No Crying at the Dinner Table by Carol Nguyen.

No Crying at the Dinner Table by Carol Nguyen – A Review

No Crying at the Dinner Table **by Carol Nguyen is a deeply personal film, mainly because Nguyen seats her own parents and sister at this dinner table and constructs the narrative out of interviews with them. Despite being so specific to Nguyen's own family, this film also works as a capsule holding this moment in time where children are growing up in vastly different cultures than their parents and grandparents.**

In this short film, Nguyen interviews her parents and her sister, prompting them to open up about when and how they showed affection to their own parents. These shots are intercut with scenes of the whole family at the dinner table, listening to each other's interviews, as we slowly realize how much is left unsaid between each generation.

Even though I am not Vietnamese, this film could have easily been about my own family. My parents grew up in India, whereas my brother and I were raised in several different countries around the world. My dad has an entire closet full of scrapbooks my mom put together from various "I love you" cards we made for our parents at school. Yet, I have always remembered them saying "we did not grow up saying 'I love you' or hugging and kissing our parents the way you kids do". Any resentment about this would be swallowed up with a shrug and a "things were just different for us".

Yet, as Nguyen's film reveals, this is not simply a generational difference. Several sentences from Nguyen's parents begin with, "In Vietnam...", pointing to the dominant role culture plays in how one receives and demonstrates affection. In today's world of increased migration and intercultural lifestyles, a generational difference is thus further complicated by also being a cultural difference. Not only did my parents have to contend with raising children in a time different from their own childhood, but they also raised us in cultural contexts completely unfamiliar to them. As we grew older, they received affection from us in a way that was also unfamiliar, affection we learned to express because of the schools we went to, the teachers we had, and the friends we made.

While I always assumed that my parents had made their peace with their childhoods, the interviews in Nguyen's film made me realize otherwise. As her mother and father tearfully describe the rare instances in which they expressed love for their parents, and the lifetime of regret they have carried for not saying I love you, I realized that perhaps the only way to make peace with ourselves is

to express the way we feel.

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Something I appreciated about Nguyen's film was the way she dealt with indirectness. Her sister's memories with her grandparents were full of affection, and described in her voice, they don't sound like the same people described by her parents. Similarly, my brother and I never really noticed the difference in physical and verbal affection between my parents and grandparents, because they were always so affectionate with us. Perhaps through us, they felt freer to express themselves in a way they never did with my parents. We became two-way conduits; when my mother spent a summer teaching me how to write in Hindi, the first task I had was to write a letter to my grandmother. Slowly, with every visit to India, I started seeing my parents hug my grandparents more and more. I'd like to think that with every card we made and every hug we gave, we made our parents feel braver to break with custom and be more open with their own parents.

In the same vein, Nguyen's film also breaks through traditional forms of expression to recognize something universal about the human need for affection. My favourite moment in the film is when her sister hugs her mother as they are listening to the tapes, creating a physical bond as they simultaneously listen to each other yearn for that very intimacy. Playing with recordings, and re-recordings, Nguyen creates a universality out of the particularities of her mother, father, and sisters' stories. Disembodying the voices from her families' physical presence, and re-playing these interviews through a cassette player, Nguyen invites her viewer to this family dinner table where once their own mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers may have sat. There is something beautiful about watching this film unfold, to see that as simple as touch and affectionate words may seem, it takes the distance of a replayed recording to actually bring generations closer together.

Every experience of intercultural movement is different, but what binds the diasporic together is the constant negotiation of difference, be it between cultures or generations. Nguyen's short film is a touching example of how something we consider to be universal, love, is felt and shown in varied ways. In the context of migration, where children learn this expression in a manner unlike their parents, distances can be created even within a single family. In *No Crying at the Dinner Table*, when each individual expresses their understanding of affection, that conversation can bridge the entire distance of multiple generations and cultures.

The film is now available to watch on The New Yorker.

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