

Politicized Nostalgia in Lat's *The Kampung Boy*

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Excerpt

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym asserts that the formation of national identity relies on evoking “cultural intimacy” (42). Drawing from the work of anthropologist Michael Herzfeld, Boym defines “cultural intimacy” as “‘self recognition’ through various common frameworks of memory” through which people witness the icons of their past, enabling them to connect with the larger community with whom they share a tradition (42). Boym recognizes “cultural intimacy” as necessary “glue in everyday life” that uses common settings, actions, and language to form collective identity (42). While “cultural intimacy” is vital, Boym cautions that it can be manipulated to function as “political nationalism” when efforts to remember the past extend into aims to reconstruct it as an idealized symbol, constituting a process she designates “restorative nostalgia” (43).

The widely known Malaysian cartoonist Lat delineates his childhood from birth until departure from the *kampung*, the term for Malaysian village, in his autobiographical graphic novel *The Kampung Boy* (1977). Lat has been consistently praised as having “a unifying effect on Malaysians” by drawing on the common experiences of the *kampung* to bring together Malaysians through images of village life, which can be understood under Boym’s model as promoting “cultural intimacy” to create “a microcosm of the Malaysian world of that time” (Rahman 63, Boym 42, Desai 180). Lat’s critics consider him a “chronicler of rural nostalgia,” acknowledging that he “present[s] an idealised view of village life” (Rahman 66). Yet Lat’s critics generally agree that Lat is apolitical, primarily interested in uniting Malaysians through humor. By declining to recognize his works as politically motivated, critics neglect to identify the culturally reductive effects of Lat’s nostalgic depiction of the *kampung*.

The *kampung* came to increasingly represent the past during the 1970s governmental efforts to promote reform for the rural Malay population. By denouncing the *kampung* as anti-modern, political leaders solidified a dichotomy in which the rural *kampung* became a symbol of the past, in opposition to the city, which represented the future. Lat, by attempting to honor his “pride in his own ‘Malay-ness’ and his cultural ‘roots,’” romanticizes the *kampung* in response to the 1970s movement, countering the accusation of “Malay ‘backwardness’” with a sentimental *kampung* that adheres to Malay value structures (Piyadasa 41, Bunnell 1689). Boym’s theory of restorative nostalgia, when applied to Lat’s *The Kampung Boy*, suggests that Lat’s idyllic *kampung* represents a form of nostalgia that privileges a superficial reconstruction of the past over the acknowledgment of both historical and contemporary nuance. By portraying the encroachment of industrialization on the *kampung*, foreshadowing the *kampung*’s eventual disappearance as a result of urbanization, Lat adopts the simplistic binary of rural and urban settings established through the problematic government narrative. While Lat inverts the rural versus urban relationship in order to vilify urbanization and honor the *kampung*, he ultimately reaffirms the *kampung* as a commemorative symbol of the past, undermining its role as an active feature of Malaysian identity.

Works Cited

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Editor Commentary

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In this paper, Jenny Silver seeks to complicate the received understanding of the significance of a prominent Malaysian writer’s graphic novel. According to Jenny, critics have consistently characterized the works of Lat, the writer in question, to be politically neutral. In the excerpt above, which showcases the first four paragraphs of the essay, Jenny introduces readers to the wide variety of critics who have expressed this view and subsequently complicates this consensus by bringing in insights from a different discipline to show that Lat’s work can be understood to have a deeply political element.

One of the surest ways for a writer to invoke motive in a research paper is to situate herself firmly within the scholarly conversation and show, as explicitly as possible, how she differs from other scholars in her interpretations. Jenny does precisely that, but she goes further by planting herself in the discourses of two different disciplines. On the one hand, she places herself in the literary conversation about the nature of Lat’s work, which many critics consider apolitical. On the other hand, she situates herself in an anthropological conversation about the meaning of cultural symbols and national identity.

Motive asks us to question why a writer’s argument is important or necessary. With her two-pronged approach, Jenny manages to inform her readers of the importance of her contribution by using the theoretical framework afforded to her by anthropological scholars. This framework, which champions the idea of “cultural intimacy” and “restorative nostalgia,” functions as a lens through which Jenny can analyze and reassess the significance of Lat’s work. As she effectively shows, literary scholars can easily miss the mark and overlook the political ramifications of Lat’s work if they are bereft of the insights from anthropological scholars like Boym, who provide the ideas of “cultural intimacy” and “restorative nostalgia” as important key concepts for the understanding of national symbols.

Whereas the thesis is the central claim made by the author, motive establishes why this claim is original and worth listening to. By contrasting her understanding of Lat’s work from the interpretations of other critics, Jenny immediately provides a compelling and unique viewpoint that draws readers in with the promise of new insights.