

Production of myth and identity: politics of assimilation in "love and vertigo"



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“ These are the myths I tell about my family and, like all myths, they are both truths and lies, simultaneous buffers of love and betrayals of trust.”

(Hsu-Ming Teo 1)

Love and Vertigo is a contemporary autobiographical novel that maps the lineage of the speaker Grace and her parents' imminent immigration to Australia. The novel moves through three pertinent spaces of Singapore, Malaysia, and Australia and intriguingly all these three spaces are interlocked with cultural and political myths and trauma. Hsu-Ming Teo in her text intricately engages with moments of transformation from Birth to Social influx, Traditional Chinese culture to Westernised English Culture, and in relationship dynamics within family. Love and Vertigo as an autobiographical novel tries to draw attention to the convoluted life of a diasporic family where the struggle of assimilation not just results in complicated social and religious relationships but the absent present past and isolated presence within the space of Australia results in cultural and identity anxiety which is experienced differently by all the characters involved. She draws attention towards how trauma, myths, religion, anxiety, abuse, and assimilation are highly individualistic experiences which can be gendered and culturally specific at the same time.

This paper intends to explore the central element of myth making within the novel and how this seminal quality is not just essential in weaving a Chinese cultural and individual identity in the beginning of the story but a movement away from it after the racial attack represents a need and anxiety necessary to assimilate within Western culture for survival with its nexus within euro-centric ideals. Further, this paper will engage in an analysis of Trauma as <https://assignbuster.com/production-of-myth-and-identity-politics-of-assimilation-in-love-and-vertigo/>

presented in the novel that is experienced by three different generation and how gendered the space can be and simultaneously productive where the political trauma leads to creation of dichotomous myths between East and West, evincing politics of assimilation.

Hsu-Ming Teo's preference for Autobiographical narrative is incidental as autobiographical narrative is a preferred mode of narrative within marginalized and diasporic groups. The usage of autobiographical narrative with the context of Love and vertigo could be looked at through a necessity to establish a sense of control or ownership over voice and representation which would be often overwritten or shadowed by the interpretation of the white gaze. Teo's choice for an autobiographical narrative not just evokes this sentiment of need of control but through this form of narrative she engages in an excavation of her roots, culture, and tradition leading to a comprehension of the liminal space she exists within.

Autobiographical narratives often lead to a problematic discussion with regards to the split between the writer's personal " I" and the speaker's " I" within the narrative as they are distanced and the speaker's " I" almost becomes symbolic. The relationship between the speaker and the writer is a specular one where the distanced gaze looks and experiences a version of reality that is personal leading to questions of authenticity.

There were some relatives who worshipped and bowed down before the Amazonian Cod for no other reason than its sheer monstrosity and diabolical ugliness.... appeasement gradually transformed into cautious petition...then

he pushed his luck...Uncle Winston won seven hundred and thirty thousand dollars (Hsu-Ming Teo 15).

Myths within *Love and Vertigo* play a crucial role as it doesn't just establish a cultural identity but personal identity is highly influenced by myths within various communities. The focus on myth within narration not just elucidates the creation and transformation of a superstition into myth but as myths within the narrative is transferred through generations it leads to a reinstating of systems of gender binaries, rationalizing the autocratic rule of the Patriarch. Any figure moving away from the myth or resisting is punished narratively, which is seen through Lida, Pandora, and even through Mei Ling.

Sonny's attack on the aquarium and killing of the Cod not just results in his exile from the family but his attack could be considered as metaphorical for a break of cyclic chain of abuse that is perpetuated from myths due to his mother's suicide not just from abuse used by Jonah but abuse and betrayal from Pastor Rodney too. Sonny's infuriation with superstitions within this space could be looked at through the perspective of identity where his western skepticism clashes with repressed traditions of Chinese household leading to a need of total separation and severing of ties.

Myths within the story undergo an interesting transformation during the space of post-war when the Japanese troops left Chinese myths were replaced with English-Greek mythology system. This shift within the center of culture is not just evinced through an English education and language system imposed but the kids and the family was renamed after mythical characters from Greek mythological systems. To safeguard ones position

within society and to create mobility within spaces afflicted by Western systems this physicality of Greek myth not just leads to the first problematisation within the space of identity but there exists a perpetual struggle within the text within the space of language where English can neither be fully absorbed nor entirely rejected.

