

Review of Lan Cao's Monkey Bridge

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Book Review:

Cao, Lan. *Monkey Bridge*. Reprint, Penguin Books, 1998

Lan Cao depicts the actuality of Vietnam's social life during the Second Indochina war (1955-1975) and the complexities of migration in her debut novel, *Monkey Bridge* (1997). The novel is critically acclaimed for its war literature imageries, and it is received as a powerful work of fiction, elucidating the uncharted territory of the Vietnamese-American experience on the subjects of the aftermath of war, the migratory process, and the migrant life. Cao wrote this fiction with a blend of personal input because Cao herself is a Vietnamese-American citizen who fled Vietnam during the fall of Saigon in 1975. She grew up in Saigon's twin city Cholon (South Vietnam) and was later migrated out to Avon, Connecticut. Thus, Cao built her plot from different perspectives, such as being a novelist of the Vietnam War, a postcolonial exile, and a migrant writer. The plot narrated by Mai and her mother, Thanh, reflects the different perspectives of the traumas that Cao projects for her readers. The critical detail that this novel explained was the aftermaths of war and migration from a Vietnamese perspective.

Monkey Bridge constitutes one of the earlier novels written about the Vietnam War and its aftermaths from the perspective of the Việt Kiều (Vietnamese overseas) (Le 395). It is mainly about the spoils of the Vietnam War; instead, it recounts a personal experience and turmoil from a Vietnamese perspective. Cao's personal experience of Vietnam life adds a significant level of detail that connects the readers with the characters' emotions and feelings for their homeland as an immigrant. Generally, the novel recounts Thanh's troubled struggle to come to terms with the suffering in her life and the suffering of her nation (Nguyen 192).

The title of the novel is a metaphor for passage. A monkey bridge is a slender bridge built of spindly bamboo used by rural Vietnamese to cross the canals and river in Vietnam. Likewise, the novel is about the different crossing of troubled personas. First, the crossing refugees and migrants endure, i.e. living marginal lives in the center of the American dream and trying to find an identity. A crossing the traumatized made, the horrors of war, and the urge to find a place to be called home with peace. Finally, the crossing of mothers and daughters, the parents and their children are in the center of havoc because of the cultural and emotional dislocation to reconnect with one another. The title stands for these three crossings, and Cao consciously built her narrative to reflect the difficulties associated with displacement and crossing borders.

The *Monkey Bridge*'s plot revolves around daughter, Mai Nguyen, a 13-year-old Vietnamese girl who has been sent to America before the fall of Saigon to live with an American Colonel family that her family befriended and mother, Thanh, who also manages to escape and rejoins with Mai in Arlington, Virginia, after months. However, unfortunately, Thanh leaves her father behind in the mayhem of her final hours before departure. Mai and Thanh are reunited and settled in Northern Virginia, where both the mother and daughter battle to start a new life. Mai's plot explains an ideal Vietnamese immigrant scenario in America, a teenager who is about to venture into the modernized culture of America. With Thanh, though she moved to a new continent and country, the horrors of the past from her native country, a dark tale of family secrets, betrayal, political obstructions, and the abandonment of her father are still haunting her. The novel starts with Thanh hospitalized for a stroke, suffering paralysis in the half side of the body, and she is heard calling her father, Baba Quan, in her sleep. Even though Thanh recovers and leaves her dark past to settle for a while, Mai furiously wants to know of her grandfather, her family, and why he could not get back with Thanh to America. It is this curiosity of Mai which leads to the rising action of events in the novel. The plot's events show us Virginia in the eyes of Mai, who is on her summer break to join college and tries ways to know more about her family. Mai eventually finds the secret letters that her mother, Thanh, has written for her, which she has kept away from Mai to be read later in life. These letters give the readers the narration of Thanh and take us to Vietnam back when Thanh was young. These letters explain the story of Mai's family in Vietnam and the mystery of her grandfather. The characters in the novel, except for Mai, moves with an element of discretion attached to them, the mental turmoil from war and the migration and the need to find mysterious doubts about themselves. Mai and Thanh

are shown decaying from their life in Vietnam and trying to be better. The character sketch of Baba Quan brings out structure to many elements in the novel. Such as the politics of Vietnam and the war, which can be understood from Quan's involvement in VietCong, the social construct of Vietnam from the life of Uncle Khan and the tradition and cultural integrities through Thanh's view of Baba Quan and the Vietnam life.

Monkey Bridge is a spectacular novel for many reasons. The story attempts to expand on the politics and critically narrates the plight of exile and displacement from an explicit perspective. One of the crucial factors in this book is how Cao made her story transverse into fiction. Monkey bridges as depicted in the novel also connect man and woman, self and other, friend and foe, as well as past, present, and future (Shan 39).

