

## Chi Vu, *Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale* (Giramondo, 2012)

Chi Vu's artistic work has, perhaps, made its most significant impact in the Australian artistic universe with the bilingual performance *Vietnam: A Psychic Guide* (2009). The work was adapted from her text which, along with other instances, has been published in various reputable national journals and anthologies. *Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale* (2012) gives continuity to Vu's preoccupations with the Vietnamese/Australian dynamics, in the process confirming her to be a truly inspired and talented writer.

'Storytelling is a way of creating a sense of belonging and reaffirming your identity', Vu has told Phil Kafcaloudes apropos of her recent contribution to the collection *Joyful Strains: Making Australia Home* (ABC Radio Australia, 28 January 2013). It then might strike the reader as odd that *Anguli Ma* is a gory murder story. Vu is, in fact, a part of the generation of Vietnamese refugees who in the 1980s flowed towards the Australian shore. Though the journey was admittedly long and arduous, it is the emotional and psychological violence of the (cultural) crossing which comes to the surface in the novella, suggesting Vu is speaking about more than her own experience. Her book drew inspiration from a traditional Buddhist folktale about a serial killer instructed by his teacher to kill a thousand people and arrange their severed fingers as a garland so as to reach enlightenment (Angulimala, as he is later known, means a 'garland of fingers'). The traditional tale links up with the modern tale set in Melbourne's Western suburbs in the 1980s where a Vietnamese abattoir worker becomes a murderer.

*Anguli Ma* puts forward a convoluted network of cultural explorations which, like the author's previous works, point to the migration not only of people but also of violence, trauma and loss. Vu subverts the argument often used by anti-migration supporters when she gives her immigrants names, aspirations and, perhaps most of all, implicitly contrasts the formers' fears with the terror of the Vietnamese of being deported if any of them does something non-Australian. The immediate reasoning is the correlation of non-Australian with un-Australian which is presented very provocatively through the intended killing of a dog. Having violence and fear as the intertwined and grotesque backbone of the novella, it is perhaps no surprise that, with the exception of *Anguli Ma* himself, the work is pervaded by women. Though they might dominate the text and appear to have achieved various levels of autonomy, such is questioned by their being both immigrants and human beings traditionally subjugated by men; take *Đào*, for example, who is trapped in her paradoxical universe: fear of *Anguli Ma* – who reminds her of Vietnamese women's role – and her disdain for her Australianised son. He shows no aggression which she comes to equate with laziness, lack of ambition and unmanliness.

*Anguli Ma* is most notably a piece of writing which stays true to its dual and explicit influences without trampling on its differences: it is based on a Buddhist tale but it has assumedly both Asian and Western gothic flavours. It is, in reality, a remarkable exercise on the postcolonial gothic in its gore, horror and the representation of helpless female victims whose vulnerability is reread in the light of their migrant condition; the reclaiming of the monk figure is particularly delightful in its ambiguity: the teacher who led *Anguli Ma* to murder blends with the Buddha who saves him. There is, however, no sense of cultural translation from the book's language (the text is sprinkled with Vietnamese expressions) to the bogeyman monk/serial killer dragging his meat sack through the streets of Melbourne. This Vietnamese bogeyman gives body to the fear of the monster following the white woman

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(and man) home, an additional feature of the related type of fiction, the imperial gothic. In Vietnam he is known as *ông ba bọ* or *ông kẹ* and though he has not made it into Marina Warner's pivotal study *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling and Making Mock* (1998) there is no doubt that the menacing creature shares prime characteristics with the mostly Western bogeymen Warner focuses on. These, however, are by no means strangers to the folklore of many Asian countries, including Myanmar, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore. In this gothic element Vu also succeeds in avoiding a postcolonial swindle: the bogeyman who flung children into his sack and then ate them is now made to represent one of the most dreaded criminals of our times – the child abuser. In the end, however, the child is saved, so to say, by the skin of her teeth.

The imagery and metaphors in *Anguli Ma* are proportionately violent in their representation of diverse but convulsive migrant selves. Furthermore, elements of the folktale are deftly reused in the light of the migrant condition at the heart of the novella: the highway murderer is envisioned as the wandering Vietnamese, misguided and lost, desperately trying to retrieve a sense of integrated identity through the exertion of violence (the wandering element is a traditionally gothic one too); Angulimala's inborn disposition to violence is reinterpreted as the migrant's own disposition which is socially ingrained in the collective white mind; contrastively though, *Anguli Ma* also reappropriates the idea of reformation. Regardless of one's past, of the immigrant's past, possibly of aggressive acts committed in order to survive, emotional and physically, the war left behind and an alien society, redemption can be achieved. Vu discloses how such acts are complex and also self-inflicted as she constructs the serial killer's internal struggle towards salvation. The reader is thrust inside the killer's mind and made to feel his disorientation and sense of homelessness: 'Alone in the kitchen ... his sneer collapsed and was replaced by the dead countenance of a man severed from history. It is a form of liberation, he thought, from your own conscience, from all expectations of life' (36-37). Nonetheless, one is subtly made to feel that, in the process, Australia can be redeemed itself as the emotional place where salvation occurs. The several voices the killer has simultaneously reveal his self-fragmentation but also the feat of his enlightenment: alternately Anguli Ma and the Brown Man (notice the racist overtones) and finally the Monk (replacing other monk identities). Besides mirroring the name changing of the folktale, through this technique the author is faithful to the original concept of psychological evolution as she has the reader accompany the character's internal journey ultimately to the moment of his complete redemption: 'Everything is inside everything else. ... Within each thing is the other. That is the nature of Emptiness. ... He observes the dying down of his anger, and the diminishing of its light in his mental landscape' (105).

This is an impressive little book which will please the readers at large and, hopefully, also draw the attention of the attentive critic who will relish the carefully orchestrated thematic and structural features it has to offer.

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