

Narratives of Traumatic Memory and Relocation of Victims in *The Lotus and the Storm*

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Since the 1990s, an increasing number of 1.5 generation Vietnamese-American writers who were raised and educated in America have emerged. Their writings have explored the devastating effects of the Vietnam War on immigrants, offering American literature an alternative angle on the conflict. Lan Cao, a Vietnamese-American, is the author of *The Lotus and the Storm* which set in war-torn Vietnam. The novel's main characters go through the excruciating anguish of losing families and displacement. Meanwhile, they suffered from everlasting trauma although they immigrated to the United States. This essay examines the novel's ongoing war trauma and post-war memories, illustrates the post-traumatic syndrome brought on by the Vietnam War in the Vietnamese people as a whole, and investigates how practitioners heal the trauma.

Keywords: traumatic memory, relocation, victim

Introduction

"We live in an age of trauma" (Kurtz, 2020, p. 1). Trauma is increasingly becoming a societal concern. It is essential to comprehend how trauma contributes to the current social problems. Literature, particularly war literature, depicts the traumatized experience of people from various backgrounds. Everyone involved in war is traumatized, including civilians as well as combatants.

In 1982, the Vietnam Memorial Wall was erected on veterans' petition, which drew public attention to the Vietnam War. James William Gilbson commented that "the Vietnam War became a major cultural topic in this period" (Gilbson, 1988, p. 22). More than 7,000 books are thought to have been published before the 1990s. The majority of the books among all the literary works were written by American Vietnam veterans (Christopher, 1955, p. 25). James Wilson thought that an important feature of the Vietnam War Literature is that "the Vietnam writers and directors imply the destruction of human values and human morality" (Wilson, 1982, p. 101). Suan Jeffords approaches the study of Vietnam War literature from feminist's viewpoint. "While friends may be uncertain, enemies unidentifiable, and goals unclear, the line between the masculine and the feminine is presented in Vietnam representation as firm and unwavering" (Jeffords, 1989, p. 53). In contrast to male writers who typically depict troops and the battlefield at large, female writers frequently focus on family and civilians.

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Since the 1990s, a growing number of 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans—those were born between the first and second generations—have started writing. As most of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese-Americans were educated in the United States, they were easily assimilated into American society and comprehended American culture. They start to reflect on the civilization they left behind after settling in America. The 1.5 generation Vietnamese American writers provide American literature with an alternative voice about the war.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the Vietnam War trauma and the collective traumatic memory through the eyes of female writer Lan Cao, and to look into possible solutions to heal the psychological and cultural trauma.

Mai's Traumatic Memory in *The Lotus and the Storm*

The Lotus and the Storm written by Lan Cao is a narrative on the trauma and healing of Mai and her father Minh. The novel does not follow a chronological but applies a style of polyphonic narration to display the war. The twenty-nine chapters of the novel can be divided into three parts: *A Small Country* (chapter 1-17), *Half-lives* (chapter 18-23) and *The River Flows but the Ocean Stays* (chapter 24-29). The narrators change among Mai, Minh and Bao (Mai's ego).

The novel begins in 1963 when Mai lived in a luxurious and spacious villa with her parents and sister. Her father Minh is a military officer of the Republic of Vietnam who is always absent from home. Her father's "military salary is meager". It is her mother Quy "rebuild the family's fortune" (Cao, 2014, p. 44). Quy is a beautiful and successful business woman who is intelligent and always make the right decisions on investment. She is an anticommunist because her father was killed by north communists for being a landowner. Her father "was decapitated, his head sewn onto a pig's body staked by the trapdoor's entrance" (Cao, 2014, p. 45). However her brother (Mai calls Uncle Number Five) becomes a Vietcong operative. The opposite political status caused personal tension among Quy, Minh, and Uncle Number Five. Her sister Khanh is smart and "is convinced that she will win the Nobel Prize in Physics when she grows up" (Cao, 2014, p. 10). Mai and Khanh have a close relationship and always stay with each other. They have a special friend James Baker who is an American serviceman at military compound nearby and "does weekly volunteer work at the orphanage in the neighborhood" (Cao, 2014, p. 18). The three of them often share rock and roll together. Although the country experienced complicated military and political changes where Minh experienced and survived coups, the family seemed far away from the war and stayed as a lotus flower showing simple purity.

