

**“Wars Don’t End When the Fighting is Over”¹:
Adib Khan’s *Homecoming* and the Australian Literature of the Vietnam
War**

Geoffrey V. Davis

Abstract: The Bangladeshi-Australian writer Adib Khan’s fourth novel *Homecoming* (2003) marked a significant change of direction in the author’s work. No longer concerned to give fictional representation to the diasporic experience which had preoccupied him since his own migration to Australia in 1973, he now embarked on a work which addresses one of the most controversial issues of his new country’s recent history, its involvement in the Vietnam War and the traumatic consequences for those who fought in it. As an Asian-Australian writer engaging with the legacy of the war, Khan offers an alternative view from a new perspective. His novel presents a compelling psychological study of a veteran’s struggle to confront his experience and reconstitute his identity. This article seeks to locate the novel within the wider tradition of Australian war literature, to examine Khan’s representation of the war and its aftermath for Australians and Vietnamese alike, and to identify the particular contribution this Asian-Australian novelist has to make to central concerns of his adopted country.

Keywords: Adib Khan; *Homecoming*; Asian-Australian writing; Vietnam; war literature

“All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield,
the second time in memory”
(Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies. Vietnam and the Memory of War* 4)

“The shadows of Vietnam hover over us”
(Adib Khan, *Kosmopolis* 02 7)

Europeans, one may suppose, may not be particularly well informed about Australian military history and may therefore be somewhat surprised to learn that, as one historian has written, “Australia has been involved in more major conflicts for more years than any other industrial nation” (Kent 155). The country was the first of the British colonies to take part in the wars of the “old world;” Australians fought on the British side in the New Zealand land wars of 1863-1864;² they saw action in the Sudan in 1885, and then in the Anglo-Boer War in South Africa between 1899 and 1902. The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 demonstrated how dependent on Britain the country was, for, as the celebrated historian Manning Clark put it, “as the British had declared war, Australia was therefore also at war” (442) and, since it was London which determined quite where Australian forces were to be deployed, he added cantankerously: “Australians were not makers of their own history” (450).

¹ This is a phrase Frank’s Vietnamese wife Maria attributes to her father (*Homecoming* 68).

² As reported by Peter Pierce (“Perceptions of the Enemy in Australian War Literature” 166).

While thousands upon thousands of Australians volunteered for war service, neither they nor the many enthusiastic supporters of the war suspected what lay in store for them. Not until the numbers of the dead and wounded became known in Australia, did it become clear just what was happening “on the other side of the earth” (Ward 165). Eight thousand Australians were killed at Gallipoli in 1915 before defeat was conceded and the retreat ordered;³ a further 7,000 were to die on the Somme one year later. Continuing dire news from the European front gave rise to criticism of the manner in which the war was being conducted by the British. The heavy losses at Gallipoli and on the Somme were ascribed to inadequate planning on the part of the British military; Australians soon began to doubt whether the country should be sacrificing “all its finest young men on the altar of the British Empire” (West 217). When the numbers of volunteers declined, the introduction of conscription was proposed to deal with the problem, but it was rejected—after heated debate—in two referenda. Nothing illustrated the division of the country more graphically than the extremely tight result of the 1916 referendum (1,100,033 votes to 1,087,557).

The issue of conscription was less contentious during the Second World War, since the entry of Japan into the war posed the first real threat of military action on Australian soil itself. Although in the end this did not happen, Australia did witness naval encounters off its coast for the first time; some harbours in the north-west of the country were bombed and Japanese submarines did penetrate into Sydney Harbour. What the geopolitical circumstances of World War Two changed—quite fundamentally—was “the time-honoured concept of complete reliance on Britain” (Ward 188). In 1942, the fall of Singapore, long regarded as the “impregnable pivot of Australian security” (Ward 190), led to the country taking an active role in the war in the Pacific and forced it to introduce basic changes in its foreign and defence policies by reorienting them towards an alliance with the United States. The readiness of later Australian administrations to send troops to Korea in 1949 (Millar 62) and to Vietnam in 1965 may be seen as an expression of the Australian desire to be regarded as a “worthy ally” of the US (Burstall xxi).⁴ Since then, Australian troops have also seen action in American-led coalitions in Afghanistan, where they have been active for the last fifteen years (Williams), and Iraq, where they were involved in the attack to free Mosul from the so-called Islamic State (Miranda).

