

**DEEP SOUTH MEETS SOUTHEAST ASIA:
AN ANALYSIS OF “LOVE”
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This paper was written for Dr. Brevik’s English 1101H course.

“Love,” Robert Olen Butler’s tale of affection, lust, obsession, and power, sheds light on the inevitable Americanization that engulfs all those who are foreign to the land. Through an unnamed Vietnamese narrator, Butler examines the various nuances associated with Louisiana living and juxtaposes these themes with aspects of Asian culture. Butler’s use of characteristic Southern and Vietnamese symbols and ideals creates a hybridized setting that influences and propels the characters’ actions and decisions.

Although “Love” exists superficially as the story of a crazed man and his undying fixation on his wife, Bu’o’m, subtleties, such as the narrator’s diction, showcase the invasive quality of American colloquialisms. For example, the narrator describes himself as “what they call here [in America] a ‘wimp’...I assume the manners of a wimp, too, and I am conscious of doing that” (Butler 73). Many Vietnamese immigrants struggle with learning English, as “Vietnamese and English are strikingly different” because word meanings in English are distinguished by inflection, and “Vietnamese, in contrast, is uninflected” (Gall 167). Nevertheless, the narrator seems not only to have mastered formal English but also non-standard English, suggesting that the process of Americanization has indeed invaded his language.

Moreover, Butler set this story in Gretna, Louisiana, where, because of its multiethnic influences, people speak with accents and dialects that are more difficult to understand than other Southern speech patterns. The narrator, therefore, must have developed an understanding of this dialect, as evidenced by his understanding of the phrase, “you ax Doctor Joseph what you want. He be a powerful low-down papa,” a phrase that is also undoubtedly spoken with a heavy Southern drawl (Butler 81). An immigrant with education only in formal English would not understand such a phrase, but the narrator, because of his immersion into the South, understands the man perfectly and follows his advice.

According to Nazli Kibria, “immigrant groups... inevitably.... move from attachment to ‘traditional’ immigrant identities and culture toward integration into the ‘modern’ mainstream of U.S. life” (15). Often, assimilation into the traditional American lifestyle represents not a choice but a requirement, and adapting to American living marks a rite of passage for immigrants. Even in modern-day America, Americans expect immigrants to mold themselves to fit the ways of the country; the narrator has no choice but to learn to understand the language because, in America, most signs and instructions are spoken or written instead of depicted. However, Buenker and Ratner argue that “for Vietnamese refugees, although there was tremendous pressure to quickly assimilate economically, there was much less pressure to assimilate socially and religiously” (381). Adaptation from Vietnamese culture to Southern American culture resembles a delicate compromise in which some aspects of each culture recede in order to make room for other attributes. One of the most striking examples of assimilation reveals itself in that the narrator remains nameless for the duration of the story. A name represents the very basis of a person’s identity, but in “Love,” every character—the wife, the voodoo priest, the teacher—has a name except the narrator. Immersion into a culture often yields the greatest results for becoming acclimated to the mores of that culture; immersion into the South allows the narrator to grasp the distinctive Louisianan English, while consequently losing the pillar of his Vietnamese identity.

Misuse of language, however, only comprises one part of a greater theme in Southern literature: Southern ignorance. Tran Van Ha, Bu’o’m’s lover, sees this ignorance and uses it to his advantage, as he names his restaurant Bun Bo Xao, which translates into “Sautéed Beef with Noodles” (Butler 78). By giving his restaurant this exotic-sounding yet absurd name, Ha attracts many unknowing Southerners to his business to partake of what the narrator refers to as “second-rate food” (Butler 79). This phenomenon rages on today in Atlanta, where several “Korean bakeries tout Germanic and French names: Café Mozart, Hansel & Gretel, White Windmill, Tous Les Jours, and Crown,” all of which sound interesting but reflect no evidence that Asian cuisine is served there (Pickel). Also, instead of attempting to prepare a true representation of Vietnamese cooking, Ha significantly tones down the flavoring of his food to appeal to American taste buds. Ha’s concession suggests that

Americans, especially Southern Americans, possess unyielding preferences and expectations but that they enjoy believing that their tastes are worldly and refined, which is supported by the narrator's assertion that "they can't even distinguish [the Vietnamese food] from Chinese" (Butler 78). Even in modern America, Southerners exhibit the desire to internationalize their palates with Asian treats such as cakes and pastries. Seong Kim, owner of an Atlanta bakery specializing in Korean goods, states that "lots of white people [come]...Americans, they like our cakes" (Pickel). Though distinguishing between two styles of food exists as a simple task for the narrator, this differentiation represents a difficult and probably unattainable goal for the native Southern American.

Also, "a common concern of the American public [during the time after the Vietnam War] was one of economic self-interest—a fear of having jobs taken away as well as having too much public assistance and welfare given to the refugees" (Buenker and Ratner 377). This fear of job loss and economic downfall was a valid fear: "between the 1970 and 1980 census the U.S. population grew by 11 percent overall, but the Asian American population grew by 141 percent," suggesting that Vietnamese refugees contributed to a large portion of the total amount of immigrants entering the U.S. in the years after the fall of Saigon. The reasoning behind Ha's customers' decision to dine at Bun Bo Xao may possibly lie in their willingness to support entrepreneurship from immigrants and therefore protect other jobs for native Southerners.

