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Book Review: *Quiet As They Come*

In *Quiet As They Come*, Angie Chau introduces the reader to an extended family of Vietnamese immigrant that began their lives in America together in one cluttered house. Chau masters the art of weaving together the individual stories of selected family members, providing readers with a fresh stream of perspectives with each chapter; just when the reader begins to form an impression of a character, Chau's subsequent chapters wash away any initially biased perceptions of such characters. Through these constant shifts in perspective between characters, Chau also highlights the growth within selected characters—both in a direct and indirect manner. Some characters provide readers with a first-person narrative, whereas others are described from afar, emphasizing the physical and emotional distance certain characters have toward others. The beauty in Chau's writing, however, is not simply her ability to shift between perspectives, but rather her capability of tying the loose threads of seemingly detached stories into a cohesive representation of the conflict each character encounters: their passive observances of the tension between the Vietnamese and American lifestyle. Despite the utter confusion and hardships roaring through their thoughts, these characters are as quiet as they come.

The story begins through the eyes of Elle, one of the children in this extended family. She introduces the readers to her family in a segmented, yet honest, manner. This honesty is crucial, for it provides readers with a baseline perception of the other characters. When readers are later exposed to the deeper insights into certain characters' stories, they will be able to see how Elle's initial depictions of her family members were

at times fairly accurate, but at times severely lacking the insight that one can only gain when listening to another individual's story. In the first chapter, Elle mentions:

The house is big and old. There are lots of hidden closets and corners and secrets inside. [...] My name is Elle. It's not my real name. That's kind of a secret too. [...] My parents changed it so I would fit better. Sometimes I wonder if they'll change my last name too. And if they do, what will become of the old me? (Chau, 13 – 14)

Secrets. Change. Old. New. These are all key concepts in Chau's novel. Although this extended family of twelve (thirteen including the imprisoned Duc, husband of Kim) lives together in such close proximity of each other, secrets act as barriers between them; thus, there is perpetual misunderstanding between all family members. Elle is not the only one who fears change; they all do. The younger children are growing up in a world unlike the one in which their parents did. Since their parents are also slowly learning the American customs, the children have no guidance. This is an ironic concept, for the entire family immigrated to America together, they are encountering similar problems at the same time (albeit at different stages of their lives)—yet each individual family member seems to withhold their true concerns, electing to confront these identity issues alone. On the rare occasion that they *do* confide in one another, they use secrets as their medium, filling the house with whispers. The chaos that pervades their outward interactions serves as a mask, for their true stories are secrets so quiet that in order for one to understand a character's perspective, one must simply read and listen without judgment.

In order to maintain a thoughtful interpretation of this novel, readers must remember that their initial impression of certain characters may drastically vary as the characters themselves progress through major episodes of their lives. The core struggle of searching for a balance a Vietnamese and American lifestyle persists throughout the novel, but each chapter presents the reader to a different perspective for each character. At some point throughout the novel, each character has attempted to understand what this “balance” truly means—and if it is actually attainable. Chau intertwines the confusion of both the younger and older family members, subtly demonstrating that age does not discount any immigrant from such struggles with identity.

Through the intricate plot embedded within this family, Chau questions the meaning of pursuing a better life, otherwise known as the “American Dream.” Is it truly a dream, or is it attainable in reality? Are the sacrifices worth the struggle towards this dream? Another question that seems to haunt the characters in this novel is whether or not this new life is better than the one they presumably left behind in Vietnam. Chau incorporates a fair amount of flashbacks into these stories, providing readers with the appropriate background information in order to understand their current incentives, dreams, and nostalgia. Once again, Chau has aptly applied this issue to both younger and older characters. Not only is there a sense of nostalgia for life back in Vietnam for both age groups, but also a somber longing for a life that could have existed.