Australian involvement in the Vietnam War began with the dispatching of thirty military advisors to South Vietnam in 1962, where they formed what was known as the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV). In April of 1965 the Liberal Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, announced that he would commit Australian combat troops to fight alongside the United States with the stated aim of “containing communist aggression” (Ham 5); in the following two months, the first contingent of eight hundred men was sent. At the time a Morgan Gallup poll established that 56% of Australians were in favour of the country participating in the war; many were not, however—and almost immediately opposition began to form. The first arrests at an anti-war demonstration in Sydney took place in October of that year. In March 1966 Harold Holt, who was a fervent admirer of US President Johnson, succeeded Menzies, and promptly increased the Australian commitment. A further 4,500

³ Clark accordingly describes Gallipoli as a “sacred site” (461).

⁴ This would also adversely affect not only Australian relations with the other countries of Asia but also the internal political stability of Australia herself, as witness the many demonstrations against the deployment of conscripts in Vietnam (Cf. Kent 155).

men, of whom, significantly, some 500 were conscripts, were sent to Vietnam. This decision gave rise to further mass protest marches; the Seamen's Union refused to load ships with supplies for the troops (Ham 275; Doyle et al. 161). Throughout the period of their deployment the Australians were stationed at Nui Dat in the Phuoc Tuy province of South Vietnam. Their major engagement—the Battle of Long Tan—took place near there on 18 August 1966. As in the case of the First World War the issue of conscription then became contentious. Although in November 1966 a poll had found that 68% of the population were in favour of conscription and 37% approved of sending conscripts to Vietnam, an anti-conscription campaign starting in the universities soon gathered pace.

By the end of 1967 Australia had 8,300 troops on active service. The war they were fighting was, however, increasingly perceived as “unpopular and futile” (Pierce, “Australian and American Literature of the Vietnam War” 111) and, by 1969, the Australians, disturbed by US policies, were keen to withdraw. In April 1970 the withdrawal of the first battalion of Australians was announced. This was followed by three successive anti-war Moratorium marches, in each of which over 100,000 demonstrators took part. Aimed at securing the withdrawal of Australian and all other foreign troops from Vietnam and at the repeal of the National Service Act which had first permitted conscription for overseas service, the Moratorium marches have been described as “the largest and most sustained public protest movement in Australian history” (Ham 517). The last Australian troops finally left the country in December 1971. For many of them, as Robin Gerster writes, “return to Australia ... was just as traumatic as the battle experience itself” (232). When Gough Whitlam came to power as Labour Prime Minister in 1972, national service was ended. Over the whole course of Australian participation in the war some 60,000 men had seen service in Vietnam; 520 of them had been killed and some 3,000 wounded (Ham 663). In 1976, in the aftermath of the war, the first Vietnamese boat people arrived in Australia.⁵ The so-called Welcome Home parade for the troops who had served in the war did not take place until October 1987.

In view of Australia's regular involvement in wars overseas, it is unsurprising that the country has a long tradition of writing about war, both non-fictional and fictional. The former category includes writing by war correspondents, the memoirs of participating soldiers and the journals of prisoners of war, as well as official military histories. The latter includes such varied work as the minor poetry which emerged from the Anglo-Boer War, the novels born of the experience of active combatants in the First World War, the poetry and fiction of the Second World War, the literature of protest against Australian participation in the Vietnam War⁶ and the body of fiction which that war has generated—and continues to do.

With regard to the fictional writing just mentioned, there is an important distinction to be drawn between writing by former active combatants, which often appeared in the immediate post-war period and was largely inspired by personal experience of the war, and fiction by non-combatants, published considerably later. Each new generation must form an image of the wars that have shaped its times and must assess the way in which those wars have impacted on their own society. Conscious of how much has remained hidden and is gradually being forgotten, it must seek to grasp the nature and significance of events of which it has had

⁵ Cf. Nam Le, “The Boat” in *The Boat* (2008).

