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EWRT 1A

Essay #3

November 1, 2023

Different Kinds of Family Love in Viet Thanh Nguyen's book of short stories *The Refugees*

“Love”, the four letter English word that modern society frequently and naively associated with the concept of romantic love, casual sex, and flammable passion, is a more complex concept than we usually think about. This word carries a much deeper meaning than what our massive media shallowly portrays in our daily life. While we do see the acting of “love” in other contexts, the most dense location we observe “Love” is in family relationships. “Family Love” is therefore the core representation of “Love” because family is where we are bonded with each other either by our blood or by our wedding vow, and therefore, tighten by a much stronger force than our casual relationships in the society. The love in a family has many different facades due to the roles we connect to each of our family members. With the change of age and time of maturing, the dynamic within our “Family Love” also evolves. In Viet Thanh Nguyen's collection of short stories, *The Refugees*, the author illustrates many representations and progression of “Family Love”. Through the lens of the complex life story of refugees through war, we see a vivid illustration of the reality of the sacrificial love between siblings, the love of responsibility beyond romantic passion between spouses, and the everlasting love between parent and child.

No love is more obvious while someone is willing to laid down their life for us, as apostle John said in the New Testament Bible, “The way we came to know love was that he laid down his life for us; so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers” (*New American Bible*, 1 John

3:16). In the story of “Black-Eyed Women”, the brother of the ghost writer laid down his life to save her, “After my brother stabbed him with his pocket knife, the three of us stood there in astonishment, our gaze on the blade, tipped by blood, a silent moment broken when the little man howled in pain, drew back his machine gun, and swung its stock hard against my brother’s head. The crack- I could hear it still. He fell with the force of dead weight, blood streaming from his brow, jaw and temple hitting the wooden deck with an awful thud still resonant in my memory” (Nguyen 15) vividly described the painful brutal killing of her young and brave 15 years old brother got killed in his suicidal attempt to protect her from being raped. Earlier in the story, the author described his wisdom by mentioning that he cut her hair into a “short, jagged boy’s cut”, told his sister not to talk because ““You still sound like a girl.”” then removed her shirt, and then he ripped her shirt into strips in order to disguise her as a boy (Nguyen 14). He loved her not just with courage, determination, and satisfaction, but also with all his wisdom. Oftentimes, the time we observe the act of Love in a family relationship in a moment of external danger. Our sibling, out of our surprise, stood up to protect us the moment we met them the most.

Sometimes we do not even know they choose to trade their well being to protect us. For example, in the story of “The Transplant ”, Louis Vu blackmailed Arthur Arellano that he will report Author’s brother Martin employed illegal immigrants in Arellano & Sons if Arthur decides to remove Vu’s pirated goods from Authur’s garage (Nguyen 95). Arthur struggled and silently accepted that and went home. He knew how much his younger brother took care of him and he valued Martin and decided to protect him by compromising with Vu. But does Martin know about that? No! The sacrificial love from our sibling may not be obvious in front of our face. There are times our siblings choose to secretly trade their interest in exchange for our well being without our acknowledgement or awareness.

The love between married couples is always an act of choice. Differ from other kinds of family love, which is mostly by the bonding by our blood, the love between spouses is bound by their wedding vow. In modern society, except few cultures still exercise “arranging marriage”, such as in India, most of us choose our own spouse by our own will. Therefore, we choose to love our spouse and vow to keep loving our spouse in the unforeseen changes in the future, till death tear us apart, as part of our wedding vow. The showing of our love to our spouse is usually demonstrated in our long term commitment and patience to resolve our conflict and persist to act gracefully toward them even in a moment they no longer appeared to deserve our love. In the story “War Years”, Mrs. Hoa persistently visits different stores to raise funds to support the Southern Vietnam guerrilla army (Nguyen 95). Even Mrs. Hoa’s tactic annoyed Long’s mother, she was greatly moved by her perseverating love after their disconnection for more than ten years. She firmly hung on the hope that she still could see her husband return one day, ““Whoever said my husband was dead? No one saw him die. ... They’re alive, and no one like you is going to tell me otherwise”” (Nguyen 69). Her love is not only showcase on her persistently efforts to support the guerrilla warfare which may increase the chances for her husband to survive, but also the fact she cast her love into hope which produces action. Not only does she keep her vow to love him, but also keep the hope that she will still have the opportunity to love him! As apostle Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 13:13, “But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love” (*The Message*, 1 Cor. 13:13). Mrs. Hoa’s extravagant love toward her missing-in-action husband produced her unswerving hope!

We observe another kind of love between spouses in the story “I’d Love You to Want Me”. Mrs. Khanh started to suspect Professor Khanh has a love affair with others after he started to call her by another name “Yen” which she does not recognize (Nguyen 102). Throughout the story I always wonder if “Yen” is her real name that she forgot due to her memory loss. We see in the story she persists to ignore this issue which bothers her and maintains emotional calmness to handle her husband, even to the end and even replies to Prof. Khanh, “‘It’s just me.’ she said. ‘It’s Yen’” (Nguyen 123). I believe at this moment she decided to compromise the memory lost and limited mental capacity of Prof. Khanh started to communicate with him inside “his world” by using “his language”. That is an act of love by lowering down her own competency to live her life according to what her husband could operate under. That is a love of empathy! It is an act of exercising her wedding vow!

