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A Poem of Human Sorrow

Unlike many refugee life novels in the United States, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* is the first novel written by a Vietnamese-American author Le Thi Diem Thuy. From the perspective of an unnamed girl, the memoir-style novel narrates a story of a refugee family who fled from Vietnam and emigrated to the United States after the Vietnam War. This book reveals to the readers the trauma of war, the hardships of immigrant life, the pain of loss, and the desire to grow. To connect with the reader, Thuy uses poetic language, rich metaphors, and interlaced styles of time and space to make this book as subtle and beautiful as poetry; allowing readers to realize that trauma has coexisted with those who have experienced trauma so long.

Although this is a novel about trauma, the author uses a lot of beautiful and poetic language which makes the novel full of touching appeal. In the first chapter of the book, the six years old narrator arrived in California with her Ba and four uncles as a refugee. Leaving without her mother, experiencing the horror of her brother's unexpected death, living in a completely unfamiliar culture, the little narrator encounters unspeakable loneliness. loneliness. With long parallel sentences, the six-year-old narrator expresses her feelings of anxiety, curiosity, sadness, and loneliness:

“ the story could take place in the courtyard of our house in Vietnam or on the deck of the Navy ship...it could take place in the heat of midday or in the cool of the

evening or in the strange weather of one of my Ba's nightmares...it could be about how everything that happened to my Ba and the four uncles and me,...as in those fairy tales that the teacher read to the class every Friday" (30).

The whole paragraph is a child's inner monologues to the glass animal. With these descriptions of her memorize, readers can not only understand the loneliness and longing of the narrator, but also the difficulties they have encountered during their escape. Observed and experienced, as a six-year-old child, her trauma emphasizes her loneliness, especially without her mother around and in a strange culture. Likewise, another piece of poetic writing is the way the narrator's mother describes what the Vietnam war is like in her mind, " Ma says war is a bird with a broken wing flying over the countryside, trailing blood and burying crops in sorrow. If something grows in spite of this, it is both a curse and a miracle" (87). This text is full of poetic rhythm to arouse human sorrow and sympathy for those trapped in the war. In this way, the poetic language in our book gives this book its unique charm.

Another way that the author describes trauma is with the use of metaphors. With this, readers will be more interactive with the book and critically think about the content of the book. The first metaphor is the meaning of "gangster". The author repeatedly refers to her Ba as a gangster, who was called gangster by his wife too. The speaker's father participated in the Vietnam War as a soldier in the Southern Army. The name of gangster indicates that war always takes lives, just like how gangsters harm others' lives and properties. To some extent, there is no difference between soldiers and gangsters. Another reason he is called a gangster is how the narrator's father married the narrator's mother without her parents' acceptance. In a sense, Ba not only took their daughter away but also took her far away from her homeland. The narrator's mother was sad for disobeying her parents and not accompanying them. Therefore, to

her, Ba is a gangster. Another great metaphor is water. The author indicates that “In Vietnamese, the word for *water* and the word for a nation, a country, and a homeland are one and the same: nu0c”(Thuy). First, water is the metaphor for the image of their homeland. After the swimming pool in the apartment was filled up with concrete, the narrator’s mother became very sad and felt disconnected from her homeland. At the same time, the water also represents the pain of loss from losing the narrator’s brother, “ Was it true, what the women had said, about the boy’s body being filled with bad water?” (132). The water here implies painful memories related to their hometown. The use of metaphors makes the difficulties in the story appear calmer but more deeply impactful to readers.

Lastly, one of the characteristics of this novel is the author’s intertwining of time and space, as the transitioning of the lens in a movie, which makes readers feel a little overwhelmed at the beginning. For example, in the last chapter, the author keeps switching between the present and the past, the United States and Vietnam. The two scenes are the death and funeral of the brother in Vietnam, and the daily life of his parents in America now. The author calmly combines the great grief that she experienced in the past with her parents and the long journey they went through to accept and live with the pain. This makes readers feel that only after a long period of time can the pain be buried slowly and numbness becomes a habit.

To conclude, this is a novel with a heavy topic about human lives. However, the author tells the story in her unique way. Through poetic language, exquisite metaphors, and mingled time and space, the readers empathize with the narrator who suffers the trauma caused by the war which dramatically arouses readers' compassion. The novel also lets people realize that, after going through all the hardships, there are still warm moments that remain, “ Out from the darkness of the sea, wave after wave of small, luminous bodies washed to shore” (158).

