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### **Living and Creating Along a Linguistic Fault-Line**

Should I be called a creative writer or a translator?

I live in Singapore, a country where ethnicity (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others) and dialect group are listed on every ID card. I write about South East Asia, a multi-lingual, multi-cultural archipelago, constantly grappling with how to represent characters speaking in different languages, or different Englishes, while maintaining a single narrative voice, and rendering oral languages into ‘written’ formats, while also retaining the right cultural context.

An example of my creative writing process at work can be seen in my novel *As the Heart Bones Break*. This novel spans 60 years in the life of a Vietnamese man, whose character’s voice I first heard in my head in Vietnamese (which I speak fluently), and which I then “translated” into 120,000 English words.

The novel is about a man uncertain about the identity of his father and his own ideological leanings during the Vietnam War, who tries to resolve issues concerning filial piety, allegiance, and lineage. A major theme is the impossibility of outright victory for either warring party, because of kinship ties crosscutting political and ideological divides.

I wrote this book for two reasons. First, because of my husband: I married a man whose blood father was a Viet Minh commander, and whose adopted father (also the commander’s best friend) worked for the French. My husband’s upbringing occurred in a French housing compound never attacked by the Viet Minh—for obvious kinship reasons! Second – in 2003, the US invaded Iraq. Many of my Vietnamese acquaintances felt it would be Vietnam redux, another U.S. quagmire in a field of relationships it didn’t understand. I felt it would be timely to re-tell the Vietnam War from a Vietnamese perspective.

Like in translation, I wanted to capture an echo of Vietnamese in my English writing, a language that generally uses kinship terms when referring to people. Hence, navigating kinship terms in English and Vietnamese was critical in creating a realistic voice for my character.

To foreground the protagonist’s integration into his adopted family of South Vietnamese loyalists, for instance, he is addressed as ‘Youngest,’ signalling hierarchy. In turn, his siblings are nameless, and referred to according to their birth order: Oldest, Fifth, Sixth, etc... On the other hand, to emphasize the ‘otherness’ of the protagonist’s American-born Vietnamese wife, my characters address her as Nina, never by the Vietnamese ‘Beloved’ or ‘Wife.’

Yet, relationships also determine pronouns. For instance, when the protagonist’s tutor reveals he is a communist, he addresses the protagonist as ‘*con*’ (son), binding him to obligations thereof.

The fluidity of these referential pronouns posed difficulties when choosing an appropriate point of view for the story. I first wrote in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person. Unfortunately, such pronouns almost always signal the age, status and ‘other’ being addressed. ‘He’ as a child might be ‘*nó*’, ‘*em*’ or ‘*con*’. In manhood, he could be ‘*hắn*,’ or remain ‘*con*’ if his parent is talking about him. This sense of the protagonist’s maturation could not be created in English 3<sup>rd</sup> person.

As for the first person, except in highly formal situations, Vietnamese rarely use the word for I, ‘*tôi*.’

In service to the story, I chose a 2<sup>nd</sup> person POV, and decided to narrate the story from the perspective of an ivory wedding bangle, channelling the spirit of the protagonist's deceased mother—the only character who truly knows the identity of the protagonist's father.

Critical reception of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person POV has been mixed. Vietnamese-born reviewers overwhelmingly favoured the 2<sup>nd</sup> person POV as appropriate, while American reviewers and an Australian-born Vietnamese found the use of the second person jarring, even off-putting. They bristled at having to “become” the protagonist, an intention I never had.

In conclusion, I'm similar to a translator in three ways: I translate from another language, a language I hear in my head; I seek creative solutions in English; and finally, I am read by readers who may not understand the nuances of the cultural perspective I'm writing from. It's here where one finds the magic, danger, and possibility in writing on a language divide. For some, the 2<sup>nd</sup> person POV created an unintended imposition of another's experience, whereas I hope my novel will help my readers set aside their assumptions and empathize.