

Le ly hayslip: between east and west



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The West has always been generally regarded as a negative force upon Asian cultures in the sense that the introduction of Western ways brings irrevocable changes that stains the purity Oriental cultures. On the other side of the fence, the West has always regarded the East as a land of exotic people, stubbornly clinging to their old ways, refusing to change with the times. Indeed it is a clash between the immovable rock and the irresistible force, and people in the crossroads get caught and get lost in the maelstrom, with a few coming out unscathed.

Le Ly Hayslip's book *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* chronicles such a struggle. It is a poignant book that captures the rending of one's soul, when one is caught between the need to change and the desire to cling to the old and the familiar. The encroachment of the West first took place within the context of the Vietnam War, when the United States allied itself with South Vietnam against the communist North.

More than a book about how war changes a life, the book is about how Le Ly Hayslip straddled the East and the West and how she managed to keep herself whole and survived. The book captures the epic life of Le Ly Hayslip, from her childhood, to her life as a young woman escaping to the United States, to her return to her native land, some twenty years after. This paper seeks to take a look at Le Ly's life at three important milestones and understand how the West has imposed itself upon her world and how it changed her life as well as those of the people she loved.

The West first came into Le Ly's life when she was still very young. Perhaps in an uncanny prediction of her destiny, her village straddles the border

between the conflicting South and North Vietnam. Their lives were constantly being pulled by soldiers from each side and their loyalties were constantly shifting and the people were under constant threat of violence and threat to their lives. Le Ly captures the simplicity of their life as well as the suffering they endured at the crossroads, " Although the land remained fertile, farming was often interrupted and the whole village came close to destruction." (5)

While the influence of the West is not so direct in this case, it can actually be seen in the civil war that is going on in her country. For a long time, Vietnam has been a colony of France, and it was only after World War did Vietnam finally gain its independence. However, the fledgling country soon fell under the shadow of communism through the influence of China, which in turn was being controlled by the Soviet Union. In light of this, it might be said Western imperialism has been affecting Le Ly's life from the day she was born. The desire of the Soviet Union to spread the communist ideology is the reason why South and North Vietnam are at war.

When Le Ly was 14 years old, Le Ly and her friends worked as lookouts for North Vietcongs. The South discovered what she was doing and she is arrested and tortured. When she is released from prison, the Vietcongs regard her with suspicion and sentence her to death, charging her with espionage. However, instead of killing her, the two soldiers tasked with carrying out her sentence raped Le Ly instead. It was at this juncture that Le Ly left her village to work in the town of Saigon. In Da Nang, she took on several jobs, working as a maid, a black-market vendor, and a prostitute.

It was at this stage of her life that Le Ly met several Americans. Her bad experiences in the hands of the Vietcongs as well as the relatively good treatment she received from the Americans have changed Le Ly's values and allegiances. This relatively pleasant encounter with the West has planted in Le Ly the desire to leave Vietnam and start a new life in the United States. She saw the West as a land of promise, where she can escape from all the violence and war in the East.

She saw a chance when Ed, asks her hand in marriage, after which, they immediately left Vietnam with her son in tow. When Le Ly left for the United States, she longed to someday return to her home land, but she was also unsure if she will ever have that chance. In the United States, she gets down to settling to a new life, resolved to leave the past behind. Of course that is easier said than done, and her love for her family and the longing to return to Vietnam never left Le Ly. This desire became stronger when Le Ly found prosperity and success in the United State.

After so many years of living as an American, Le Ly returned to Vietnam. In all her years living in the United States, she managed to stay true to her eastern roots. The Buddhist ways that Le Ly's father taught her served as the anchor of her identity, and she never gave up this part of her that she held sacred. Between the East and the West, Le Ly found a haven in the love and respect that she had for the two countries that she calls home.

And that perhaps is the reason why Le Ly was able to reconcile the conflict and rage that was tearing her soul apart. She soon comes to an

understanding and by her own words Le Ly thus describes the freedom and wisdom in living a life of compassion,

Vietnam already had too many people who were ready to die for their beliefs. What it needed was men and women - brothers and sisters - who refused to accept either death or death-dealing as a solution to their problems. If you keep compassion in your heart, I discovered, I discovered, you never long for death yourself. From my father's death, I had finally learned how to live. (383)

References

1. Hayslip, L. L. (1993). *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: Tie-In*
Edi