⁶ There is a useful overview in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*. 2nd ed. Oxford UP, 1994, pp. 785-796.

no direct experience and can often hardly begin to imagine. David Malouf, speaking of the First World War, formulated this statement that would apply equally well to subsequent wars:

I assume that the obsession of my own generation with the First World War, the attempt to fill the gap in experience with poems and novels that were not written then but have been now, is a way of giving us the experience imaginatively, so that we can at last assimilate it and use it. ("Statement" 267)

Among works which fulfill that purpose are some of the most significant in Australian literature, such as Malouf's own *Johnno* (1975), *Fly Away Peter* (1982), and his *The Great World* (1990), for example, or George Johnston's *My Brother Jack* (1964), Randolph Stow's *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965), and Roger McDonald's *1915* (1979). Such works written in opposition to war, a long tradition in Australian literature, have been influential in shaping the attitudes of subsequent generations of Australians to their country's history.⁷

Australian participation alongside the United States in the Vietnam War has generated a great deal of writing, military,⁸ and historical, much of it highly critical of Australian government policies. It would seem, too, that some of the fiction published subsequent to the war, which does not appear at first sight to be concerned with Vietnam at all, might well be regarded as pertinent to it. Thus one critic has suggested that the authors of works set during the First World War, such as *1915* and *Fly Away Peter*, "may have chosen the divided, angry and anguished climate of that time as their setting as a means of dealing indirectly with Australia's part in the Vietnam War, where similar social schisms greeted Australian involvement" (Dennis et al.). Likewise, it has been suggested that "the Vietnam War is the hidden subject" of several novels set in Southeast Asia, such as Christopher Koch's *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1978) and Blanche d'Alpuget's *Turtle Beach* (1981) (Dennis et al.). Besides, the Australian literature of the Vietnam War itself continues to grow. To give an idea of its great variety and of the kind of tradition Khan has situated himself within I want to refer briefly to several representative works.⁹

⁷ It is perhaps no coincidence that several of them appeared during or in the wake of the Vietnam War, since that conflict, it has been suggested, also generated much interest in its predecessors. Cf. Jay Winter, "Producing the Television Series *The Great War and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century*," *Profession 1999* (New York, Modern Language Association, 1999, pp. 15-26). Winter suggests that "the appearance of a rich historical literature on the 1914-1918 conflict was in large part an echo of the Vietnam War" (18).

⁸ Among the military histories are Gregory Pemberton, *All the Way: Australia's Road to Vietnam* (St Leonards NSW, Allen & Unwin, 1987); John Murphy, *Harvest of Fear: A History of Australia's Vietnam War* (St Leonards NSW, Allen & Unwin, 1993); Ian McNeill, *To Long Tan: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War 1950-1966* (St Leonards NSW, Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1995); Chris Coulthard-Clark, *The RAAF in Vietnam* (St Leonards NSW, Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1995); and Paul Ham, *Vietnam: The Australian War* (Sydney, HarperCollins 2007).

⁹ I am not myself aware of novels written by Vietnamese migrants in Australia which deal directly with the war. However, there are two articles on Vietnamese writing that have been published by Australian scholars. Both predictably run up against language problems. Michael Jacklin, in his article "Southeast Asian writing in Australia: the case of Vietnamese writing," assumes, no doubt rightly, that few Australians have any knowledge of literature in Vietnamese written in Australia, regrets that such scholarly work as exists on the subject tends to focus exclusively on the small body of work

An important early, and very powerful, collection of anti-war writing edited by Shirley Cass and others is *We Took their Orders and Are Dead: An Anti-War Anthology*, whose title is taken from A. D. Hope's poem "Inscription for any War" (89) and which brought together contributions by 77 writers. One of these is Bruce Dawe, who is represented by a moving threnody which, like Khan's novel, bears the title "Home-coming" (74-75). The first novel of consequence to be published was Morris West's *The Ambassador* (1965). It takes the form of a first-person narrative by an American ambassador (based on Henry Cabot Lodge) who was posted to South Vietnam during the war against the Viet Cong and is essentially a psychological study of a politician attempting to come to grips with the cultural and religious traditions as well as the complex political realities of the country. The novel traces his struggle with his conscience, as he is caught between a myriad policy options, inveigled into abandoning support for the president of the country, whom he respects, in the cause of cynical diplomatic real politic, and ultimately has to recognize his own moral responsibility and that of the US in destroying the country.

Both John Rowe's novel *Count Your Dead: A Novel of Vietnam*, which appeared in 1968, and William Nagle's *The Odd Angry Shot*, published in 1975 and later filmed, were written by Australians who had actually served in Vietnam. Rowe vividly portrays the realities of the war through the eyes of an American economics graduate whose concern to rebuild Vietnam is frustrated by the military's policy of wholesale destruction. The novel mounts a sustained critique of American policy in Vietnam, particularly through frequent heated debates between the protagonists on such issues as the ruthless violence of the American forces, the poor prospects for reconstruction, and the strained policy differences between Australians and Americans. An especially memorable display of American arrogance is the moment when one of their soldiers characterizes Australian dependence on the US with the remark: "If we wanted Australia, we could take or destroy it tomorrow. Christ, what are you compared to us. You're not a country, you're a tennis court" (113).

