

A Reflection on Ethnic Literature: Nam Le's "Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice"

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Nam Le's first collection of stories, *The Boat* (2008), was highly acclaimed both domestically and internationally for its maturity and stylistic refinement¹⁾, the success "almost unprecedented" for a fiction writer from Australia, according to the Australian scholar Nicholas Jose. The book won the Dylan Thomas Prize, PEN/Malamud Award and Australia's Prime Minister's Literary Award among others, and it has now been translated into more than fifteen languages including Japanese²⁾. Le's writing is a fine example of recent Asian diasporic writing in the English language that has gained widespread appeal.

Le was born in Vietnam in 1978, and migrated to Australia with his parents as a boat refugee before reaching the age of one. He graduated from the University of Melbourne with a law degree, and worked for a major law firm. Then, he abandoned his career in law to attend the renowned Iowa Writers' Workshop. His literary career flourished in the United States where his stories appeared in magazines. As this brief biography shows, his fiction cannot be easily affiliated with a single national literary tradition.

The scope of his stories is cosmopolitan in terms of their settings and narrative voices. Despite his Vietnamese heritage, one would hesitate to call his work "ethnic writing." Set in Iowa, a Columbian town, New York, a rural coastal town in Australia, Hiroshima, Tehran, and Vietnam, his stories traverse nationality. Generally, they are told from the perspective of locals such as a juvenile assassin in "Cartagena" and an evacuated schoolgirl in "Hiroshima."³⁾ Such an ambitious attempt to depict other cultures from an insider's viewpoint is justified by his sensitivity and masterly skills to capture the psychology of people in crisis and the ambience of each locality. For example, Le creates an intimate sense of locality and seasonal change in "Hiroshima" by inserting a variety of cicada sounds. He cannot be categorised as an Australian, Vietnamese, or American writer: he is all those at once.

This paper focuses on the opening story, "Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice." Written in a mock-autobiographical style, it is a Le's critical response to ethnic literature, its economy, and ethics. My chief concern is how a young writer of Asian descent perceives his ethnicity in an era of consumerism and globalisation. What manner does ethnicity affect their subjectivities? How do they resist or comply with pressure to essentialise their ethnicities? In the following pages, I examine how Le's writer-protagonist

perceives the position of ethnic literature in the literary market, and how he negotiates with his ethnicity in the creative process. Eventually, I will show that this story is an imaginary journey of a young writer, finally abandoning his status as an ethnic writer.

“Love and Honour” is a metafiction about a young writer who chooses to write about his father’s wartime experience. The narrator Nam, Le’s fictional self, shares some biographical elements: quitting a Melbourne law firm to participate in the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. When the deadline for a short story is only a few days away, his Vietnamese father visits him from Sydney after a three-year absence. The son was strictly disciplined by his “abusive” father as a young boy and their relationship remained troubled. Although the reason for his sudden visit is not revealed in the text, it triggers an emotional, ethical, and aesthetic conflict in the budding writer, which leads him to reflect on his identity as a writer. At first, penning an “ethnic story” was a compromise to Nam, but he later realises that there are some things that cannot be expressed in words.

“Love and Honour” highlights a predicament in which writers of Asian heritage are often placed: they are torn between readers’ exotic expectations and their own aesthetic ambitions. Consumerism in the literary market provides a backdrop for the story, where even a writer’s ethnicity is considered a commodity⁴. Rey Chow explains how ethnicity functions in the cultural politics of representation:

In terms of the conventions of representation, the West and its “others” are thus implicitly divided in the following manner: the West is the place for language games, aesthetic fantasies, and fragmented subjectivities; the West’s others, instead, offer us “lessons” about history, reality, and wholesome collective consciousnesses. This division has much to tell us about the ways “ethnicity” functions to produce, organize, and cohere subjectivities in the “multicultural” age. (Chow 100, quoted in Vu 132)

Chow’s hypothesis explains the tendency of non-Western writers to adopt an auto/biographical style of writing, comprising stories of revelation or quests for an “authentic” cultural identity. However, second-generation migrant writers raised in Western societies speaking English may possess creative inclinations and subjectivities closer to what Chow describes as the characteristics of the West: “language games, aesthetic fantasies, and fragmented subjectivities.” Le is addressing unorthodox ways of imagining non-Western subjectivities that do not fall into Chow’s schema.