This change in name and identity perpetuated through mythology is cemented by a study of Greek myth within domestic and educational space where almost like oral traditions they are passed amongst each other and later this is advanced through Pandora's introduction of Grace and Jonah within Christianity. This new culture and tradition moves within the family in form of references, education, heterogeneous interactions where with new identity it recreates systems of myth within domestic space but gender binary remains undeterred.

" Mei Ling fisted her left hand and thrust it into her mouth, gnawing on the knuckle of her thumb and whimpering fretfully. ' I don't want it. Don't want this damned baby, rubbish child.'" (Hsu-Ming Teo 22)

Trauma within the novel is almost productive as it leads to creation of myth related to spaces. The gendered trauma of motherhood and the political trauma of the riots and ethnic " otherness" leads to creation of myth within the speaker where she represents Malaysia as a space of violence and trauma due to stories passed down to her through Pandora and ambiguous memories of life in Malaysia as a child. Interestingly, Grace's presence within Malaysia as a kid leads to a strengthening of this association of Malaysia with ideology of violence but her absence from the space of Singapore in the past

leads to a creation of idealism due to Pandora's elucidation of her experiences with Wendy Wu.

the inability fully to witness the event as it occurs, or the ability to witness the event fully only at the cost of witnessing oneself. Central to the very immediacy of this experience, that is, is a gap that carries the force of the event and does so precisely at the simple expense of simple knowledge and memory (Caruth 7).

Corporeality of trauma within Love and Vertigo is evident throughout the text where there corporeal aspect of trauma is specific to women within the patriarchal regime but ahead within the novel there exists an intersection between political and physical trauma. Trauma within the narrative is an experience which can neither be escaped from nor confronted but transforms itself into repression or distance and isolation. It oscillates constantly between what Caruth calls "crisis of death" and its correlative "crisis of life" where the characters struggle with the presence of unbearable nature of the event and survival of the event.

The jarring and malignant experience of trauma within the narrative of Love and Vertigo is conducted through a wind angle view where each birth is associated with social riot or influx leading to a metaphorical explication of the physical trauma experienced. Motherhood almost transforms into traumatic space where the distancing of a self and the body occurs. This gendered space of trauma is portrayed through Mei Ling's forced pregnancy, the brutal abuse faced by women within the patriarchal system by the hegemonic masculine authority, and through Pandora's miscarriage,

distancing and isolation during pregnancy and the sexual trauma she undergoes when Jonah rapes her. In fact one of the initial traumas that Pandora experiences could be even her separation from her foster mother where as a kid she had to sever maternal ties with Madam Tan and reestablish her relationship with biological mother, always deprived of love and intimacy.

This gendered space of trauma within the novel is removed from personal interpretation of the speaker and represented as specific and personal to the physique, psychology, and emotion inflicted by the trauma. Hsu-Ming Teo's this treatment of gendered trauma not just reveals the banal treatment of sexual and gendered trauma within the structures of society throughout cultures but she comments on the form of trauma that perpetuates under the disguise of love and traditions, which struggles to rationalize the violence and trauma generalised within the abusive relationship marking other's body with reprimand for resistance. This could be theorized as one of the multiple themes behind the title Love and Vertigo. ' If you love me, you make damn sure my son grows up in a country where he never has to worry about something like this happening. I don't care where we go- England, America or Australia...If you won't emigrate you won't have a family either' (Hsu-Ming Teo 138-139).

Movement within the text is incited through political trauma where Pandora and Madam Tay both immigrate out of a fear of social and ethnic riot. The political trauma not just etches itself within their memory but it leads to manifestation of anxiety with regards to survival and safety. Political trauma

in the beginning of the text presented itself through a shift within
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mythological identity in narrative during the presence of the Japanese, the ethnic riots provoke a movement for safety but inadvertently the immigration for Pandora is within the space of Australia which recently lifted its " Only White Policy."

One has to notice that although Pandora's immigration to Australia was necessitated by political trauma but there existed a complex and almost discomfoting relationship between her and Madam Tay who constantly not just manipulated Pandora's position and life within the domestic space but influenced Jonah's actions and movements. The overwhelming and authoritarian presence of Madam Tay not just results in constant struggles between Pandora and Jonah's mother but after her incessant vigilance of Pandora and Jonah causes Pandora to move first to Malaysia later to Australia. This movement is incited through a need to establish a sense of identity and individualism which Pandora struggles with through the text.

