

Belonging and the Construction of Home in Preto's *The Last Hope School for Magical Delinquents*

Ramadhina Ulfa Nuristama^{1✉}, Sufi Ikrima Sa'adah², Rizqy A. R. Ahmad³

UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia¹

UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia²

Universitas Muhammadiyah Kupang, Indonesia³

✉ ramadhina.ulfa.nuristama@uinsa.ac.id

Abstract:

This paper studies the construction of belonging and home in Nicki Pau Preto's *The Last Hope School for Magical Delinquents*. The novel tells about Vin Lucas, a young mage who has experienced parental neglect, repeated school expulsions, and institutional labeling. This paper applies a qualitative literary method through close reading. By applying New Criticism theory, this study analyzes characterization, setting, irony, naming, and recurring motifs, particularly Vin's school file and her movement between temporary residences. The selected data are taken from the novel and classified into three stages: de-homing, recognition, and emotional inhabitation. The results show that Vin's biological family and former schools provide physical shelter, but it does not give emotional security. Last Hope becomes meaningful because its community recognizes Vin as a person, not as an accumulation of failure. The deletion of her disciplinary files, recognition of her magical identity, and her stable friendship change Last Hope from the last institution to a comfort and safe place called home. Then, in this novel, home is understood as a relational condition and ethic that are built through recognition, care, continuity of relationships, and freedom to grow without threat of exclusion.

Keywords: belonging; home; school fantasy; chosen community

Abstrak:

Artikel ini mengkaji konstruksi rasa memiliki dan rumah dalam novel *The Last Hope School for Magical Delinquents* karya Nicki Pau Preto. Novel tersebut menampilkan Vin Lucas, seorang penyihir muda yang mengalami pengabaian orang tua, pengeluaran berulang dari sekolah, serta pelabelan institusional. Penelitian menggunakan metode kualitatif sastra dengan pembacaan dekat berorientasi formalis terhadap penokohan, latar, ironi, penamaan, dan motif yang berulang, khususnya berkas sekolah dan perpindahan tempat tinggal Vin. Data tekstual diambil dari novel dan diklasifikasikan ke dalam tiga tahap, yaitu *de-homing*, pengakuan, dan penghunian emosional. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa keluarga biologis dan sekolah-sekolah lama menyediakan tempat berlindung, tetapi tidak memberikan keamanan emosional. Last Hope menjadi bermakna karena komunitasnya mengakui Vin sebagai pribadi, bukan sebagai kumpulan kegagalan. Pembuangan berkas pelanggaran, pengakuan atas identitas sihirnya, dan terbentuknya persahabatan yang stabil mengubah Last Hope dari institusi pilihan terakhir menjadi tempat yang dapat disebut rumah. Dengan demikian, novel memaknai rumah sebagai kondisi relasional dan etis yang dibangun melalui pengakuan, kepedulian, keberlanjutan hubungan, serta kebebasan untuk bertumbuh tanpa ancaman penyingkiran.

Kata kunci: rasa memiliki; rumah; fantasi sekolah; komunitas pilihan

INTRODUCTION

A home is generally defined as the place a person or a family resides in. However, the purchase and personal occupancy of a home do not always equate to a 'being at home' feel. An individual can have a set of parents and an address, and the home can provide a place to sleep, yet a home can lack a sense of personal safety and security, and the mental assurance and comfort that a person's presence is mentally wanted and important to the family dynamic. It is true that having an initially unfamiliar space can provide a home for a person or family once special, meaningful relationships are started that promote the recognition, security, and continued existence of a family. Therefore, home should not just only a physical place, but also an emotional and social experience.

Mallett (2004) explains that home is a multidimensional concept linked to place, identity, memory, family relationships, security, and daily practices. A home can even become a site of conflict and alienation when the relationships within it fail to provide a sense of security. Antonsich (2010) distinguishes between mere physical presence in a location and "place-belongingness"—an intimate, personal feeling of having a place within a specific social world. In this view, occupying a space does not necessarily equate to being part of that space.

