

INTERCULTURAL CONFLICT IN LAN CAO'S *MONKEY BRIDGE*

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Abstract:

*Intercultural conflict is an emerging issue in the immigrant fiction as migration from all over the world has been an inevitable part of today's global economy. It exhibits manifold and differentiated viewpoints and perceptions of individuals or societies of two different cultures as culture is multi-layered and heterogeneous in nature. The present research paper attempts to explore such intercultural conflict in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* published in 1997. Lan Cao is a Vietnamese American writer who depicts the Vietnamese immigrants' struggle to detach themselves from their native Vietnamese culture to assimilate into American culture. However, their desire to assimilate into a new culture causes them to experience the intercultural conflict which impacts their cultural and ethnic identity. Their endeavour to resolve also reveals the incompatibility between Vietnamese and American culture as they differ in their cultural values, norms, and practices. Cultural differences or distance between two individuals or groups, thus, leads to intercultural conflict causing them to rethink and reconstruct their identity in the host land.*

The present paper is divided into three sections. The first section is concerned with the substantial theoretical framework of intercultural conflict, the second section deals with the analysis of intercultural conflict in the lives of Vietnamese Americans in the novel and the final section concludes the paper with research findings. Thus, the present paper is a modest attempt to analyze how Lan Cao depicts the intercultural conflict in the lives of Asian immigrants in America who are considered as 'Others' in the new host land.

Keywords: *Intercultural conflict, assimilation, alienation, immigration, cultural identity, hybridity.*

The present research paper attempts to analyze intercultural conflict in Lan Cao's novel *Monkey Bridge* (1997). Apprehending the intercultural conflict is emerging as a key problem in the lives of many Asian immigrants in America. Ting-Toomy and Oetzel define intercultural conflict as, "the perceived or actual incompatibility of cultural values, situational norms, goals, face orientations, scarce resources, styles/processed, and/or outcomes in a face-to-face (or mediated context" (217). They point out that intercultural conflict generally arises when individuals from one culture are influenced by another different culture when they attempt to assimilate into or alienate from it. It, thus, manifests the experiences of emotional despondency and incongruous expectations between individuals or groups from diverse cultural backgrounds who identify in congruity between their cultural norms, values, beliefs, customs, and traditions when they interact together. It also exhibits the Asian immigrants' inability to confront with the host culture based conflicts in their personal, social, and even professional lives in the host land.

Lan Cao is a Vietnamese American writer who has immigrated to America before the Fall of Saigon in 1975. Her fiction mostly deals with the Vietnamese immigrants' experiences of cross-cultural conflicts in America which are largely influenced by the Vietnam War. Her semi-autobiographical novel, *Monkey Bridge* (1997), set in New York in 1978, is narrated by the protagonist Mai Nguyen and her mother Thanh,

the refugees of the Vietnam War, who fled to America to start their life anew leaving their unpleasant past behind, at the end of Vietnam War. However, they soon realize that their immigration and interdependent relationships with white natives are actually causing many troubles for them as they are unable to adjust themselves in a new culture. It eventually leads them to face cultural collusion which impels them to experience the misunderstandings or disagreements between these two different cultures. They, thus, must build a bridge, to resolve their cultural dilemma and disintegrated identity as a Vietnamese American by comprehending and interpreting both the native Vietnamese and new American culture. It demonstrates that intercultural conflict, for many Asian's immigrants, is actually a cultural challenge or opportunity to absorb the diverse approaches to overcome conflict situations and to assimilate into new cultures.

Cao, aptly, delineates the intercultural conflict of both Mai and Thanh through their mother-daughter relationship that impel them to confront the emotional struggle and traumatic experiences in the host land. Both of them struggle to assimilate into American culture to which they perceive as incongruent with their past Vietnamese culture as Mai asserts, "My dilemma was that, seeing both sides to everything, I belonged to neither" (88). It shows that she is torn between two contradictory perceptions about herself. It is more evident in her relationship with her mother, Thanh, who also views herself as a displaced refugee in the host land. Both mother and daughter's exile in the alien land causes them to grieve for their personal as well as national losses through the rites and rituals of Vietnamese culture as Edward Said points out the effects of exile on immigrants in his *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (2000),

"Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home; its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (173).