Cao drifts away from autobiographical writing. Though autobiography plays a massive role among immigrant writers as a mode of expression, this book stresses the facts with fiction as a mode of expression. A review stated this book to be "semi-autobiography" and explains that it cannot be used as a "textbook on Vietnam" because Cao's facts are all based on the interventions of American education. The critical perspective of this review is to establish how the novelist has done an excellent job tabulating actual events of Vietnamese migration through fiction. The genre of this book is critical because ever since 1975, the Vietnamese-Americans have been expressing their migratory struggles through the medium of literature. Their work talks from a Vietnamese-American perspective and explains the narrative from a diasporic point of view. The Cao fills the void of fact and fiction through ethnographic intel; readers experience the customary aspects of the exotic Vietnamese culture. Cao projects the cultural connection of her homeland through the detailed imagery of their exotic culture, such as their religion, rituals, mythology, and food. The readers are introduced to unknown cultural materials, which are explained to the core.

Cao's novel can be considered transition fiction. It presents not only the voices of the first-generation immigrants, but also the voices of the generation of Vietnamese Americans growing up in the United States who attempt to understand their parents' pasts and memories of the past, and who desire to be free from the ghosts that haunt the earlier generation, in order to assimilate themselves successfully into an American future (Ha 12). Most of the narrative focuses on the complexities of the Vietnamese refugee experience through the relationship between teenage Mai Nguyen and her mother Thanh, and their interlocked stories. The main characters Mai and Thanh are psychologically and physically displaced and haunted by their traumatic memories (Ozun 294). The harrowing memories of the war also haunt the first generation Vietnamese in the United States.

The narrative of the novel plays a quintessential role in addressing different themes. The dynamics of having two narrators make the plot non-chronological; the novel starts three years after Mai and Thanh move to America. The narrative travels in past and present and takes its readers on a journey East and West. Cao used double narrative because she is telling two stories in the novel which are interlinked to support the events of the other. The different narratives of the novel allow the readers to enjoy

various settings around the globe. The memories of Thanh show the Mekong village and the small streets of Saigon, and the present memories of Mai show us the urban life of Virginia. Cao designed these environments with a vibe to relate to the different cultures and geographical features and visually feel the scenario.

Cao's themes in the novel explain the plethora of complexities of migrating from one culture to another and critically examining how age and time validate the objectives in life. One among the significant element that this novel illustrates is the 'gender construct of Vietnam's conservative society.' The narration of Thanh reflects the traditional Vietnam setting and describes the cultural norms that she had lived. Thanh was sent to a catholic boarding school. Her education was rich and fancy, but she had to ditch all her academic qualities to be the ideal wife her mother-in-law wanted her to be. Thanh's narration elucidates the importance given to men in the Vietnamese tradition. Cao explains the toxic masculinity that culture and tradition hold in Vietnam through Baba Quan, a low-life who prostitutes his wife to pay his bills. He joins the resistance army called Vietcong, always jealous and greedy even though he was well paid by Uncle Khan and eventually murders Khan. Though the toxicity of Quan is apparent, Thanh defends him by telling lies, because according to Vietnamese culture, Men are the gatekeepers of the family; taking care of it is their prime objective, and women are meant to sacrifice. Cao's narration between Mai and Thanh, explains the cultural parallels of America and Vietnam. This novel explains the subject of language and its establishment in the life of a migrant. Cao shows language in the novel both as a subject of obstruction and also power. In one of Thanh's secret letters that Mai reads, she explains that her daughter is disgusted with the fact that she speaks English with an accent. Cao projects the power that language possesses through Mai when she explains the language's gift that she has acquired and how its authority works. One of the most settling subjects that *Monkey Bridge* resonates the immigrant's nostalgia for their homeland. When the Vietnamese American community in Little Saigon gathers, they all talk about their nostalgia for their homeland. Cao's crucial issue that she stresses is the social complexities in the generation gap that immigrants face. The intervention of different cultures and language barriers produces a rift between the first-generation immigrants (parents) with the second-generation immigrant. Cao explains the context of the generation gap through Mai and Thanh. It is hard for Thanh to get accustomed to American traditions because of her inability to adjust to two cultures.

Lan Cao elucidates the importance of Vietnamese migration, taking her readers on a vivid trip of the socio-economic turmoil, the political disintegration, the departure and the aftermath of Vietnam's event surrounding the fall of Saigon in 1975 and also as a work fiction that explains the migratory issues with subtle and also explicit images for its readers.

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