Even only briefly mentioned, we also see another example of love between spouse in the story “The Transplant” by the short description of Norma’s respond to the news of sick Arthur before the medical operation, “For a long time Norma was silent, but when she sat down at last, he knew she had resigned herself to seeing him through his illness. When she put one hand on his knee and the other to his cheek, he also understood that the autoimmune hepatitis was God’s sly way of keeping them together. This was the one benefit he could find in what was otherwise a disaster” (Nguyen 78-79). Regardless of how much problem Arthur has due to his gambling addiction, Norma still chooses to stay with Arthur during the period of his medical treatment to support him both mentally and physically. Norma only decided to depart from Arthur again after he recovered in health and started again to gamble (Nguyen 82). While Norma chooses to love Arthur and be with him during his sickness, she chooses to establish physical boundaries from

him after she starts to realize Arthur still has not grown up to own up his own life. Love has limits, sometimes!

The love between parent and children are also presented in different forms from several stories. In the story “Black-Eyed Woman”, we observe a loving relationship, exhibited in the ghost story telling, listening, and writing, as a form of collaboration, between the “ghost writer” and her mom, ““Why write down what I’m telling you?’ ‘Someone has to,’ I said, notepad on my lap, pen at attention. ‘Writers.’ She shook her head but I think she was pleased” (Nguyen 20-21). This is a constructive style of love between parents and their child which collaborate and foster creativity together. Her mom, on the other hand, deeply loves her dead son, and always remembers him, in the form of a ghost story. But, over time, “Having cried over him for years, she did not cry now” (Nguyen 19).

We see similar love, in the form of grief in the story “War Years” while Mrs. Hoa has to face the horrified news from her daughter that not only the Communists killed her eldest son but also “scratched the eyes out of the picture of his grave” (Nguyen 69). It must very painful for Mrs. Hoa to bury her eldest son upon his death fighting the Communist. However, it is even more painful for her to learn that his grave was disturbed! ““You see how the Communists weren’t satisfied with killing my son once?’ Mrs. Hoa aimed her gaze at me. ‘They killed him twice when they desecrated his grave. They don’t respect anybody, not even the dead” (Nguyen 70). The love of a mother therefore, surely created hate toward the one who hurt and damaged their loved one. It is a very painful sense of love. But it is still based on love! Love the one who already died and we are helpless to do anything more for them. Don’t we all have this kind of love, especially if our parents already left the world we live in? We still remember them in our loving memory but the time has passed and we can do nothing more to let them feel our love.

The only thing we can do, is to do something to affirm ourselves that we still love them and remember them, even if they are no longer here with us and will never see them in this world!

Fortunately, for many of us, we still have the opportunity to enjoy the love between parent and child. In the story, “The American”, the author illustrates a tension between James Carver and his daughter Claire from their exchange, “‘He’s old and angry and bitter and he’s taking it out on everyone he meets.’ ‘I’m not angry and bitter. What am I angry about? What am I bitter about? That I’m being lectured to by a kid who thinks he’s going to save the world with a tin can robot? That I have a daughter who think she’s a Vietnamese?’” (Nguyen 141). This passage reveals to us how Claire and James see each other. From Clair’s eyes, James is not a father easy to interact with. From James’ point of view, Claire and Legaspi are naive and do not understand the emotion and moral suffering he sacrificed for the country.

Everyone involved in a war are looser to the war, they always suffered from the blaming, from their own heart or by others, toward them of being part of an act of killing, while in fact they were placed in a dilemma that they struggled and intend to avoid thinking and remember since they know everything they did, regardless truly was truly necessary at that time, damaged, hurt and killed someone. They were angry postwar. They do not know what they are agreeing about. The anger came from the guilt deep inside their soul of their acts during the war, which subconsciously they know caused bad things to some life in this world, even though they may not see them in their own eyes. These damage our heart and often create emotional damage that we are not aware of and hard to explain to others. In the story, we can see James clearly suffer from his war experience and create barriers to have a healthy communication with his daughter.

The story changed, after James saw his own vulnerability and his protection mechanisms were cracked down by his illness. His weakness called for Claire. In the end of the

story, we see Claire, regardless of how bad the interaction between James and her, took the responsibility to care for her father after dark in the hospital, “He put his arms around her neck and held on tight as she leveraged him up from the bed. ... Once he was sitting on the bed with his feet on the ground, he hung an arm around her neck and let her pull him to his feet” (Nguyen 147). It is not easy, physically, as well as mentally, to take care of a sick old man. Her love, even buried and hidden for many years under, now blossoms in the most appropriate time to shower James, the weak, sick and needed father. Vulnerability sometimes is the key for us to see love. Because unless we are vulnerable, we are too proud to receive love from our children who we used to nurture and easily reject their independent act of love.

The life experienced by the refugees is much more painful and complex than the life lived in a peaceful and free country. Through the lens of the refugee stories, we see examples of different kinds of “Family Love”. Viet Thanh Nguyen shows us, in this book *The Refugees*, how people love their siblings, spouse, children, and parents in these short stories. Most of these loves are measured and polished through the painful events of death, age, loss, blackmail, separation, and sacrifices. All these stories prompt us to take our limited opportunity to express enduring love to our family members now! Do not wait till it is too late! Would that be ever too late to love? No! Never! As long as we live, it is never too late to love! The one we love may not be able to receive our love, or will be capped by the changing nature of their health status to receive or feel our love. But we will always be able to find some action to assure ourselves that we still love them! Cherish your moment to express, but never give up thinking it is too late. As the Holy Bible states, “Love never dies” (*The Message*, 1 Cor. 13:18).

Work Cited

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