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Book Review: Love Like Hate, by Linh Dinh

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Linh Dinh

Linh Dinh, a Vietnamese American poet and fiction writer, published his debut novel *Love Like Hate* in 2010. The novel is divided into three parts. Most chapters and events in Parts II and III are narrated chronologically. However, the five chapters in Part I recount events that occur much later, but they are presented at the opening of the novel to preview the truly dramatic situation that will occur in Kim Lan's family as she attempts to secure a Viet Kieu (a Vietnamese expatriate or an overseas Vietnamese) for her daughter, Hoa. The novel opens a window to Vietnamese society during the Vietnam War and through the early years of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

During the Vietnam War, Kim Lan was a nurse. Her childhood was characterized by sorrows: she lost her mother at the age of two, and a month after her mother's funeral, her father (a police captain) remarried a domestic servant, who proceeded to mistreat and abuse Kim Lan. After her marriage in 1965 to Hoang Long, a captain in the Army Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), Kim Lan quit her job in a hospital and opened a café in her own home, located in a suburban district of Saigon. In 1971, Cun, their first son, was born, and he was as unattractive in appearance as his father. During the war, Hoang Long quite often was absent from home due to his military duties. Sen, a local Chinese Vietnamese chess player, patronized the café and befriended Kim Lan. Hoang Long, who was promiscuous, spent much time with his mistress—a younger nurse who expected “expensive gifts” from boyfriends who wanted to court her (p. 77). His adultery resulted in an unfulfilling conjugal life with his wife.

When the communists reunited the country in 1975, most people in the former South Vietnam were fearful about their future lives under communism. During the extremely chaotic period of the fall of Saigon and the communist takeover of South Vietnam, Hoang Long was not with his family. While many people tried to escape the country, Kim Lan remained inside her home with Cun. Sen suddenly appeared and offered to take Kim Lan and Cun with him on a boat sailing to his hometown province in China, but she decided not to accompany him. Sen's



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affection for Kim Lan was so strong, however, that he eventually returned to Kim Lan, admitted his love for her, and then lived with her as her spouse in Saigon.

Hoang Long, along with thousands of people who had allied themselves with the Saigon government, was consigned in postwar communist reeducation camps where he endured the hard labor, malnutrition, humiliation, and disease that characterized the detention experience. Throughout Vietnam, poverty, corruption, bribery, and hunger were ubiquitous. Kim Lan thought that Hoang Long was dead, so she kept his photo “on the altar and lit incense sticks in his memory, but she rarely thought of him” (p. 94). She also had to close down her café because the government did not support private enterprises. Thus, Linh Dinh subtly portrays a dark picture of postwar Vietnam under the communist regime.

In 1986, the government recognized the failure of its economic policy, and it subsequently “allowed people to resume petty capitalism” (p. 96). Kim Lan reopened her café and named it Paris By Night, which quickly developed into a lucrative business. In the same year, she gave birth to Hoa—her daughter by Sen. In 1988, Kim Lan received a letter from Hoang Long, asking her to buy him various necessities and bring them when she visited him in a reeducation camp in the North. She lied to Sen, saying that she would have to attend a family funeral, but she took Cun and boarded a train bound for Ha Nam Province to visit Hoang Long. Their fifteen-minute meeting at the camp was a *pro forma* exchange about the family, but she sobbed as she saw how “dark and haggard” he looked (p. 123). She lied to Hoang Long about her marriage to Sen, and Cun lied about his school progress—he already had quit school after being humiliated by his peers. Kim Lan had hidden money in a package that held a malodorous fermented shrimp paste, one of the items she had packed for him, and Hoang Long later used the money to bribe the head warden to hasten his release from the camp and reunion with his family.

When Hoang Long met Kim Lan again at her café in Saigon, he had to face a new reality: Sen had become Kim Lan’s husband and co-owned the house. Sen refused to yield his position, so Hoang Long, a man battered by the war and the reeducation camp experience, but attempting to maintain some level of human dignity, departed and later migrated into the United States via the U.S. Orderly Departure Program, where he resettled in Ohio. Kim Lan and Sen’s marriage was not so happy as it had been prior to Hoang Long’s release. By this time, Cun was going through puberty. Having the strong sexual desires of his biological father, he stole Kim Lan’s money to pay prostitutes and attempted to spy upon a maid while she was taking her shower. Cun later made Phuong, a fishmonger, pregnant, and subsequently married her, despite his mother’s disapproval.