Recent studies describe belonging as flexible and context-specific. According to Allen et al. (2021), belonging is the experience of being connected to some aspect of the social world. This can encompass people and places, and may also include groups. In contrast, Borch et al. (2025) note that for children and adolescents, family, school, peers, and community, and the institutions of civil society are all important to the construction of their sense of belonging. This, therefore, shows that belonging goes beyond someone's acceptance or rejection. It should be more dynamically approached as a process that changes as the relationships and surroundings of an individual change.

These issues establish the foundation of *The Last Hope School for Magical Delinquents* by Nicki Pau Preto. Vin Lucas is a student whose magic is powerful and unpredictable, so he gets expelled from magic schools. While each school documented the destruction caused by Vin's magical outbursts, none of them looked into the root of the problem; these records of misconduct helped

label Vin the "problem student." The Last School of Strictland of Magic expelled him for being a "magical delinquent" and placed him at the Last Hope School for Magical Delinquents; it was the only school that agreed to take him in.

Vin's conflicts go beyond magic school issues. His parents are traveling insect researchers with an ever-changing location. With this lifestyle, stable emotional support was not provided. He started to accompany them on their research trips. However, he was quickly displaced to different boarding schools. Once he was expelled from a school, he had no family to support him. His family and schools together became his frustrations and he was viewed as a burden by his family and threat by his schools.

Consequently, the school in this novel serves as more than just an adventure setting; it acts as an arena that shapes Vin's identity and determines who qualifies for inclusion in the community. Smith and Moruzi (2018) demonstrate that supernatural school settings in children's and young adult fiction can be used to explore themes of the body, identity, power, discipline, and social standing. The element of magic allows emotional experiences to manifest in concrete forms. In Vin's case, his sense of exclusion is materialized through magic that is explosive, volatile, and constantly misunderstood.

This study adopts New Criticism as its primary literary approach. For New Criticism, a literary work is a unified whole, and the meaning is constructed from language, characters, setting, imagery, and irony, as well as motifs. Meaning is not constructed by the author's intention or the personal response of the reader. Instead, it is about how the text has organized its components. Close reading is the central method of analysis. Ohrvik (2024) suggests that close reading can link grammatical details to extensive arguments. Hence, it is still an effective methodology.

The concepts of "home" and "belonging" serve as supporting lenses to elucidate the findings of the intrinsic analysis. This article does not measure Vin's psychological state but rather analyzes how the text constructs the experience of alienation and acceptance through word choice, characterization, the depiction of space, and the repetition of symbols. With this focus, the research question posed is: how does *The Last Hope School for Magical Delinquents* construct a shift in the meaning of home and the sense of belonging through characterization, setting, irony, and recurring motifs?

METHOD

This paper used a qualitative literary method by using an intrinsic approach. The primary data are taken from the novel entitled *The Last Hope School for Magical Delinquents*. The data are words, phrases, dialogues, narration, description of the setting, and character actions related to home, displacement, rejection, confession, friendship, and Vin's magical identity. Data collection was taken through close reading that focused on plot development and changes in Vin's relationship with Last Hope and the use of the word "home", the school's description, responses to parents, and Vin's interactions with the headmistress and her friends. Then, the data were classified into three categories: experiences of de-homing, recognition, and emotional inhabitation. Data were analyzed by paying attention to word choice, context, the plot, and the relationship of each motif. Concepts such as belonging, home, and place attachment are used to support the interpretation, though the primary evidence remains rooted in the novel's internal elements.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Biological Family and the Experience of Homelessness

Vin's fundamental issue is established early on through the narrator's statement: "But she didn't have a home" (Preto, 2024, p. 15). This statement arises when Vin learns that other magic schools are no longer willing to accept her. Her initial reaction is not to consider a new school, but rather to question where she will be sent. In material terms, Vin has not always lived without shelter; she has lived with her parents and attended various boarding schools. However, the word "home" in that quote is distinguished from a house as a mere physical structure. What Vin lacks is a place that offers the certainty that she is allowed to stay and that her presence is desired.