Emphasising cultural difference is not only a strategy for diasporic writers to create a space for their voices to be heard, but also a necessity to answer the needs of the market, or readers’ thirst for “true” stories. The title of the story, “Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice” is taken from William Faulkner’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech, where he named these as “the old verities and the truths of the heart, the old universal

truths."⁵) It will be natural to assume that Le adopted the phrase in homage to the great writer. At the same time, Le contrasts the high literary ideals, which his protagonist aspires to reach, with secular forces surrounding ethnic literature. In "Love and Honour," those who profit from literary institutions seem ready to take advantage of popular demands for signs of cultural difference. For example, when Nam is suffering from writer's block, his friend advises him to "write a story about Vietnam" (7). A writing instructor and literally agents also remark: "Ethnic literature is hot" and "You have to ask yourself, what makes me stand out? [...] *Your background and life experience*" (8). There is also an episode of a successful female Chinese writer, who penned "a collection of short stories about Chinese characters in stages of immigration to America" (7). Aspiring writers with no ethnic background express bitterness and mock this trend: "You can't tell if the language is sparse because the author intended it that way, or because he didn't have vocab," and "The characters are always flat, generic" (8). Putting the validity of such generalisations aside, it is true that the body of work by Asian diasporic writers, from Amy Tan to a more recent success Yiyun Li, has been established as a literary genre, which explores the writers' own cultural heritages and delineates migrant experiences⁶. Instead of reproducing such texts, Le chooses to observe the conditions of "ethnic literature" in a consumerist society. As such, "Love and Honour" can be read as a contemporary cultural critique.

While writing about themselves and their inherited culture might be a shortcut to publication "in the multicultural age," the popularity of "ethnic literature" could be a curse to emerging writers who refuse to allow a singular, imposed "ethnic" identity. Nam is one of the latter, and his drunken friend approves of his approach: "You could *totally* exploit the Vietnamese thing. But *instead*, you choose to write about lesbian vampires and Colombian assassins, and Hiroshima orphans—and New York painters with haemorrhoids" (9). Steering through identity politics, writers with Asian backgrounds are naturally self-reflexive and strategic⁷. As Cam Nhung Vu observes, it is not as easy as it seems to be an "ethnic writer who is just really good" (Vu 151). When a new generation of Asian diasporic writers examine their relationship to the imagined homelands, their refined critical awareness and cosmopolitan sensitivity may reject linear narratives of self-discovery⁸. The idea that there is an authentic self deriving from one's cultural heritage is invalidated. In Le's case, his complicated relationship to his Vietnamese heritage is explored through a multilayered consciousness. Vietnam may be his homeland genealogically, but it is by no means closer to him than the rest of the world, which he may have more emotional affinity towards and direct access to.

In spite of an earlier aversion to writing about Vietnam, Nam makes a decision to write a story of his father's survival of the My Lai Massacre to meet a deadline. He justifies his decision by saying: "*Fuck it*, I thought. I had two and a half days left. I would write the ethnic story of my Vietnamese father. It was a good story. It was a fucking *great* story" (17). Self-conscious Nam gives it a title, "ETHNIC STORY." The story Nam writes is not shown to the readers; instead, his father's experience is narrated through Nam's recollection of overhearing

it as an adolescent at a drinking party. This is an ingenious way to avoid producing a testimonial narrative of war while displaying Nam/Le's capabilities. As a matter of fact, the story Nam recounts is vivid and powerful, and undoubtedly "a good story", but it is not the path the young writer wishes to follow.

Then, conflicting emotions over war memories, i.e., desires to forget and remember, emerge.

'Why do you want to write this story?' my father asked me.

'It's a good story.'

'But there are so many things you could write about.'

'This is important, Ba. It's important that people know.'

'You want their pity.'

I didn't know whether it was a question. I was offended.

'I want them to remember,' I said.

He was silent for a long time. Then he said, 'Only you'll remember. I'll remember. They will read and clap their hands and forget.' For once, he was not smiling. 'Sometimes it's better to forget, no?' (25)

Nam's appraisal of his father's experience as "a good story" has a dual meaning. On the surface, he appears to believe that his father's experience should be conveyed to the (Western) readers, of which he deems himself capable, but underneath he also knows that "true stories" sell well in the literary market, a fact he later admits to his father. There is Le behind this drama, manipulating and observing Nam, preoccupied by his own desires and turning a blind eye to his father's psychological crisis. Nam's father objects to his experience being exposed to, and consumed by, Western readers. Uncomfortable secrets are often at the core of ethnic minority writing. Visiting the past could threaten the equilibrium that he, the sole survivor of the massacre in his family, has attained. He also has a strong doubt that his experience can be translated into writing at all, as he says: "it's not something you will be able to write" (25). Their confrontation is very much about what literature can or should do to address traumatic memories, and fiction's power to represent the unspeakable and the unknowable.