The American daughter, Mai also lives in exile and experiences her childhood and early adolescent years alone in America as she was moved with her family friend, Uncle Michael before her mother's departure to America to accompany her. She, thus, couldn't get her mother's guidance in the alien land and her reminiscences of past life with her mother in Vietnam are conflicted with her present life in America. She then feels incompetent to experience the emotional connection with her mother as Lisa Suhair Majaj states,

"Memory plays a familiar role in the assertion of identity by members of ethnic and minority groups; family stories frequently ground ethnic identification, and the popularized search for 'roots' is often articulated as 'remembering who you are'" (266).

In the novel, the mother-daughter bond plays a crucial role as it embodies Mai's attachment to the motherland itself. Though Mai and her mother, Thanh were able to escape from their traumatic past in Vietnam, they soon experiences alienation in the United the host land of America. They seem to become homesick and mourn for their native Vietnamese relatives, home and cultural practices as they cannot completely obliterate their past in Vietnam. However, Mai attempts to form a bridge between her Vietnamese and American life to deal with her exile and intends to find the secrets of her Vietnamese past whereas her mother, Thanh endeavours to hide her family's perfidious acts as prostitution and illegitimate births in the family from her daughter. Thanh's such act of hiding her past secrets can be interpreted as an effort to facilitate her daughter's present life easier in the host land as she cannot uncage herself from her old Vietnamese way of life and the dreadful memories of her discarded father Baba Quan, his act of murdering the landlord and even the funeral of her own mother.

Thanh's attempt to hide her family's secrets impels Mai to uncover these truths to comprehend her true identity. Eventually she succeeds to unveil her Vietnamese family's past by reading the journals of her mother and discovers her Vietnamese cultural heritage as Michelle Balaev points out, "Mai's search for the

'truth' of her mother' past becomes a search not only for an articulation of her own identity, but also an exploration of the contours of her relationship to her mother" (41). She is then determined to help her mother to get rid of her traumatic past in Vietnam, but her mother, Thanh attempts suicide believing her sacrifice will rescue her daughter from the curses of the bad karma of her family. The cultural and generational gap between Mai and Thanh, thus, exemplifies the intercultural conflict of many ethnic-minorities in America as Mai experiences detachment from her mother when she asserts, "I was still not accustomed to the peculiar way she revealed her world to me" (201). She realizes her mother's inability to resolve her intercultural conflict in America is significantly caused by her traumatic past in Vietnam as she confides,

"Both Mrs. Bay and my mother had seemed unreal since the first day they arrived together in this country... In many ways, they continued to live in a geography of thoughts defined by the map of a country that no longer existed in terms I could understand" (66).

Thanh's desire to retain her identity as a Vietnamese is actually ignited by her alienation in the new land as "She had no claim to American space, no desire to stake her future in this land" (91). It reflects her emotional frustration that gradually leads her to confront the cultural dilemma as Stuart Hall in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* points out that immigration to a new land causes the intercultural conflict as,

"Individuals gradually internalize the values and customs held by the society in which they live and develop as people. An individual's acculturation is, therefore, an unending process, but one that becomes more selective as a person matures." (112).

Alike Thanh, Mai's experiences of a stressful life in America also eventually lead her to dejection or depression, particularly in her adolescence age. She becomes rebellious against her own Vietnamese mother, Thanh and undervalues her motherland, Vietnamese's cultural practices, values, norms, and traditions. Moreover, her discernment of the Vietnamese War also causes identity crisis leading it to the intercultural conflict. She succumbs to discrimination on the basis of race, class, and gender in the new culture of America and strives to comprehend her native land's Vietnamese culture through her interactions with her Vietnamese mother and the Native Americans and their biased media. She says,

Eyes, we all ended up staring at, as if we were passerby caught among the accumulated wreckage, the blunders and pile up by the roadside. It was on TV... that I witnessed my own untranslatable world unfold to Americans half a globe away. (98)

She is, thus, unable to comprehend her present life in America which is torn between the contradictory images of her motherland generated by both her mother and the American media. She further expresses her grief as, "Ours after all, was an inescapable history that continued to be dissected and remodeled by a slew of commentators and experts." (42) She is strongly aware of the intercultural conflict in her life as she realizes her Vietnamese name and heritage distinguishes herself as 'Other' in the United States. She expresses it as,