Nagle's *The Odd Angry Shot* is quite different. A fast-paced, episodic, first-person narrative, frequently bawdy and full of gruesome descriptions of the violence of combat, the novel traces the careers of a group of "mates" on a tour of duty to Vietnam with the Special Air Services. Not for nothing have they been described as "caricatures of the Ugly Australian abroad" (Gerster 230). Surviving through humour and mateship, full of contempt for the girlfriends who leave them, the university students who demonstrate against the war, and "the wharfies back home [who] have refused to load our supply ships" (82), they appear to have no respect for authority and no sympathy for the Vietnamese, they are aware that the war is being lost, they feel they "have been betrayed for a political lie" (93), and return home where

written in English, and notes that although multicultural writing has recently gained acceptance in Australia, writing in languages other than English produced in Australia is hardly being noticed at all. The effect of this is that migrant writing is only regarded as Australian literature when it is written in English. Catherine Cole and Marsha Berry, in their article "History and Postmemory in Contemporary Vietnamese Literature," wonder to what extent the Vietnam War has affected the contemporary literary practice of Vietnam and the diaspora. They note that only "a relatively small number of non-Vietnamese Australian fiction writers have written about Vietnam" (3) and attribute this interestingly to a desire to forget rather than to commemorate the war. Devoting their article largely to issues of postmemory, they engage hardly at all with Vietnamese writing whether of the country itself or of the Australian diaspora.

their only options seem reduced to “War Service Homes, ... second-hand Holdens” (97), harlots and drink (see 98).

The plot of Gabrielle Lord’s 1998 thriller *The Sharp End* largely derives from the experiences of Australian soldiers both in Vietnam and at home after their return, so that the book schematizes the traumatic psychological effects of the war on soldiers, the constant recurrence of memories of the war, the refusal to talk about their experiences, the harassment wives suffered from anti-war protesters while their men were away, and the broken marriages that often ensued after the soldiers’ return. Lord’s detective and murderer are both Vietnam veterans, “two country boys” who “went to the Vietnam war together” (58) as friends and return estranged due to an event that took place over there, which is only revealed at the end of the book. Harry, the detective, haunted as he is by the “ghosts” (71) of his memories, has never spoken about them. Nor has he ever revealed anything about his friend Angus’s brutal rape of a dying Vietnamese woman, which he witnessed. Angus, who turns out to be the murderer, has returned to Australia suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Like Khan, Lord encapsulates the brutalization of war in the horrific image of a rape and uses its concealment and subsequent disclosure as the central motivation for a postwar struggle for justice.¹⁰

My final example is *The Rainy Season* (2009) by Myfanwy Jones, an author of a later generation than those previously mentioned. Jones worked as a journalist in Vietnam in the mid-1990s, which accounts for one of the distinguishing—and perhaps redeeming—features of the novel: the attention to authentic local detail based on intimate knowledge of the country as it was in the 1990s. Ella, the 25-year-old narrator whose sole knowledge of the country has come, typically for her generation, through movies, goes to Vietnam twenty-five years after her father in an attempt to discover what had happened to him as a soldier there and to understand what caused him to leave his family four years after his return. As it turns out, her mother, now an alcoholic, had asked him to leave since he “was very hurt in that war, ...—his spirit. Something inside him was damaged” (300). This novel pays particular attention to the negative reception which the veterans returning after the war met with. Ella, for example, recalls her father’s opinion that

they sent them to war before they were old enough to vote, then gave them no way to come home ... They thought they’d come back heroes, but instead they became our national shame: heartless and depraved, the papers said; raping, mutilating, village-torching, baby killers. (179)

She remembers, too, watching the Welcome March of 1987 on television, hoping to see her father:

After fourteen years of being shunned by their fellow Australians, vilified by the press, excluded from the RSL [Returned Servicemen’s League]—because Vietnam was not a real war and so they were not real soldiers—here, at last, the Vietnam veterans were being brought in from the cold. (233)

¹⁰ Donna Coates in “Coming Home: The Return of the (Australian Vietnam War) Soldier” discusses Lord’s novel and is useful on its representation of trauma. She does not refer to *Homecoming*, however.

