



The Little Identity of Mr. Linh

Redefining the Identity of a traumatized expatriate*

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IN *La Petite fille de Monsieur Linh* (2005), Philippe Claudel (1962) tells the story of most expatriates who decided to go into exile in the hope of finding better living conditions in another country. Having experienced the sudden traumatic disappearance of his family members, Mr. Linh finds himself in the urgency of leaving his native country, taking his little girl, the only member of the family he had left behind. Although he had never left his village before and knew no other language or way of life, the reader cannot even guess until the end of the story that this child is only a doll belonging to his granddaughter killed with her parents in a bombing. From the beginning of the novel, the reader feels that there is something hidden in the glances cast toward the child and Mr. Linh, in the mocking laughter of the inhabitants of the dormitory, and in the silence and submission of the child. Although there is no spatio-temporal index, we understand that Linh should be Vietnamese, having lived through the war with the French and the Americans: throughout the novel, there are allusions made to previous war and a war going on.

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In this new space, on the one hand, Linh seeks silence and avoids contact with his compatriots, the people who speak his own language because he wants neither to remember the memories of the past, nor to answer questions concerning his little daughter. On the other hand, he seeks a different type of relationship that can help him find another motivation to live, which he can find in Mr. Bark, a resident of the country. Linh does not know his language, but the affectionate and contemptuous look, sincere tone, friendly little gesture to give him a blow on the shoulder and the pleasure they both experience of this "being together".

It is from that point that one feels that Linh is in the process of questioning his identity: he does not seek to build relationships with his compatriots, but with a stranger who begins to show him the way, and who was walking blind in the city as soon as he got out of the dorm.

The first landmark he keeps in town is the bench on which they sat which was in front of a park. He notices others: the bench where they settled down to contemplate the sea, the restaurant where Bark invites him, where he relaxes and allows himself to give in to the pleasures of taste that he had forgotten since his arrival in this country where nothing tasted to him. Linh as a traumatized expatriate, inspires such confidence in Bark, that he later tells him all about his past in the army, his mission in Vietnam (without Claudel mentioning the name of the country), nonsense that a young armed soldier could commit, until the admission of having massacred the compatriots of Linh. Although Linh does not understand what Bark is telling him, sympathizes with his friend in his suffering; he patiently listens to him confessing, gives him friendly taps on the shoulder and this is enough for both of them.

However, the question one would ask in this first part of the book is the reason for the silence for which Mr. Linh opts. In order to answer this question, we used psychoanalytic and postcolonial theories. Silence is sometimes a resistance to diglossia, which hurts the refugees; silence is also a reaction to the memory of the traumatized person: since he does not want to remember it by speaking, the traumatized person remains silent. Identity could not therefore be confined to the confines of the native country and the mother tongue; identity finds other dimensions in the vicinity with another language. Not integrated into the new space, knowing only a few points of reference, the expatriate does not feel safe: the city for him becomes a danger to be traveled; a danger that must be traveled to be able to feel himself exists. When Linh is put in the asylum, from his bedroom's window he contemplates the city to imagine the route that would take him to his friend Bark. The solitude, the silence, and the emptiness, which dominate

the asylum, make Linh the one who submits to revolt, from passivity to activity.

Despite an attempt doomed to failure, he does not get discouraged and finally finds a way out of this place overrun by oblivion, an oblivion that contributes to the erasure of identity and existence. He rushes into the city imagining that the route that his window to his asylum's room had offered him would be sufficient.

Nevertheless, the one who does not know the language of the country, is handicapped of the streets: Linh must walk blind and this scares him until he almost gives in to his perdition. Claudel the author and director, evokes the dizziness and the decrease in the strength of Linh, the passage of people who do not see him in a cinematographic way and reinforces the importance of the look, especially for the one who is not targeted. Looks. As we refuse to look at him, he does not feel that he exists. While he is well motivated to cross the city, his invisible existence pushes him to the threshold of renouncing life. He begins to ask himself questions that he never asked himself in the whole novel: why is he alive while his family is dead? Memories come back to him and he wishes to have been killed instead of his son and daughter-in-law. The repressed feelings return to him, unforgettable. Because the mourning is unfinished, because Linh feels guilty: he still remains alive while his son, his daughter-in-law, and his granddaughter have disappeared and he wants to blame himself by taking care of his granddaughter's doll, taken for a living being.

The theories of Ricoeur and Halbwack favor an analytical framework for the interpretation of the role of memory in the reformulation of the identity of an individual who suffers from memories of a collective past. Whereas oblivion or the lapse of memory, as well as the aphasia which seems in relation to the erasure of the memory, represent the loss of part of the identity.

While we sympathize with Linh and other refugees, Claudel highlights the same problem of repression in those who are called "enemies" against Linh and his compatriots: Bark on his part suffers by remembering his past, because the memory processing consists of awakening the memory and reliving the scene, which is at the origin of the trauma. Because the desired forgetfulness prevents the insertion of the individual in his relationship with others, the individual is forced to go back through certain moments of the past to fill in the gaps in his identity and reintegrate into the world. Bark's loneliness, one-way verbal communication and his confession prove how much his past makes him suffer. He confesses in front of the one who could only listen to him and understand that he is suffering, without Bark being

entitled to an interrogation. According to Nicola King, trauma survivors express a gap in their sense of identity because they recognize a break between their present and past selves, that is what Linh and Bark suffer from.

In the second part of the novel, we see Linh who want to act and prove to himself that he still exists. The importance of the reinforced doll, Linh crosses the city on the autism, which keeps him alive when his life is in danger, that a car hits him; it is not only the fact of finding his friend, but especially the little girl.

It's Bark who understands how essential Sang-diû is to Linh. Like a mother who gives birth and who by dint of pain and fatigue gives in to a long sleep, Linh was also going to give in to this sleep, which for him is double the death. When Bark puts the little girl on his chest, he understands that the doll is Linh's "granddaughter". She returns him to life and it is just at the end of the novel that finally the "drawn" appears between "little" (petite) and "girl" (fille), which means "granddaughter" (petite-fille) in French.

In this article, relying on psychoanalytic and postcolonial theories, we will try to see how Mr. Linh, through a friendly bond formed between him and a stranger (enemy of passed time), as well as motivation with the hope of promoting a better life for his granddaughter, tries to integrate into this new life and to redefine his identity, which is no longer that of his country of origin.

Keywords— Expatriate, Identity, Linh, Traumatism.

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