

THE BOAT (NAM LE) AND THE BEAUTIES OF POSTMODERN LITERATURE

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Abstract: *Nam Le is a Vietnamese-Australian writer. With the debut collection of short stories, The boat, the young writer has received a number of prestigious awards. Beyond the limitation of national literature, Nam Le has shown many qualities of an international writer. The characteristics of the postmodern style in his story collection are the factors contributing to such qualities as well as factors that create real excitement for reading.*

Keywords: *Nam Le, the boat, post-modern literature.*

1. Introduction

Nam Le is a Vietnamese-Australian writer. With a collection of stories called *The boat*, young writer has received many prestigious awards. However, up to now, Vietnamese readers do not seem to show a great interest in the author. Through the interpretation of some aspects of Nam Le's poetic short stories, especially two works related to Vietnam, we expect to receive the consensus from the readers about the beauty of postmodern style of this writer.

2. Contents

2.1. Introduction of the writer

Nam Le's real name is Le Huu Phuc Nam. He was born in 1978 in Rach Gia, Kien Giang province. At 3 months old, Nam Le and his family moved to Malaysia, and then settled in Australia. After graduating from the University of Melbourne with two Bachelor degrees in Literature and Laws, Nam Le became a young lawyer and quietly pursued a career in literature. In 2004, he received a master's degree in the field of literary art after attending a writing camp in Iowa (US). Nam Le also worked as an editor in the editorial office at *Harvard Review* - one of the most prestigious journal of literature and art in the US. In 2008, Nam Le returned to Australia and published a collection of short stories entitled *The boat*. The book quickly received many awards such as: *Dylan Thomas Prize* (2008), *U. S. National Book Foundation "5 under 35 Fiction Selection* (2008), *Sydney Morning Herald Best Young*

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Novelist Award (2009), Australian Prime Minister's Literary Award (2009), PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story (2010), etc. Currently, Nam Le is one of the most popular young writers in the US.

2.2. *The beauties of postmodern literature in "The boat"*

The collection of stories *The boat* by Nam Le published in Vietnam in 2011 by The Publishing House of Writers Association, was translated by Thien Nga and Thuan Thuc. It can be seen that the first factor contributing to the huge success of Nam Le's *The boat* is deep reflections of the writer about the difference between national literature and international literature. This makes literature become the subject of literature at the opening story of the collection: *Love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice*. The questions often posed to the character named Nam, who has many autobiography characteristics of the writer, are: Why have I become a writer? What and how to write to become an international writer? The reason to become a writer was briefly explained: "*The Importance is in what you are able to write not in what no one can write*" [4, p.40], but the question of what to write is not easy to answer: "*deadline comes, I am really tired and I am trying to write. And then, in the long period between the deadlines, I return and face with an empty screen and my mind gradually becomes vague. (...). What a difficulty! This world always has something going on*" [4, p.18]. Thus, to Nam, the biggest challenge is not the problem of how to write, but the themes / topics / contents to be reflected. Although there have been a lot of suggestions like: "*Write a story about Vietnam*", or "*Ethnic literature's hot. And important too*", Nam even heard there was a Chinese woman who immigrated to America writing a collection of short stories about the process of Chinese immigrating to America and "*It was rumored that she was offered a six-digit contract to write two books*"..., but Nam was still in an intellectual impasse. As a writer who has a deep sense of his pen's mission, Nam felt insulted to write about something trivial or easy, which is a terrible insult. Nam also envisions a sense of sheer boredom that the writer brings to readers if he or she just writes about things that are familiar. Like many young people in Iowa, when he started writing, Nam recognized a number of limitations of ethnic literature. In the ebullient debates among them, the limitations have been indicated as: They keep describing foreign food; characters are always boring, general; poor language; stereotyped images ("*I imagine myself wearing a conical hats, standing in the rice paddy field, which is the way to bore my readers*"); using the trite and hollow style, lacking the necessary actions to remove redundant words ("*Sometimes I still think about the number of words a way to think about the number of casualties*")... However, his final choice for the end work of the writing course is the story of the Vietnamese boat people - ethnic thing.

Like the character that carries his autobiography characteristics, in *The boat*, Nam Le wrote two stories for the ethnic theme. The Australian young writer aspired to be an international writer but not intend to deny his root. In other words, the qualities of an international writer which Nam Le desired did not conflict with his interest in the ethnic