On one summer day in 1967, everything changed. When Mai, Khanh and James played together and planned to cook evening meal outside, Mai's parents asked Mai and Khanh to get into the car to kiss goodbye. The minute they got into the backseat, "the windshield shatters" (Cao, 2014, p. 102). Khanh was shot on the neck by a bullet which nobody knew where it came from. Khanh was thirteen and Mai was nine at that time. Mai suffered from the traumatic memory so deeply that she still remembered what happened at that time although thirty years has passed. In the *Lotus and the Storm*, Lan Cao described in detail the somatization reaction and schizophrenia caused by war to survivors through Mai's experience.

When language is insufficient to express the feelings of trauma, the language becomes empty and weak, and the person may lose the desire and ability to express it. Mai represented the symptom of PTSD such as aphasia and depression for a long time since then. The nine-year-old girl Mai didn't know how to express grief. She felt

“her absence is a hole I cannot fill” (Cao, 2014, p. 103). and lost the ability to speak. She “is someone who has lost her soul” and “become a stone” (Cao, 2014, p. 104). Mai’s parents began to blame each other for Khanh’s death. She thought they should have moved long ago because they stayed too close to the military place. Uncle Number Five had warned them to be careful but they did not follow his advice. Mai’s father often gazed at the remote sky for a long time and her mother swallowed pills to relieve sorrow. The atmosphere of the family became gloomy. James cried extravagantly for Khanh’s death. Everyone needed to be comforted. Mai’s mother “is even more remote now than before” (Cao, 2014, p. 106) and she had a cricket to accompany her.

Mai was further traumatized during Tet (New Year in Vietnam) in 1968. As Tet is the “biggest celebration in Vietnam” (Cao, 2014, p. 149), the North and South army arrived an armistice agreement temporarily. However, the North launched Tet Offensive suddenly and Cholo the city Mai and her family lived in was under siege. Everything seemed to be sudden and chaos. Mai “hear a tumult of gunshots and rockets. The clock ticks and with each second the sounds of a battle being waged get closer and closer” (Cao, 2014, p. 150). Mai didn’t want to be crowded with people on the first floor so she stayed in her own room for two days. On the third day, she went out to garden to release tension.

When Mai wanted to go back into the house, the site was bombarded and she fell down in a dead faint. Mai could not tell clearly what happened after she regained consciousness. She went back to her bedroom finally. But when she woke up, she found nobody was in the house anymore. She came out to the garden again. Planes flew over her head. She hid in a jar “to hide from the line of fire” (Cao, 2014, p. 152). She believed her mother would come back to look for her and take her to a safe place. James stopped to search for her when he passed by. Mai intended to warn him there was a sniper on the rooftop behind the chimney but “a hand had reached out and with an overpowering muscular force” to push her to the bottom of the jar and keep her mouth shut. That is why she had a purple bruise on her neck since then. She heard “a shot go off. A body falls to the ground. Everything turns black yet again” (Cao, 2014, p. 156). When she came around, she did not find James in the garden. Mai’s father came back to pick her up. Mai had a “purplish bruise” on her neck. She became “an empty shell taken over by spirits” (Cao, 2014, p. 157).