The sentence shows how this particular understanding of a child returning home also gets subverted. For most children, sent home means a return to a safe space, a familiar environment of family and home. With Vin, going home brings about the opposite, panic. She returns, not to an emotionally protective space, but to her biological family. The other major family members take a more prominent place in her family, but it can be observed that Vin has become accustomed to filling out school forms and forging signatures on school forms (Francesco, 2022).

This neglect does not always manifest as direct violence. Vin's parents do not openly cast her out or physically harm her. Yet, their recurring absence teaches Vin that their research matters more than she does. The narrative even portrays her parents as deeply interested in multi-legged creatures, yet uninterested in their own child. The humor surrounding their insect research in this section does not erase Vin's pain; instead, it creates an irony that highlights the disparity in

attention: the very thing her parents deem important is what displaces the child they ought to be caring for.

Vin's idea of her childhood changes. The exciting adventure lifestyle has a different meaning now. It is understood to be a lifestyle of extreme unrest. It came to be understood that jetsetters, for lack of better words, just 'drag around their kids like suitcases' (Preto, 2024, p. 16). Vin comes to the realization that her parents were not carting her around like some groceries.

The narrator later intensifies this metaphor by likening Vin to an old piece of furniture that no longer fits the owner's lifestyle. The shift from suitcase to furniture underscores the feeling of being a burden. A suitcase is at least prepared for travel, whereas ill-fitting furniture tends to be discarded or put into storage. Boarding school ultimately served as such a storage space: Vin was placed there so she would not disrupt her parents' travels.

In this context, her biological home failed not for a lack of physical structure, but for a failure to provide a sense of belonging. Antonsich (2010) notes that the experience of feeling "at home" is linked to security, familiarity, and attachment. Vin found none of these elements. She even considered her temporary bed at school preferable to returning to her family, as the school at least provided a physical space—albeit a temporary one. The family, which should have been a source of stability, became the very place she least wanted to go.

The suitcase motif evolves into a symbol of Vin's inability to emotionally inhabit a space. After being expelled from Strictland, she needed no time to pack because she had "never bothered to unpack" (Preto, 2024, p. 18). Leaving the suitcase unpacked was not merely a matter of practical habit; it was an act of self-protection. By keeping her belongings ready to move at a moment's notice, Vin avoided the expectation that any place would be permanent.

The unpacked suitcase bridges the gap between physical space and psychological experience. Vin might sleep in a room, but she never truly inhabits it. He left no traces, arranged no belongings, and cultivated no sense of ownership, as past experience had taught him that he would soon be leaving. In the concept of place attachment, a bond with a place is formed through experiences, meanings, and social relationships, rather than merely through the duration of one's stay (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Vin never had the opportunity to build such an attachment, as each school was simply part of a cycle of displacement.

The Delinquent Label and Institutional Identity

Previous schools did not remedy Vin's lack of a home; they merely prolonged her displacement. At the beginning of the novel, Headmaster Pratt is depicted sitting behind a massive desk like a judge, while Vin is relegated to an uncomfortable chair. The spatial arrangement evokes a courtroom atmosphere rather than an educational one. The headmaster is not there to understand the root causes of events, but to deliver a verdict. Vin's thick file lies open on the desk, serving as the primary evidence of who she is (Preto, 2024, pp. 11–14).

The file records various magical outbursts, instances of damage, detentions, and expulsions. Yet, the documents note only the consequences, not the causes. During the fire incident at Strictland, for instance, another student repeatedly cast sparks at Vin. She tried to restrain herself, absorbing both the pain and the magic, but the mounting pressure eventually caused her to erupt. The school authorities saw only the resulting fire; the bullying that preceded the outburst held no weight in their assessment.