subject or writing about ethnic. Even the writer who is living far from the homeland has been deeply concerned about the relationship between himself and the nation as a writer: “*I don’t completely understand my relationship to Vietnam as a writer. This book is a testament to the fact that I’m becoming more and more okay with that*” [1]. “*Becoming more and more okay*” because through this collection, readers can see clearly how deep affection is the writer’s for his country. Nam Le has placed two stories involving the ethnic theme on the most important positions in his collection: at the beginning and at the end. Both are related to the war in Vietnam before 1975: a story about the Vietnamese boat people left the country silently after the war (*The boat*) and a story about why he wrote about the boat people (*Love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice*). Both of them are rich autobiography. Through those stories, readers visualize not only how the writer felt when he left, but also how he managed to live in a foreign country. What surprises the readers is that why a child leaving the country at 3 months old could write such as deep story about Vietnam. Furthermore, Nam Le has put in his works a huge amount of mother-tongue, including idioms, proverbs, dialects, pronouns, etc. that the translators have tried hard, yet failed to express them all. However, the most striking thing is that Nam Le wrote about his country in the international spirit. Both stories are not a trace of any political color. All reality materials illustrate the purpose of literature. Thus, war stories which lead to a series of bad consequences such as slaughter, betrayal, punishment, escaping, exile, etc. totally do not arouse the feelings of hatred, division and ending relationship. These horror obsessions of the devastating war just make people want to forget (*Love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice*). The horror about a fragile life on the run just makes the people long to live (*The boat*). This means, as the writer said, it makes people vision something “*greater than resentment, more dangerous than memories*”. Therefore, the writer’s determination to choose a theme that has long been viewed as sensitive (the theme about the fate of the Vietnamese boat people) does not aim to raise people’s awareness of things that would have been buried in the ashes of the past, but to remind people of a bloody lesson of war. This is never meaningless when the world we live in is still full of horrific murder weapons. This message makes the ethnic story not restricted in its framework. That is problem of humanity, story of eternity.

In search of the essence of existence, Nam Le aspires to go beyond all the space limits in his compositions. Except for two autobiographical stories which begin and end this collection related to ethnic theme, five remaining stories tell about five different places, at different unique times. It is a remote area of Australia - where a secondary school boy has to face the fear of challenge of rival that comes along with the approaching death of his mother (*Halflead bay*). It is a slum neighborhood in Colombia where a 14-year-old assassin boy lives among pure love and violence presenting everywhere. He was facing approaching death after having refused to perform the action to kill his childhood friend (*Cartangena*). It is a sweltering night in Tehran where an American lawyer was in psychological crisis, bewilderment by the drastic offs selection of her best girlfriend (*Tehran calling*). It was a clear morning, while Mayako was seeing a flash that was reminiscent to a camera lights in her old

memory, when the atomic bomb falls, claiming the lives of herself and many other innocent people (*Hiroshima*). That was a horror mood of old painter in New York before his death of hemorrhoids and the estrangement of his only daughter who had been separated for seventeen years (*Meeting Elise*). It is true that, with *The boat*, Nam Le is sobbing with the beauty and pain of many lands.

However, the international nature, humanity nature in this story collection does not only stop at the form aspect as themes or characters, spatial context or historical events influence to humanity, etc. but also in a very universal problem: problem of human destiny before the trials of existence. In life, people may have to face the completely individual situation, but behind the unique behavior of an independent individual, a writer always determines a living instinct. By a profound sympathy, thorough understanding and rare sophistication, Nam Le wrote the things that only he is capable of. Nam Le's works bring a very interesting sense that arouses readers to explore together and wish express deep feelings, the most discreet thoughts of the inner. In other words, the pen of Nam Le is making all boundaries of space and time become blurred and even disappear, leaving just the person with person. The young writer has succeeded in doing so by selecting the language for his characters which is capable of expressing almost absolute precision. May be, that is how "*To make the strange seem familiar and the familiar seem strange*" [6].

But postmodern style makes the readers, if you want to understand it, have a quite good literary understanding. Because the writers sometimes do not want to combine the expression and what is expressed. Postmodern thinking does not admit a type of power and universal discourse, so "no supernarrative spirit makes all peace". Allegory should appear so that inside the seemingly stable form hides the fluctuations constant, to "*forecast the depth can not capture the chaos and deep behind the structure of language*" [2]. The discourse of Nam Le usually piles with allegory. Each word, each sentence, each image contains connotations. They force the readers to constantly imagine, speculate, annotate, contact, patchwork, chaini, etc. so that the can open a door into the world of art that the writer creates. That is, turning to the position of the receiver, each reader instead of looking for the core meaning behind the text, has the right to obviously supply the works with their own significant/merits, and to expand and complement them.

In *Love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice*, allegories such as the river, the bullet, the man and the burning gasoline container, Linda, the number 14, the exotic small head between pillows or above the aneurysm fur coat, etc. can help readers reach closer to the thoughts of the writer about the past stories related to the ethnic theme. Although no one can be certain of a unique significance of this discourse, they still have to accept that the use of allegory to convey the generation stories between exile Vietnamese, in this context, is entirely relevant. Because allegory has the characteristics of the era and current events. They establish continually new meanings which overlap the existing ones. This is also because allegory is based on a time misconception, "*added meaning is formed in a continuous way, it must structure and make the stable meaning, explicit or metaphors become minor*" [2].

This is a small example: “*In me nothing but hatred*” he said, “*but I was so bored with everyone now*”. He stopped after the word “*hate*” as a father for the first time says the word before his innocent child, testing knowledge of the child, checking what is the connotation of the word and something is experienced later” [4, p.43]. With this style characteristics, although the amount of work is not large, the author is able to send various messages. This is what has been asserted by *The Times*: “*Stories always require read slowly and read more than once*” [4]. Therefore, it creates new spiritual excitements in receiving literature. It is here, we understand what the notion *Reading synonymous with creativity* means.

3. Conclusion

Although the writer has not written much, the special contours of a literature talent in Nam Le have been disclosed with *The boat*. Transcend the limits of national literature, Nam Le has shown many qualities of an international writer. The characteristic of the postmodern style in this collection of stories is one of the factors contributing to such qualities, as well as factors that create real excitement for reading activities.

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