After the event, Mai became frail and dizzy frequently. “Traumatic memories tend to be perceived as sensory fragments, such as visual images, olfactory, auditory, and kinesthetic sensations” (Van der Kolk, 1995, p. 515). It frequently appeared and made Mai went back to the traumatic memory. It stared at her with irritated eyes since she had mental problem. She was separated into three parts: Cecile, Storm and Mai. Cecile stands for innocence and elegance, symbolizing the childhood without war. Storm is the ego after the horrified experience, who stands for the frightening experience in the past. Downs compares two states of existence: the physical self and the nonphysical self (Downs, 2007, p. 32). He believes that the physical self is completely embedded in his body, and he knows that he is real and that his body is the foundation on which he interacts with others; For the second situation, the individual feels nonphysical self is separated from the body and is no longer directly involved in physical behavior but observes, controls and criticizes the physical self’s behavior. In *the Lotus and the Storm*, Mai and Storm, the nonphysical herself, observed, judged, hated and blamed each other excessively. Mai draw “a picture of the angry face and solemnly place the picture in the box” (Cao, 2014, p. 171). She persuaded herself that she had locked the monster in the box and then she felt better.

From the beginning of schizophrenia, Mai felt the existence of irritable and resentful Storm, but she did not understand the phenomenon at first. She always felt there was a gloomy face with angry eyes fixed on her. However, she still felt Storm appeared from time to time and even tried to control her behavior. For this, she hated the existence of Storm. Storm is the furious and resentful nonphysical self of Mai had developed from terror and pain. Storm considered that Mai was too weak, timid and insignificant. Mai tried to forget the horrible past and looked forward to the future. While her inner self Storm repeatedly brought her back to the past and made her being addicted to those memories that was unacceptable and unforgettable. Storm believed that it was because her sacrifice to carry so much grief, anger, and censure in life that Mai did not defeated by the traumatic experience and lived a “normal” life.

By describing Mai’s somatization, aphasia and schizophrenia after the trauma, Lan Cao vividly reproduced the trauma that the war has caused to the children and adolescent and reveals the cruelty of war. Herman found that language alleviates somatic neurological disorders caused by terror. Felman believes that reconstruction and narration of history can relieve the trauma (Felman, 2002, p. 69). In Lan Cao’s novels, victims told or wrote about the traumatic experiences during the Vietnam War to share their feelings. Pouring can be said to be the necessary process of healing, and is the first step to recover from emotional chaos. The audience is sometimes family members, sometimes other Vietnamese refugees with similar experiences. Through narration and listening, trauma stories can not only cure themselves but also be helpful for the whole Vietnamese diaspora.

Relocation of Victims in *The Lotus and the Storm*

Mai healed trauma and conquered “storm” by forgiving her mother and herself. She was stressed by two things. For the first one, her mother abandoned her and didn’t come to the United States with her and her father Minh; for the second one, James was shot down for her. For years, Mai was obsessed by sorrow mood that her mother decided to stay in Vietnam when she and Minh headed for America. Cliff told Mai the fact after Minh’s death that her father owed his life to her mother. Phong saved Minh’s life in 1963 rebellion not because sanctity of personal friendship but because he loved Quy. Cliff drew Minh back from fire in a dangerous operation in 1967 not because of military duty but because he loved Quy and “didn’t want her to suffer another death of a loved one” (Cao, 2014, p. 319). Mai realized that her mother “suffered quietly and privately” (Cao, 2014, p. 315). Her mother sacrificed herself and saved everyone. Mai relieved when she realized she and her father were not abandoned. She finally gave up hatred and began to miss her mother after knowing the truth. And she decided to take her father’s ash home and released it in the river of Vietnam.

When Mai went back to Vietnam and waited her dinner in a restaurant, her attention was caught by a story “AMERICAN VETERAN VOLUNTEER TIME”. She scanned the story with hope and picked up keywords “Veteran. Wounded. Lost years. Returns to Vietnam. New life here” (Cao, 2014, p. 327). Mai realized James Baker never died. When he recovered, he returned to Vietnam and continued volunteer work. The story introduced his routine from which Mai knew he still helped in orphanage and taught English. Mai went to Ben Thanh Market where James visited every Monday to try whether she could come across James. “From a measured distance, a man catches my eye. I see broad shoulders and thick, wavy hair that shines. His presence fills the room” (Cao, 2014, p. 329).

