

Subarno Chattarji. *The Distant Shores of Freedom: Vietnamese American Memoirs and Fiction*. New Delhi: Bloomsbury India, 2019. Pp. 262. ISBN: 978-93-88271-46-2.

Reading the book written by Subarno Chattarji – Professor in the Department of English at the University of Delhi – and published in 2019 by Bloomsbury India is an opportunity to know the main trends and themes of Vietnamese American memoirs and fiction. It is also an invitation to reflect on the interweaving of literature and politics, offering an alternative perspective on the Vietnam War and its aftermath. Throughout the five chapters of the book, Chattarji focuses on about twelve Vietnamese American works that raise relevant issues to understand the historical impasse connected to identity and memory in that community.

Roberto Schwarz, a Marxist/Adornian Brazilian critic, argues that analyzing literature involves “forms [...] working on forms. Or better – the forms discovered in literary works are seen to be the repetition or the transformation, with variable results, of preexisting forms, whether artistic or extra-artistic” (25). That statement summarizes well what Chattarji notices in the Vietnamese American literary production, particularly with regard to the construction of different identities. They are constrained by the sociohistorical context that also enables their creation through literature, which assumes a political role.

The first chapter of Chattarji’s book draws up a framework of key concepts. They include the *good refugee*,¹ *representative legitimacy*, *invisibility*, *literature of exile*, *memory* and *nostalgia*. Based on them, Chattarji outlines the contradictions in representations of the Vietnamese American according to different perspectives within the community and outside it (including the Americans and the communist and non-communist nationalist Vietnamese).

Chattarji concentrates his efforts on the study of the literary production that expresses the Vietnamese American perspective, being aware of a question that may arise from the struggle over representation: is Vietnamese American literature studied because it is literature or because it is Vietnamese American? The author argues how tricky it is because, in fact, it puts the inseparable realms of literature and politics apart.

Based on Chattarji's analysis, we can distinguish a central theme in the Vietnamese American literary universe: the aspiration for freedom. To seize that aspiration, the author is taken on a journey among voices yearning to be heard as containing legitimate experiences and representations of the self and the other. Nevertheless, building a memory involves remembering and forgetting. That filtering forms images which end up being contradictory in what they delineate about the wishes of being American and being something else. The exploration of those contradictions makes clear Chattarji's interest "not only [in] structures of the US Empire and power, but also [in] structures of fragmented lives, selves, and memories" (4).

Continuing that journey, memoirs of the re-education camps are analyzed in the second chapter. The memoirs reconstruct the identities of the narrators who survived the war and its subsequent horrors. Rather than losers, those narrators represent themselves as the ones who aim to conquer freedom in America, being very thankful to the Americans, regarded by many Vietnamese Americans as heroic saviors. That image, however, also involves some bias: "Vietnamese Americans in these memoirs constitute a category arising out of being South Vietnamese who were and are victims of war, communism, refugee camps, and racism, but not of imperialism or capitalism or hyper-militarism" (Chattarji 80). In other words, this category of memoirs insists on depicting America as "the distant shores of freedom," but the equally harmful intervention of the US army and the current situation of the Vietnamese Americans cannot convince Chattarji that freedom for the discussed community can be found in the United States of America.

The following chapter addresses the memoirs written by women. Female voices having their own accounts, independently of how

traditional they might be, also represent a political act towards freedom, adding awareness of gender inequalities to the initial challenge of creating representations in the production of memories. The point is that those memoirs tend to assume the attribution of the category of “refugee literature”, not as a category carrying a historical experience (and a political meaning), but as a cultural diversity label. As Svetlana Boym, one of Chattarji’s references, asserts: “this is an American way of dealing with the past – to turn history into a bunch of amusing and readily available souvenirs, devoid of politics” (51). Once again, narratives that could represent radical changes “ventriloquise dominant expectations rather than opening up alternative narrative spaces and imaginings” (Chattarji 167), thus, making the Vietnamese Americans drift away from freedom one more time.

The fourth chapter explores the third attempt to reach the “shores of freedom”. This time fiction comes to the fore, bringing a novelty: the abandonment of the representation of the Vietnamese American to Americans. Instead, the concern is in producing representations of the community to the community itself. Fiction would allow the creation of perspectives that contemplate the desires of the Vietnamese American. For the fiction writers, versions of the facts are attainable, but the facts are unknowable. As Chattarji recognizes, those versions have their relevance: “memory and nostalgia are a powerful resource for the refugees to maintain identity and dignity in alien spaces” (214). However, the alleged impossibility of knowing what really happened and the nostalgic appeal of those literary productions just strengthen the *status quo*, since freedom remains an ideal, instead of being something achievable.

In short, Chattarji poses groups of narratives that attempt to deal with the past, but are still unable to confront History as “what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis” (Jameson 88). Without recognizing the contradictions and idealizations of those rewritten identities, the war will never be over in reality. By the end of the fifth and last chapter, it is clear that freedom cannot be attained on the promising American shores, nor on the nostalgic Vietnamese ones. It looks like something distant and unattainable, but actually it is not. It is in the critical thinking practice as undertaken in an exemplary way by

Chattarji. Definitely, his book offers the reader elements for a broader rumination on the burden of past events and ongoing oppressive systems, concerning not only the Vietnamese American community, but also developing countries such as the ones where Chattarji and the author of this review come from, that is, India and Brazil respectively.

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Notes:

¹ Another concept linked to the “good refugee” is the “model minority” one, which is also discussed by Chattarji and has been object of reportages as prejudice specially against Chinese Americans, but also against Vietnamese Americans, has been increasing recently despite all the efforts of the Asian American community to fit into the American society. A partial explanation would be in the hate speech promoted by Donald Trump against the Chinese during the pandemic (Dias).

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