The politics of assimilation within Love and Vertigo is marked with the element and act of constant " othering" that occurs within the narrative with regards to Grace and Sonny. Their ethnicity, their dialect, language, and cuisine are not just presented within the dominant white space of Australia that has recently allowed immigration but both Grace and Sonny's experience of isolation due to it is represented. Grace although taunted for her patois of Chinese-English dialectic, Sonny is physically assaulted for his corporeal and linguist " otherness". This experience of complexity within identity and race is again portrayed as an individual experience, resulting in varying form of disturbances and issues with relation to Chinese and Australian identity.

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Assimilation within the novel is problematized where Pandora tried to create a home within the immigrated space of Australia but she couldn't establish a level of familiarity with it leading to a going back to Chinese traditions through name and cuisine which is observed within Jonah too, yet the return is never complete. Sonny assimilates within Australian culture and identity by severing ties with his Chinese roots and not identifying himself with traditions and culture perpetuated by the patriarch. Grace on the other hand suffers through a need for assimilation. We grew to hate the sound of our voices, and those of our parents.

They loved all things British, but they couldn't speak English. Their accents, their syntax and their vocabulary mirrored in language or cultural difference and our social leprosy before the age of multiculturalism. Even then we were right, we were wrong (Hsu-Ming Teo 178).

Grace experiences a complexity with relation to identity and assimilation where her need for belongingness not just results in her growing familiarity with Australian accent and culture but there results a strong clash between the Australian identity and Chinese Identity. This political space of assimilation, for Grace, leads to a production of myth related to spaces where Malaysia within her mind is associated with memories of violence, separation, and cruelty and Singapore is associated with idealism. This space related myth is perpetuated and influenced by her dependence on Pandora's memory and her need to be liked and appreciated by her. A further movement away from the Chinese identity occurs within the novel after Grace encounters the abuse and fear utilized by the Patriarch towards Pandora, Sonny, and her to ingrain acquiescent and submissive behavior.

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This experience of abuse within a diasporic household leads to a distancing from Chinese identity where Jonah reiterates his idealized memory of Malaysia, almost functioning as myth, to not just juxtapose the segregation he experiences at a vocational and cultural level within Australia but to establish a sense of shame within Grace and Sonny for being “ungrateful”, associating the figure of Jonah with frustration and “Martyr complex” and coincidentally deflecting the emotion of frustration and distance with Malaysia. This creation of dichotomous view of spaces not only leads to segregation of Grace further but when Grace and Jonah encounter other Chinese families with years, they realize their ambivalent position where they are neither Australian nor Chinese enough.

In many ways, Australia becomes the buffer against the memories of the past. Yet because the migration is induced by trauma of the Malaysian 1969 race riots on the psyche of Grace’s mother, its legacy in the mind of her daughter appears with the stain of distrust and censure, with a touch of the mythical (Pillai 7)

Shanthini Pillai within her essay “Essentialism And The Diasporic Native Informant: Malaysia In Hsu Ming Teo’s Love And Vertigo” discusses the problematic space of political representation with terms of Diasporic Literature in terms of Hsu-Min Teo. She talks of how within the discourse of the novel Hsu-Ming Teo’s approach of Malaysia is essentialist and laden with connotation of violence and “macabre” leading to creation of an image of Malaysia that is far removed from reality. She points out how within the space of discourse and politics Hsu-Ming Teo’s representation of Malaysia isn’t just mythical and biased but inadvertently causes the question of “
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gaze” within the novel, questioning who Teo is speaking for and speaking as being placed within the hyphenated space of diasporic identity, “ Australian-Malaysian”.

Hsu-Ming Teo through *Love and Vertigo* engages in a representation of struggles within diasporic space with relation to political, cultural, and social assimilation. She portrays the individualistic and personal experience of trauma and abuse, especially within the diasporic space and the perverse reiteration of a religion distinct and removed away from primary culture. Teo through a system of myth within the narrative not only unfolds a discussion about the interrelationship of myth and identity but she depicts a frustrating need of characters to create a space of familiarity and home within the space of Australia, Malaysia, and Singapore which is distanced and problematized for them further due to association of these spaces with contrasting images of betrayal, love, roots, and abuse.

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