
Beyond official narratives and the tales passed down the generations in the oral traditions, it is hard to know what went on in Vietnam, particularly Hanoi in the 1980s, and the impact on the lives of ordinary people. Fiction can claim to present an ethnographic model but very few Vietnamese novels exist in English. *The Beauty of Humanity Movement* is a contemporary novel which attempts to move into the gap created by historical events, namely the Communist schism from French-Colonial occupation and the ensuing ‘silencing’ of those deemed politically incorrect by the new regime. However, Camilla Gibb is a Canadian writer and an outsider. Gibb looks in on modern Vietnam and mediates its layers of culture from a position of Western scholarship and the commodity values of the publishing industry. She writes designer novels. Middle class readers can meditate and raise their conscious awareness. The craftsmanship is apparently seamless and the work has been quickly translated into many languages other than English, reaching a global readership.

Gibb is often asked to justify writing about cultures which are totally what she is not.¹ The author was born in London but lives in Toronto, attended an American University in Cairo, has a BA degree in anthropology and Middle Eastern studies from Toronto University and a PhD in social anthropology from Oxford. Inevitably if personal experiences determine anything in life her space as a writer will veer towards the interstices of cultural discourses, worrying at the boundaries of disciplines. In interviews freely available on the web Gibb suggests that her *raison d’être* comes from the desire to counterbalance the media narratives which polarise ideologies at the extreme ends of fundamentalisms and give rise to negative feelings about the Other. She suggests that ordinary decent people are not represented on either side of any religious, racial and cultural divide; her object then is to bridge the chasm. Gibb suggests, to Su Aziz at the Malaysian Writers’ Festival in 2007, that men have always written women characters and that if that crossing had not been allowed we would be without all the great female characters in literary fiction. Regardless of the openings for deconstruction in that statement, fictional writers do trade on their abilities to put themselves in the Other’s position. Although simple inversions are never workable in reality, the suggestion here is that Gibb uses her immersive imagination to move the educated reader to empathy for the lives of people for whom war, poverty, marginalisation and exile are everyday trials.

Gibb’s first novel, *Mouthing the Words*, is a darkly humorous tale of growing up in a ‘dysfunctional’ family and coming-of-age between multicultural Canada and the English class system. Later novels take up the challenge of understanding other cultures—not her own. Gibb’s third novel, *Sweetness in the Belly*, is a Canadian best-seller a Giller Prize finalist and winner of the Trillium Award. The novel confirms the author’s bent for non-stereotypical protagonists and exotic locations, in this case Harrar, a city at the edge of the Ethiopian Highlands and a centre of the Islamic religion. The story is narrated by Lily, a white woman, who chooses to live and work

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in a mixed community and continues to do so when forced into exile in London by internecine fighting. Gibb’s short story, ‘The Principles of Exile’, published in 2007, is about the horrendous experiences of a youth sent from Paris to a small town in Outback Australia, to escape a fatwa declared on his publisher father who has dared to publish the work of a renegade Lebanese author. Again there are strange inversions to burst the bubbles of self-complacency in Western readers, but the focus is on the effect of repressive ideological thinking on families and ignorance of cultural differences.²

At the 2007 Writers’ Festival in Malaysia, Azril Mohd. Amin comments that Gibb’s understanding of multiculturalism is perhaps distanced and estranged from the nitty-gritty realities of how cultures deal with inter-racial relations. But what interests him most is the story of her transition from academic writing to fiction. The compassion that she shows for her characters impresses him most. This is a valid insight on the writer’s work. Gibb’s writing space is not a frame for multicultural issues but opens towards a parallel field of study, transculturalism, where the imagination ranges above and beyond the agonisms of cultural divides, seeking new insights into fair community interaction.

The Beauty of Humanity Movement is the story of Maggie, a beautiful woman who has been brought up in the US but returns to Vietnam where she was born to search for traces of her dissident father, a victim of the revolutionary purges of the mid-70s. Her family roots are in Hanoi and Maggie, who has taken a job as an art dealer, hovers in the liminal space between two worlds: ‘they call her Việt Kiều — some watered-down and inferior species of Vietnamese — a sojourner, an exile, a traitor, a refugee’ (43). But despite her status as an outsider Maggie eventually finds friends who help her to look. She is directed to the old phở seller, Hưng.

‘I was told this is where you could see the real old Hanoi,’ she said, which did at least soften his expression. ‘You knew all of these artists?’ She gestured at the walls.

‘Of course,’ he said.

‘Did you ever know LýVănHai?’

Mr Võ’s bottom lip curled upward. ‘He must have been one of Hưng’s,’ he said with a shrug.

Maggie shook her head, not understanding.

‘He’s a phở seller,’ said Mr. Võ. ‘Years ago he had a shop where a lot of artists ate breakfast, but now he’s on the street, always moving.’

‘Do you know how I can find him?’