All the characters encounter this struggle to some degree, but Kim, Elle’s aunt, may be one of the more outstanding examples. Although she has immigrated to American with her kids and extended family, her husband, Duc, is still imprisoned in Vietnam. She frequently has flashback episodes to her interactions with Duc; some were enchanting,

others were heart wrenching. After her excruciating work hours have depleted her energy, Kim finds solace in rereading Duc's letters from prison, for his tender words fuel her passion both for him and for their eventual reunion (Chau, 36 – 37). Duc is Kim's past, present, and future; he is the reason why she continues to fight for her survival in America.

Duc and Kim, however, cannot coexist. Regarding this conflict between the Vietnamese and American lifestyles, Duc is representative of Vietnam, and to some degree, Kim is representative of America. Kim has always adored Western culture, and in one specific flashback, she recalls a situation in which she wanted to cut her hair. Duc, however, fiercely opposed the idea, instructing her that she must remain like a traditional Vietnamese woman. He said, "I love you the way I married you" (Chau, 31). When Duc finally arrived in the United States, the readers should appreciate Chau's mastered writing skills, for her balance between flashbacks not was not only an appropriate method to portray Kim's personal struggle, but also a symbol for the novel overall: there is no true balance between the Vietnamese and American lifestyles; immigrants must identify with one more than the other.

As the days grew closer to Duc's arrival, Kim had deliberately arranged a short summer camp trip for her children, yearning to first have her sacred time alone with Duc. Aside from the moments when she and Duc first fell in love, Kim had never been happier than she was during the days anticipating Duc's arrival. When he arrived, however, it was evident that he could not live in America; he could not live with Kim (Chau, 111 – 124). Both Duc and Kim are broken people—but in somewhat different ways. Duc cannot adapt to the American lifestyle. Not only does he suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress

Disorder (PTSD), but he is also unwilling to change his old ideals for this new life in America. Chau gradually presented the reader with instances in which Duc was both loving and cold towards Kim, and this build-up reached its climax when he decided to leave Kim forever. Readers should not make generalizing assumptions about Duc's heartless demeanor, for they might mistake his cold words and decisions as him no longer loving Kim. Chau intentionally included the excerpts about their love letters to show that Duc deeply loves Kim. Among other factors, his arrival in America clarified to him that he cannot forget his Vietnamese lifestyle, resulting in his abandonment of his wife and his potential American lifestyle. In contrast, Kim has chosen the American lifestyle. Despite this milestone moment in Kim's life, she lies to her children about Duc's arrival in America, stating that issues in Vietnam prevented him from leaving the country. As revealed in the final chapter of the novel, her daughter Sophia recalls that situation from her perspective, explaining that she did not believe her mother's lies; she knew her father had initially arrived, but chose to leave (174 – 175). Although Kim decides to keep her struggle a secret, Sophia knows—yet she allows this secret to persist. After all these hardships, why do they insist on maintaining secrecy?

Perhaps these characters maintain secrecy because it allows for them to remain passive, to remain as quiet as they come. As the readers progress through the novel, they will find countless examples of this interconnected family approaching their struggles with hesitance. These characters are unsure of their identities, for the American soil on which they walk does not indicate that they are Americans. Their lives have undoubtedly change since their arrival to this new land, and each individual will reach a point in which he or she can no longer passively observe the tension between the Vietnamese and

American lifestyles; each person must make a decision, for the two lifestyles cannot coexist in complete balance. Near the end of the novel, Chau provides few subtle implications of the decisions some characters made; otherwise, she intentionally refrains from including many concrete conclusions. She urges the readers to not only think about the possible paths those characters could have taken, but also the possibilities that await her readers. Chau has exhibited a fairly accurate and honest depiction of the lives of Vietnamese people in America through a variety of perspectives, emphasizing that although people may face similar circumstances, each individual will have his or her own unique experience. Upon reading this novel, the reader will gain a deeper insight into the complications of adaptation and immersion, of change and choice—and most importantly, of identity.

Works Cited

Chau, Angie. *Quiet As They Come*. Brooklyn, New York: Ig, 2010. Print.