Hoa remained Kim Lan’s only hope for joy and pride, so she was spoiled by her mother, who tried to endow her daughter with the etiquette suitable to a potential wife of a Viet Kieu. Hoa attended an expensive English language school, wore trendy clothes, ate American fast food, listened to American music, read American magazines, and patronized bars favored by Viet Kieu. After the normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations in the mid-1990s, many Vietnamese Americans returned to Vietnam to visit their abandoned, but not forsaken, families, and among them was a large number of males who wanted to marry Vietnamese women, whom they would bring to the United States. Kim Lan wanted her daughter to have a happy marriage and a financially secure future; thus, she insisted that Hoa marry a Viet Kieu in order to realize her own wishes and expectations for Hoa’s future well-being. However, Hoa fell in love with Quang Trung, a son of a nouveau-rich family and a “punk rocker with an upside down tattoo on his arm” (p. 195) whom she met at a bar called World War III. The title of the novel, *Love Like Hate*, derives from the name of the band playing at this bar. Hoa spent a few days with Quang

Trung in Vung Tau, where she lost her virginity to him. Kim Lan later found out about Hoa's clandestine liaison with Quang Trung and reprimanded her severely, forbidding her to continue her romance with this punk. Hoa escaped from the room in which she had been locked—a punishment imposed by her furious mother—and she visited Quang Trung's home, only to find that he already had a new girlfriend. The novel ends with her having become involved in a sexual affair with a French tourist in his hotel room, even before she reached eighteen. He treated her as a prostitute, and she treated him as a client.

Chronologically, Part I of the novel narrates events subsequent to Hoa's fifteenth birthday. At her café in Saigon, Kim Lan was conversing with a Viet Kieu named Jaded Nguyen, accompanied by his girlfriend, Huyen—a neighborhood girl who soon would join him in Philadelphia, following their marriage. Kim Lan became obsessed with the Viet Kieu's "quiet confidence," "even and white [teeth]," pleasant face, nice clothes, and apparent happiness (p. 13). The couple had met through an online chat-room, and he had flown to Vietnam to meet her in person. Huyen's image of America came primarily from Hollywood movies, but when she reached American soil, she soon realized that America was not the "paradise on earth" about which films are made and about which she had dreamed. She and her husband lived a frugal life in a small apartment in Philadelphia, where she eventually found a job at McDonald's. In 2001, Kim Lan received an unexpected letter from her ex-husband, Hoang Long, who was living with his second Vietnamese wife in Ohio, where they both worked at a chicken processing plant. He enclosed with the letter \$200 for his son, Cun, as a Christmas gift—a humble amount that disappointed Kim Lan greatly. She then wrote a letter to Huyen, but signed her daughter's name, lamenting Hoa's misfortunes in Vietnam because she was unable to marry a Viet Kieu, thus implicitly asking Huyen for a recommendation.

Thematically, *Love Like Hate* is a satire on the shallow human relationships, materialism, opportunism, debauchery, and less-than-romantic sexual interactions in postwar Vietnamese society. The novel also is as a comedy of manners, which satirizes the foibles of ridiculous human behavior: unfounded beliefs, grandiose illusions, and endangering self-deceptions. Every character is a caricature of a type, and Linh Dinh effectively employs wit, humor, irony, and sarcasm to emphasize the absurdity of certain naturalistic social realities in postwar Vietnam. The Vietnamese communist government's "Open Door" policy, issued in the late 1980s, introduced Western popular culture into Vietnam, and many people, especially a majority of the young generation, became obsessed with everything Western, which they considered to be more sophisticated and exciting than everything Vietnamese. However, Western popular culture does great damage to many of the positive and endearing aspects of Vietnamese society, even as it might innervate others. Kim Lan's fetishization of the Viet Kieu, for example, motivates her to train her daughter in the qualities and mannerisms that might make Hoa desirable as a spouse for a Viet Kieu, but which also prepares her for a life as a tourist courtesan.