‘They say you find him with your nose.’ (29)

Old Man Hưng makes a superlative beef and noodle soup which he sells on the streets, only one step ahead of the authorities who demand his licence. Meeting Maggie jogs his memory and Hưng recalls living through the purges of the revolution. Gibb slowly feeds in flashbacks of past horrors: crimes of land reform, illegal arrests, the deliberate classification of peasants as landowners so that jealous neighbours can

seize property, false witness, torture, execution, the abandonment of children to illiteracy and starvation. Maggie’s father, a member of a group of idealistic artists and intellectuals who refuse to give up their creative freedoms and suffer as a result the destruction of their work and lives, is unlikely to have met with a happy end. The cosy cocoon of literary fiction uses the pleasure of a good book to sell the pain of history: ‘the deception of whole fruit is the rot that can be concealed beneath its skin. The Communist victory of 1975 was tainted, as victory always is, by opportunists’ (86). The ideals of a grass-roots democratic revolution is subverted by the emergence of a new perverted and predatory elite.

The text is stylish, easy to read and with short descriptive paragraphs enlivened by dialogue. Gibb is adept at evoking details: location, precise gestures, quirky character traits, relationships between people and objects, the necessary emotions. However, the language is disciplined, unambiguous and realistic. The text has an exotic visual appeal. The Cyrillic alphabet is used for proper names and for the magical phô, the soup which when made with loving care nourishes and sustains the community. The narrative is tightly controlled and the author cunningly holds back pivotal pieces of information, about Maggie’s father, and about the mysterious woman, Lan, who lives next door to Hưng, but why they never speak is not revealed until near the end. The action moves back and forth between the present and the past, until the lives of the protagonists arrive at the quilting point of the novel and a satisfactory ending is engineered. The analogy is there between life and the vigorous outpourings of an artistic and literary community – the stuff which dreams are made of – but the crux of the novel is the nature of the passage from dreams to realities. The theme is love and betrayal and the need to forgive.

The Beauty of Humanity Movement is a paperback of three hundred pages. I think that I would not get the same pleasure from holding an e-book. The cover design by Emily O’Neill and cover photograph by Mark Pennington offer a dreamy image of the feast to come – a pile of empty bowls ready to be filled. And the fly-leaves fold inwards – an elegant touch reminiscent of the dust jackets of yore – to reveal a rich fuchsia backing. The reader is beguiled towards a sojourn in a strange land, to experience the exquisite but homely fare. The needs of an armchair traveller are anticipated. The interior space of the vehicle is as cultivated as the exterior promise. The book is an engrossing read.

Tư is Hưng’s surrogate grandson but he also represents the hybrid vigour of the new generation and a new modern Vietnam which takes the global world as a referent, embracing increased cultural exchange and cosmopolitan savvy, but without losing respect for the old moralities of Confucius. Tư is an ex-teacher but now a guide for the tourists who visit his country. He is well-informed about the West, albeit second-hand from books and the movies shown at TAFE. He is aware of cultural differences in the ethnic mix of the foreigners he caters to in his job. Gibb is keen to show that there is no resentment against the US for a bygone era. She suggests that 60 per cent of the population were born after the war and the new generation are not really interested in past trauma. Bridges were mended when the economy picked up after Bill Clinton lifted the trade embargo in 1994 and made an official visit in 2000 (79). The Ministry of Culture and Information still guards public morality but the doors are opening to the influence of the West through the media and popular culture. Psychically and economically modern Vietnam looks to the US.

Tu’s friend Phuông fancies himself as the next *Vietnam Idol*: he plans to win his way into the finals with a traditional ballad and then belt out his own version of subversive rap called Hanoi Poison on the theme of individual freedom. Tu, himself, is smitten with Maggie and determined to help her trace her father’s pictures but he does not relinquish his sense of identity nor his old-fashioned family values before the arch-sophistication of her money or the ‘shit-on-the-canvas’ art circles where she is expected to buy for Western consumption. The chapter titles are relevant to meaning-making: the title of the novel is significant. However, a mutuality of good intentions between the Việt Kiều woman and Hưng’s surrogate family weave the Old Man’s destiny. There are twists aplenty to the story but the ending comes without overt clichés in a beautiful balance of the narrative trajectories: once upon a time life was hard but now the modern world is a good place because the people who matter behave with honour and decency. If only ... 

*The Beauty of Humanity Movement* is given an extra-diegetic utopian twist on the web. Gibbs says in an interview that in 1997 she was offered a no-strings-attached scholarship of $6,000 which enabled her to take six months off from work and write her first novel *Mouthing the Words*. It was a dream come true for the unhappy new PhD graduate of social anthropology who was at the time stuck in a university administrative post and writing fiction on the sly. Ten years later she is able to reciprocate by joining with her then partner to fund a young tour guide called Phưong to open his own phở shop in Vietnam – philanthropy without the expectation of return. However, within the covers of *The Beauty of Humanity Movement* the Westernised Maggie is not the one with the power to give the most, for we can have nothing without community goodwill. For his part old man Hưng is left wondering about the beauty of humanity and the afterlife, if it has really come about in the present, ‘but then he asks himself, Does it matter?’ (294). What goes around comes around. Gibb gives the reader the opportunity to ponder the *creolité* of the *pot-au-feu* and the exact nature of the transcultural encounter.

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