It becomes clear that "Love and Pity" is the story of a son seeking his father's acceptance. Nam felt earlier that he was "inadequate" to all the sacrifices his father has made for him (20), of which migration to Australia would have been the biggest. As a son of Vietnam, he has always been burdened with his father's sacrifices. After completing the second version of the story with his father's help, Nam reflects: "He would read it, with his book-learned English, and he would recognise himself in a new way. He would recognise me. He would see how powerful was his experience, how valuable his suffering—how I had made it speak for more than itself. He would be pleased with me" (29). His internal monologue reveals that writing "the ethnic story of his father" was not simply a compromise, but also an attempt to be deemed worthy by his father. By retelling his father's experience, he also attempts to make sense of the

complicated relationship to his imagined homeland. It is a self-righteous effort to fulfil his filial duty to his father and to his homeland. Thus, "Love and Honour" deals with conflicts between parent and child, and their unfulfilled reconciliation, a recurring motif in migrant literature.

When the story draws to a reconciliatory close, a twist is added: the father takes Nam's manuscript and burns it in the gasoline drum of a homeless man next to a river. Realising the fate of his manuscript, Nam turns his eyes to the water's surface.

On the brink of freezing, it gleamed in large, bulging blisters. The water, where it still moved, was black and braided. And it occurred to me then how it took hours, sometimes days, for the surface of a river to freeze over—to hold in its skin the perfect and crystalline world—and how that world could be shattered by a small stone dropped like a single syllable. (30)

The single syllable echoes the sound that Nam's Corona typewriter makes. By giving a voice to his father's story, Nam unwittingly threatened to break the walls that his father has built over the years. As Nam surmised earlier, his father's experience was powerful indeed, but he did not know to what extent. He was also unaware of the power of words to destroy as well as redeem. The father's act is partly a refusal to be sacrificed for the pleasure of others. This ending prompts readers to consider who should be permitted to write traumatic memories and what fiction's duties should be toward history—a question no one can truly answer. Literature of ethnic minorities is a conflict zone where contests over representation, and negotiations between cultural production and consumption occur. "Love and Honour" is a self-reflexive mediation on those forces at work.

"Love and Honour" explores the psyche of a young writer of Vietnamese descent grappling with the question of how to identify himself as a writer. The narrator was torn between his artistic aspirations and market demand for "true" stories. Even though Vietnamese heritage does not constitute a central part of Nam's writer-self, it still haunts him via other's expectations and familial ties. His father's sudden visit is one of those apparitions from the Vietnamese past. It is crucial that Nam's manuscript was burnt by his father, who thereby thwarts his son's scheme to exploit the "Vietnamese thing." This symbolic act urges Nam to create his own "crystalline world" without approaching his father for resources, or other Vietnamese themes. Thus, this story serves as a preface to the rest of the collection, declaring Nam/Le's divergence from past ethnic literature.

Notes

- 1) The *New York Times* reviewer Michiko Kakutani has commented on *The Boat*: "Mr. Le not only writes with an authority and poise rare even among longtime authors, but he also demonstrates an intuitive, gut-level ability to convey the psychological conflicts people experience when they find their own hopes and ambitions slamming up against familial expectations or the brute facts of

history.”

- 2) See *The Boat* official homepage at <http://www.namleonline.com/>.
- 3) “Tehran Calling” is an exception, which is narrated from the viewpoint of an American woman visiting her Iranian friend in Tehran, adopting more conventional way of depicting cultural others.
- 4) For example, the blurb of the Japanese translation of *The Boat* reads: “[Nam Le] Crossed the ocean held in the arms of his parents. From Vietnam to Australia to the United States—seven stories from a former boat people Australia is proud of.”
- 5) William Faulkner Banquet Speech. Nobelprize.org <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1949/faulkner-speech.html>
- 6) Yiyun Li also attended the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. Her first collection of stories, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2007), won a number of major awards.
- 7) Tom Cho, a Chinese Australian writer, is a good example. He “inserts” himself as a character in his short stories which often borrow their setting from popular films and TV shows. He presents identity not as something static or fixed, but as something in a continual process of becoming. The extravagant performance of the morphing self, although self-reflexive, deviates from conventional migrant writing. See Cho’s collection of stories, *Look Who’s Morphing*.
- 8) Vu summarises the identity of diasporic Vietnamese writers as follows: “This high acclaim [for Nam Le’s and le thi diem’s fictional works] reflects a celebration of the literary accomplishments of the 1.5 and second generation Vietnamese in diaspora whose identities move away from “exile” and “refugee” towards “diasporic” and “cosmopolitan” (Vu 129-130).

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