The themes and issues treated in *Love Like Hate* are similar to those treated in *Dumb Luck* and *The Industry of Marrying Europeans* by Vu Trong Phung (1912-1939), a famous Vietnamese satirist of the late-colonial period of the 1930s. Vu Trong Phung foregrounds the grotesque behavioral absurdities and social realities that developed during the transition from Vietnamese agricultural feudalism into colonial capitalistic modernism under the French. Linh Dinh exposes the misguided expectations and corrupt lifestyles that developed during the period in which postwar Vietnamese society began to adopt "petty capitalism" and Western cultural values, nearly twenty years after Vietnam's communist government had imposed its closed-door policy in an attempt to eradicate exactly those realities.

It is important to contextualize the novel within the specific socio-economic period of transition that it treats in order to understand the author's satirical and often caustic tone. According to D. R. SarDesai (2005), "[i]n the eight years following the normalization of relations [between the U.S. and Vietnam in mid-1995], the numbers of Viet Kieu returning to Vietnam as visitors increased dramatically[,] from about 13,000 in 1995 to some 360,000 (including 20,000 from Canada) in 2003" (p. 228). The communist government's *Doi Moi* policy [Open Door, or Renovation/Reform Policy] encouraged foreign investment and international business, and many Viet Kieu started to invest in Vietnamese business enterprise and real estate. Believing that the Viet Kieu had acquired financial strength and wealth abroad, many Vietnamese women wanted to secure marriage for their daughters with the Viet Kieu, hoping that such a husband might rescue them from poverty and offer them a luxurious life in the U.S. Within this cultural context, Linh Dinh addresses familial and societal problems issuing from the government's Open-Door Policy: Vietnam, in theory, is a socialist/communist country, but global capitalism, in fact, has produced both negative and positive changes in the culture, economy, education, tourism, religion, entertainment industry, and human relationships in the Vietnam of that period.

Stylistically, *Love Like Hate* is a postmodern narrative that moralizes through its satire. Marriage, human relationships, and even religion become materialized as commodities. *Love Like Hate* obviously targets adult readers because it records coarse vocabulary and depicts some sexually explicit scenes that would be considered inappropriate for young readers. Sarcasm surfaces throughout the novel. For example, Huyen asks her husband, "Why do Americans say 'shit' all the time?" When he does not know the answer, she concludes that "Americans said shit all the time because they lived in a *clean* country. In Vietnam, a filthy country where shit was often on display, where it was no mystery, people rarely conjured it up in a conversation" (p. 21). In the final chapter of the novel, Hoa learns from her French tourist-client that he and many other sexually active Westerners go to Vietnam to fulfill their carnal urges. This shows explicitly how he views Vietnam as an exotic bordello in which he can satisfy his lusts in a purely business-like way and then fly away without fear of complications or attachments. Linh Dinh writes: "The sexual situation in the West is sorrowful nowadays, and that's why a country like Vietnam is the answer" (p. 235). This, indeed, is bitter satire on one of the most unfortunate, negative results of Vietnam's Open Door Policy—a negative result that will affect the nation's people for generations.

Love Like Hate does not romanticize Vietnam. The novel presents a satirizing picture of Vietnam and its degenerating cultural values. Readers who expect to find in the novel authentic Vietnamese traditional practices, or picturesque landscapes, or the poetic soul of the Vietnamese people will be disappointed by the realities that the author reveals in the Vietnamese society that began to develop in the final decade of the twentieth century. In focusing on the sexual politics of the period, the author uses less poetic and delicate satire to open a window on the transitional period in which the characters live out their lives. It is a very revealing comment upon the Vietnamese culture of the period whose full implications for the future of the nation remain to be assessed.

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About the Author



Quan Manh Ha, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Montana. His research interests primarily focus on 20th-century and contemporary American literature, Vietnam War literature, ethnic studies, and literary translation. His publications have appeared in various journals and books, such as *Short Story*, *Ethnic Studies Review*, *Southeast Review of Asian Studies*, and *Southern Humanities Review*, etc. Currently, he is writing a book on the Vietnamese American short story.



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