Mai recognized James on the market. From the back, the shoulders and wavy hair, Mai knew it was James. James turned and after a brief faltering he fixed his eyesight on Mai with tears in his eyes. James, who was in his mid-fifties, said Mai was just the same. They met again and recognized each other in a minute after thirty years. Mai found a blue tattoo with the date of Khanh's death. James took several photos from his wallet, on which were James, Khanh and Mai. James told Mai what happened to him. He spent long time in "a veterans' hospital and a rehabilitation center", then he went back home and lived with his mother without passion. Then he came back to Vietnam after his mother died. He met his wife who intended to go to America. But James prefer to stay in Vietnam as he considered Saigon as "a gentler place, a less judgmental place" for drifters like him. James guided Mai to have dinner, to walk along the street, to go to various shops to buy old books and letters, which aroused nostalgia of Mai. Several days later, Mai invited James to a voyage during which she dropped her father's ash into Saigon River so that her father could stay together with her mother. She knew her father loved her mother in his whole lifetime believed "it is possible for love to endure" (Cao, 2014, p. 341).

Mai finally reconciled with herself and heal psychological and cultural trauma. She suffered from "dissociative identity disorder" after Khanh's death in 1967. She represented three characters: Cecile, Storm and Mai. Mai lived in regret and blamed Storm for not warning James of the shooting. Storm thought she protected Mai and Cecile in that way. After Mai and his father arrived America, they began to live their "half-lives" their. Mai went to school and continued her middle school and university after she arrived at America. She found a job as librarian in a law office which gave her stability and security. They "managed to accommodate each other. I [Mai] still dread her appearance, but it no longer carries with it the threat of total destruction" (Cao, 2014, p. 201).

The other divergence between Mai and Storm lies on the cultural root. Storm who stood for the past dread experience became uncontrollably angry when she witnessed Mai's Americanness but she did not mean to harm Mai. She tried to control her outburst in private. At the same time, Mai works hard to control Storm and Cecile from going to public. After Mai knew the family secrets, she realized her mother had reason to stay behind and did not mean to abandon her and her father. Her mother sacrificed herself to save everyone. Nobody can escape from historical turbulence. When Mai went back to Vietnam, she encountered James who took Vietnam as his second home. He named his little daughter Khanh who Mai believed would rescue him. The novel ends with a serene picture. Mai drove out of city and went to field. She found a still point "that point in the present that carries a scent from the past but is not afraid of it and so welcomes the future without fear" (Cao, 2014, p. 350). She relieved from the pain. She and Storm violent self stopped blaming each other and reached a reconciliation. Mai was cured from schizophrenia and look forward to the future with smile and hope.

Conclusion

Lan Cao's novels map the state of exile and its elusive geography of loss and hope. As a refugee, Lan Cao hopes Vietnamese can reconcile with traumatic history and begin a new life. As an American, she suggests a compromise with modern society and expects for peace in the world. As a Vietnamese American, she emphasizes the coexistence with inner ego and finds an available way among different cultures. Refugees no matter what trauma they went through during the war and no matter what they have lost, they have had the mental toughness to start over and succeed. Lan Cao depicted the tragedy and cruelty of war from the perspective of soldiers, civilians, men, women and children. As post-war memories, the two novels described more about the

lasting mental wounds that war causes to people and tried to find the way to heal the psychological trauma. In both novels, Lan Cao described the great trauma of the war, her aim was not to accuse the cruelty of the war but make people become powerful enough to reconcile with the traumatic experience through the narration.

From the perspective of gender, Lan Cao described the cultural dilemma that refugees met in the new place. Dutt-Ballerstadt pointed out that the death of immigrant parents means the loss of both roots and roads (Dutt-Ballerstadt, 2010, p. 58). For the second generation immigrants, the existence of parents constantly reminds them of their ties with their motherland, and the death of parents cuts off the roots of their original culture. But in Lan Cao's novels, the death of immigrant parents didn't mean vanishment of everything. The death of Vietnamese parents did not cut the bond between 1.5 generation Vietnamese Americans with their original culture but attracted them to go back to Vietnam to find their roots. These Vietnamese parents endeavored to build a bridge for the next generation to connect the past and the future, and lead them to heal both psychological and cultural trauma.

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