Consequently, Vin's file can be read as an incomplete institutional biography. While the file appears objective—comprising official documents—it is actually constructed from the perspective of an institution intent on upholding rules. It replaces the character's lived experience with a list of infractions. The thicker the file grows, the stronger the impression becomes that Vin is incapable of change or of being understood in a different light.

Practices of naming also reveal the institution's dominance. Headmaster Pratt addresses Vin as "Lavinia," even though she has corrected him. For Vin, her full name is inextricably linked to punishment. This repetition transforms her personal identity into a sound that signifies wrongdoing. When the headmaster switches to "Miss Lucas," Vin understands that her offense is deemed more serious. In this scene, names are not neutral; they serve as tools to establish distance and assert power.

The culmination of this labeling occurs when Mrs. Prim stamps Vin's documents with the red label "magical delinquent" (Preto, 2024, p. 16). The act of branding rendered Vin's identity seemingly official, fixed, and transferable from one institution to another. Difficulty in controlling magic was no longer viewed as an educational issue, but rather as a personal trait. Vin was not seen as a child requiring a different approach, but as a delinquent who needed to be kept under control.

An irony arises here, as these institutions claim that the goal of magical education is to teach control. Yet, they make no effort to understand the mechanisms behind Vin's power. They

demand results—specifically, control—without providing the knowledge that would enable such control to develop. Consequently, institutional failure is recast as individual failure. Vin begins to believe that because her magic is deemed wrong, she herself is wrong.

Recognition as the Beginning of Belonging

The shift in Vin's relationship with the place began upon her arrival at Last Hope. The school did not immediately appear welcoming; the building was vast, old, and overgrown with wild vegetation, displaying a mix of past grandeur and decay. Visually, Last Hope bore no resemblance to an orderly school. Yet, the building's imperfections stood in stark contrast to Strictland. Strictland was orderly but incapable of accommodating difference; Last Hope appeared chaotic but provided space for students cast out by the system.

Vin's first encounter with Headmistress Ava Hope marked the turning point. When Winston introduced her as Lavinia, Vin asked to be called Vin. She immediately regretted the correction, accustomed as she was to adults disregarding her preferences. However, Headmistress Hope accepted the name, ordered the school records updated, and said, "Welcome to Last Hope" (Preto, 2024, p. 32).

That welcome was simple yet held profound significance for her character development. For the first time, a school leader not only acknowledged Vin's presence but also accepted how she chose to name herself. This recognition of her name transformed Vin from an administrative object into a subject; she was no longer defined solely by the documents sent from her previous school. Her surprised reaction revealed just how rarely she had encountered such unconditional warmth.

That welcome did not automatically make Vin feel she belonged at Last Hope; she remained suspicious, anticipating her next expulsion. In the novel, a sense of belonging is not forged through a single symbolic act but through repeated experiences that defy previous patterns of rejection. Last Hope needed to demonstrate that acceptance would not vanish the moment Vin made a mistake.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *The Last Hope School for Magical Delinquents* constructs home as an emotional, relational, and ethical space. Through a close reading of themes, characterization, setting, symbols, and motifs, it is clear that Vin Lucas begins the story with a family but no home. Her parents failed to provide recognition and security, while previous schools reinforced her

sense of abandonment through labels, rumors, and punishment.

Last Hope changes this pattern. The school initially appears to be a last resort for failing students, but instead becomes the first space that offers Vin the possibility of being understood. The acceptance of Vin's name, the disposal of old files, and the recognition that she is not alone form a series of actions that make Last Hope a home. Thus, home in the novel is not simply a place to live, but a place where one feels acknowledged and not easily discarded.

This finding confirms that, in the novel, belonging is achieved through a chosen community. Blood ties do not automatically create a home without caring. Meanwhile, a community built through caring can become a home because it provides emotional security and a space for growth. In the context of teenage fantasy, Preto's novel shows that a magical world can be used to address very real issues; a child's need to be seen, accepted, and have a place to come home to.

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