Occupying the Third Space: Vietnamese American Hybridity and the Struggle for Identity

Julie Linh Nguyen
Chapman University, nguye489@mail.chapman.edu

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After the Vietnam War ended in 1975, over 800,000 people emigrated from Vietnam between 1975 and 1995, with more than half resettling their home lives in the United States. People move to America in hopes that it will live up to its reputation of being a melting pot, but the multitude of immigrants struggling to establish an identity and assimilate into Western culture prove that America’s melting pot still has unresolved issues. Because of this struggle, many Vietnamese immigrants lack a sense of belonging, even after moving away from Vietnam and attempting to establish a life in America for many years. Post-colonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha explains in his theory of hybridity that it is a place where neither the one nor the Other exist, but where a new, third space is created for the displaced to figure out their identity. Although Vietnamese people immigrated to the United States over forty years ago, literary work by Vietnamese American writers, Andrew Xuan Pham, Le thi diem thu, and Hieu Minh Nguyen, convey through poignant language and evocative experiences that many Vietnamese Americans are still struggling in this third space with their hybrid identities.

**INTRODUCTION**

After the Vietnam War ended in 1975, over 800,000 people emigrated from Vietnam between 1975 and 1995, with more than half resettling their home lives in the United States. People move to America in hopes that it will live up to its reputation of being a melting pot, but the multitude of immigrants struggling to establish an identity and assimilate into Western culture prove that America’s melting pot still has unresolved issues. Because of this struggle, many Vietnamese immigrants lack a sense of belonging, even after moving away from Vietnam and attempting to establish a life in America for many years. Post-colonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha explains in his theory of hybridity that it is a place where neither the one nor the Other exist, but where a new, third space is created for the displaced to figure out their identity. Although Vietnamese people immigrated to the United States over forty years ago, literary work by Vietnamese American writers, Andrew Xuan Pham, Le thi diem thu, and Hieu Minh Nguyen, convey through poignant language and evocative experiences that many Vietnamese Americans are still struggling in this third space with their hybrid identities.

**THEORY**

Homi K. Bhabha, one of the most recognized scholars in post-colonial studies, developed the theory of hybridity, which is the notion that there exists a “third space” where fixed ideas about culture are not defined, but rather continually being developed. In an interview with Jonathan Rutherford, Bhabha explains that “the importance of hybridity is that it is the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it, just like a translation, so that hybridity puts together the traces of certain other meanings or discourses” (Rutherford 207). While hybridity is typically thought of as a mixture of two separate entities, Bhabha’s idea of hybridity does not trace the two origins from which the third emerges, but rather is a third space that enables something new and different to arise. Studying the hybridity of a culture erases the fixed ideas about culture since the emergence of identity is a direct response to a culmination of different things such as displacement and oppression. In his essay, “The Commitment to Theory,” Bhabha urges that the willingness to explore unknown territory “may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism or multi-culturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” (22). Studying the unknown allows one to perceive other cultures based on their unique identities that have been constructed through hybridity rather than based on their diversity through stereotypes or tokenism. These authors’ experiences articulate hybridity through writing, and exploring their material can reveal ways in which their identity developed rather than assuming there is a stereotypical or exclusive way in which it is supposed to form.

**Catfish and Mandala**

In Catfish and Mandala, Andrew Pham shares his own story of moving to America in his thirties. He delves into the issues that are coupled with immigrating to a foreign land that can’t accept his differences and returning to a homeland that no longer recognizes his changes. Andrew’s career encompasses the difficulty of hybridity and shows that he is struggling to establish a place in Vietnamese American culture. For example, Andrew’s American boss Paul says, “I like you people. Orientals are good workers. Good students, too. Great in math, the engineering stuff” (Pham 25). By associating Andrew’s work ethic and intelligence with his ethnicity, Paul stereotypes Asian people and reduces their worth to workers that are at the disposal of their American employers. After Andrew left his job, his father disapproves and says, “You don’t do that. You do best job you can. You get promotion. You get new job. You say, ‘Thank you very much, sir’ and you go. Think about future. You are Asian man in America. All your bosses will be white. Learn to work.” (Pham 25). In contrast to Andrew’s boss, his father demonstrates the expectations of immigrant parents who want their children to work hard and have the best job available to make the most of the sacrifices they’ve made. The juxtaposition of the American boss and the traditional Asian father highlights the way hybridity is pulling Andrew in opposite directions. Andrew wants to respect his father, but in truth, “[he] can’t be his Vietnamese American” (Pham 25). By saying this, Andrew expresses his desire to form an identity separate from what his father wants and from what other Americans assume. He does not derive his career choice from the stereotypes placed on him by Americans or from the narrow-minded requests from his father. Instead, Andrew retreats into the third space, makes his own choices, and begins constructing his own hybrid identity by traveling to Vietnam and writing.

**Sharpened Shards on Blue Water**

Le Thi Diem Thuy writes about how her family has been affected by the Vietnamese War in a poem addressed to her sister titled, “sharpened shards on blue water.” In this poem, Thuy juxtaposes two stories of her parents working to put food on the table – their mother taking a train every morning to sell food in markets in Vietnam and their father fishing in a restricted part of the ocean. These anecdotes in the poem show how hardworking her parents are as well as the arduous measures they had to take in order to provide for their family. Both parents worked near water – her mother’s train took her home toward the South China Sea, while her dad caught fish in the deep. They tie these moments together by telling her sister, “our lives have been marked by the tide” (34), possibly referring to a multitude of places and people, one being Phan Thiet, the coastal port city where they both worked. Sheachelanges her anger toward the war and where it has led her family: we are sharpened shards blown here by a war no one wants to remember in a foreign land with an achingly familiar wound (51-54).

**CONCLUSION**

These three writers were effective in demonstrating Bhabha’s theory by using both Vietnam and America to each create an identity that is not just one of the racial and stereotypical jeers he has received from Americans for being Asian as well as snide remarks from Vietnamese people for becoming too American. For those born in Andrew’s generation, this memoir echoes their own escapes from Vietnam and their own struggles to rebuild the life they abandoned. However, for readers like myself, a first generation American who only had the briefest knowledge on Vietnamese history, reading Catfish and Mandala provided insight into my parents’ and grandparents’ lives and what they had to endure as a result of the war. Le thi diem thu gives insight into the war and how that has affected the perception of Vietnam and its people. She is adamant about creating an identity that includes the war, but can also separate from it. Hieu Minh Nguyen’s poetry is delivered in a way that is more accessible for young readers and viewers. He is successful in utilizing contemporary mediums that will attract attention from an audience that is not necessarily Vietnamese nor looking for a memoir to relate to. In this way, Hieu informs his audience of the issues with Vietnamese American hybridity and the struggles of trying to define the ideal life in America. Studying these works and their hybridity allows us to understand people and their culture without essentializing either one.

**REFERENCES**

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**CONTACT**

Email: nguyen499@mail.chapman.edu
Phone: (714) 553-6357

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