Further exemplification of the narrator's conversion to Southern ways lies in his readiness to criticize Ha's cooking. Vietnamese social codes "often [prevent the Vietnamese] from openly voicing disagreement," but the narrator eagerly disapproves of Ha's food (Gall 167). This unabashed, flagrant display of contempt mirrors the rough-and-tumble attitude often associated with the South; therefore, the narrator's eschewal of classic Vietnamese humility for classic American protest shows how he has shed certain aspects of his upbringing during his stay in America.

Though film and literature often portray Southerners as inept and naïve, Southerners rarely lack knowledge about matters that are particular to the South, such as the practice of voodoo in Louisiana. When Ha threatens the narrator's honor by having an affair with his wife, the narrator begins to navigate the city,

going “where the television and the movies all suggested voodoo was practiced,” in order to find a voodoo practitioner to aid in the erasure of his problem (Butler 80). Even as an immigrant, the narrator wholeheartedly understands and welcomes Louisiana’s association with black magic, even stating that “you can’t live around New Orleans without hearing about voodoo” (Butler 80). He furthers his increasingly Southern style of action when he approaches a voodoo shop “run by white people, large Americans with neat shelves full of books and jars and dolls that I clearly sensed had nothing to do with the real voodoo” (Butler 81). A new-to-the-country, unfamiliar-with-the-customs immigrant would not come to such a conclusion based strictly upon the race of the shop-owners. Thus, the Louisianan television commercials and word-of-mouth stories associated with voodoo create the belief that true voodoo can only be effectively practiced by those with African roots, and this awareness of distinctly Southern knowledge characterizes the narrator as a Southerner, regardless of his national heritage.

The willingness of a Vietnamese man to practice voodoo passes seamlessly through the story, as if any person in Louisiana in the narrator’s situation would do the same. This motivation to practice voodoo emerges because the narrator requires a Southern weapon in order to fight in the South, just as modern weapons are required to fight in and to win a modern war. In the story’s setting, the Vietnam War has ended: the narrator can no longer “bring fire from heaven” (Butler 73). Thus, he must modernize his war strategy to ensure a shattering victory.

While practicing these voodoo rituals, the narrator often prays to and thanks Buddha for allowing him to perform the spells according to the low-down papa’s instructions. Also, the narrator’s fixation on his adulterous wife correlates with one of the central ideas of the Buddhist faith: the Four Noble Truths. The Noble Truths declare that “life is suffering...[and] suffering is due to attachment,” and this statement embodies the narrator’s way of life and his reason for living (Boerce). The narrator’s undying attachment is to his wife, and it is this attachment that causes him to attempt a voodoo curse that leads ultimately to his own suffering. This fusion of Buddhism with voodoo showcases the epitome of hybridity in the story: a combination of religious faiths to attain a worldly goal. This combination also aids in the Americanization of the narrator’s identity; though voodoo

is not solely an American religion, it is certainly not a religion of the Vietnamese tradition (Rutledge 47).

Conversely, Buddhism's presence in American religious life has recently spiked, with "Buddhist temples...conducting not only worship services but services of meditation that appeal to many Americans" (Rutledge 141). Even amid the somewhat inflexible Southern principles concerning custom and tradition, these Buddhist worship centers present a more tolerant picture of the South, a picture that seems less racially-driven and more open-minded than the social situation the Vietnamese refugees first encountered. According to Buenker and Ratner, the "hostile reception given by the American public...represented a continuation of the tradition of racism and hostility toward immigrant minority groups that has been prevalent and well-documented throughout U.S. history" (377). Such happenings as the construction of temples, mosques, and synagogues, especially in the South, represent the multi-culturalization of one of the most tradition-based American regions, and therefore, this amalgamated setting signifies that America, slowly but surely, is morphing into a melting pot society.

Robert Olen Butler's "Love" explores the many facets of the American identity through the actions of the characters and the characters' relationships with each other. Immigrants often view America as a land for new beginnings and second chances, and the characters in "Love" hold similar ideals. The narrator believes that in America, other men will not tempt his wife into adultery as they did in Vietnam, but his American sojourn proves to be a reenactment of the events that take place in Vietnam. Bu'o'm's affair with Tran Van Ha, however, appears to be the last of her escapades: Bu'o'm and her husband find themselves weakened by the latest affair, with the narrator incapacitated in the hospital, and his adulterous wife ashamedly by his side. Her Vietnamese life of debauchery and his Vietnamese life of power both come crashing down as he falls from the tree during his failed attempt at hexing Tran Van Ha. The final realization that Vietnam is no longer within them comes when Bu'o'm asks her husband's opinion on the "ways the Vietnamese in America were becoming part of American society" (93). In Vietnam, Bu'o'm is completely disinterested in her husband's political views, but in America, she realizes that she too must succumb to the very phenomenon of which she speaks. The hybridized culture, the wild mixture of Vietnamese and Louisianan influences all come to a close, in that the couple has become more American than Vietnamese, and because of this, they must leave behind the ways of Vietnam: adultery, strength, indifference, and fire.

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