"It felt, in fact, like a borrowed name, on loan to satisfy my teachers' insistence on rhyme and order. "Mai Nguyen" was my American name, or at least the American spin of my name. But it sounded unnatural. After all, tradition dictated that "Nguyen", a family name, be granted pride of place, a position at the beginning. "Mai" an individual name, should tag a few respectful steps behind." (125)

Mai's frustration due to intercultural conflict is evident as she realizes the differences between her native Vietnamese culture and the American culture. She experiences her inability to belong to any one

culture as her present life is, in fact, the product of her hybrid identity. She attempts to be an American by rejecting her mother's teachings as she points out that her mother, "believed in the infinite, untouchable forces that made up the hidden universe: hexes and curses, destiny and Karma." (24). She, moreover, fails to comprehend her native Vietnamese culture and eventually tries to detach herself from the Vietnamese culture as she admits,

"I could see this community as a riot of adolescents, obstreperous, awkward, out of sync with the subscribed norms of American life, and beyond the reach of my authority. I could feel for them, their sad shuffles and anachronistic modes of behavior, the peculiar and timid way they held their bodies and occupied the physical space, the unfailing well-manneredness with which they conducted themselves in public their foreigner's ragged edges. Here, in one corner, was a grouping of elderly women and men too unattached to the ways of the United States even to be unaware of their differences. (146)

On the contrary, she accepts the logical and scientific American philosophy to resolve her conflict. She endeavours to imbibe the host American culture by learning their ways of living as she wishes to speak English like the Native Americans. She insists Aunt Mary and Uncle Michael to teach her English,

"Only with Aunt Mary and Uncle Michael could I give myself an inheritance my parents never give me: the gift of language. The story of English was nothing less than the poetry of sound and motion. To this day, Aunt Mary's voice remains my standard for perfection". (36)

Her attempts to assimilate in host American culture, thus, clearly manifest that she seems to belong to two different cultures at the same time. On the contrary, her mother, Thanh is still attached to her Vietnamese heritage and doesn't desire to adopt the American ways of living. She strives to protect her daughter, Mai from the cultural and racial discrimination by the white natives in the alien land of America. However, Mai views her mother's possessiveness about her as an obstacle that leads her to confront intercultural conflict as she says, "That was why she thought she had to be with me, or at least near me, all the time, to deflect their powers, since I was too ignorant to detect danger myself" (24). She feels that her Vietnamese mother, Thanh is also a victim of intercultural conflict like her as she fails to manage her day to day life in America. She states that their roles as mother and daughter have been reversed to resolve their conflicts,

"We are going life in reverse, I was the one who would help my mother through the hard scrutiny of ordinary suburban life. I would have to forgo the luxury of adolescent experiments and temper tantrums, so that I could scoop my mother out of harm's way and give her sanctuary. Now, when we stepped into the exterior world, I was the one who told my mother what was acceptable or unacceptable behavior" (35)

She also tries to save her mother from her traumatic past by visiting Vietnam and bringing her grandfather, Baba Quan to America. Though she is firm about her decision, she is afraid of losing her new American identity if she visits Vietnam. She expresses her fear as,

"I felt a tightening in my chest. Americans, rumours had it, could forbid us to return if we stuck so much as half a foot outside the perimeters of their country... Besides, I knew from my own reading that refugees were burden to the economy" (14-15).

She then abandons her plan of visiting Vietnam, and ponders over her place in the American culture and society. She is, thus, confronted with cultural clash which leaves her perplexed about her true identity in the host culture and struggles to resolve this conflict by comprehending two different cultures,

Vietnamese and American. Her attempts to read the history of Vietnam and Vietnamese War also reveal her desire to be connected with her Vietnamese heritage, and feels to be known as Vietnamese American, rather than only Vietnamese or American.

In conclusion, it can be stated that 'intercultural conflict' in the lives of many immigrants, like Mai and Thanh in the novel, manifests the persistent struggle between individuals or groups from two different cultural backgrounds. They seem to perceive these two different cultures as unrelated entities and tend to disagree over different issues arising from such cross-cultural interactions. It is, thus, the implicit or explicit psychological turbulence of the immigrants as they culturally differ from the natives of host land. By depicting the intercultural conflict confronted by many Vietnamese American immigrants in the novel, the novelist stresses their inability to comprehend the host land's cultural values, beliefs, customs, and traditions as they perceive these cultural aspects incompatible for their existence in the present immigrant life in America.

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