That the Bangladeshi-Australian writer Adib Khan should write a novel which concerns itself with the Vietnam War and its Australian aftermath was not perhaps to be expected. Khan, who moved to Australia from Bangladesh in 1973 to study at Monash University after the universities had been closed in his own country, and subsequently became a teacher of English and History in Ballarat, did not begin writing until he was over 40, but he achieved immediate success when his novel *Seasonal Adjustments* won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for First Book in 1995. In his early novels and in his published essays he has been much concerned with the themes of diaspora and identity, not least in relation to his own experience. Recognizing the “claims [on him] of four different countries,”—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Australia—he sees himself as having multiple identities and is unable to think of himself “in terms of a single tradition” (“In Janus’ Footsteps”). Aware that he was “destined to occupy a kind of no-man’s-land, wedged between polarized cultures,” he acknowledges what he terms the “cultural dualism” created by literary influences from East and West (“In Janus’ Footsteps”). In seeking to characterize his own identity Khan has often had recourse to terms such as “splintered” and “fragmented,” as when he referred to “the cultural splintering, which results from an expatriate’s experience of dislocation” (“Diasporic Homes” 11), and attributed his “splintered life” to his elitist, Christian, English-language education in Bangladesh (“In Janus’ Footsteps”).

As a writer of Asian origin, Khan is naturally interested in Australian-Asian relations. He has noted with approval that “there is a school of thought that advocates a greater recognition and a strengthening of Australia’s ties with Asia” and that “fiction has not been slow to respond to this idea” (“Trends in Australian Fiction” 7). In his view Brian Castro’s *After China* and Alex Miller’s *The Ancestor Game* have, for example, demonstrated that it is possible to bridge the gap between East and West. He adds:

Our imaginative engagement with Asia is finding broader and more subtle perspectives that are not based on contrasts and simplistic conclusions about a superior civilization, but one that seeks to present the interaction between different cultures, between characters with different values and the necessity of understanding Australia in its regional context. (“Trends” 8)

One might perhaps regard his fourth novel *Homecoming* (2003) as a step in that direction.

In 2001 Khan described what he termed “a slightly alien scenario.” He was, he said,

in a state of transition [...] planning a novel set entirely in Australia, not about migrants, but about a white Australian, a Vietnam veteran, troubled by guilt and concerned by his lack of responsibility during the war, seeking atonement through art and a commitment to a relationship with a partially paralysed woman. (“In Janus’ Footsteps”)

This novel would become *Homecoming*. It would represent a significant change of direction in the author’s work, for here Khan is no longer primarily concerned to give fictional representation to the diasporic experience which had preoccupied him since his own migration to Australia, but would embark on a work which addresses one of the most controversial issues of the country’s recent history, its involvement in the Vietnam War and

the traumatic consequences for those who fought in it. As one critic suggested, with this novel Khan was moving into the mainstream:

The new novel reveals no trace of his interest in Indian and Pakistani culture, and only a minimal concern with the displacement experienced by migrants. Instead the displacement at issue in *Homecoming* is that of a native Australian who cannot fit into the culture around him. (Matthews 52)

Khan was well aware that this was new thematic territory for him, but seemingly had no qualms about his ability to engage successfully with an Australian theme. “If a Japanese could have written a novel about an English butler” he commented (with reference to Ishiguro), “then a Bangladeshi can fictionalize a white Australian’s experience” (“In Janus’ Footsteps”).

As an Asian-Australian writer Khan was here engaging with the legacy of a war of which he obviously had no personal experience.¹¹ He had, however, been exposed to the effects of war, since he had lived through the war of liberation of 1971 which resulted in East Pakistan becoming the independent republic of Bangladesh. That war, which he described as “savagely and brutalizing” (“Strength on Parallel Roads”), had impacted greatly on his own life. As he commented to a Bangladeshi newspaper: “The beginning of my fractured existence [was] the war of liberation and its long-term consequences [which] hastened the splintering process” (“Cruising: A Writer’s Journey”). This assessment is borne out by his returning to the experience of that war in two of his novels, *Seasonal Adjustments* and *Spiral Road*, the former published in 1994, i.e. before *Homecoming*, and the latter in 2007, i.e. after it. In both novels Khan writes passionately and sympathetically of the consequences of war and the psychological effects on those who took part. He presents characters who struggle to come to terms with traumatic guilt caused by their actions in the war. In *Seasonal Adjustments*, in a sequence of events which seems to prefigure the later *Homecoming*, Iftiqar speaks for the first time of his role in it. He recalls how he shot a young man during the conflict, how the action had changed him, how the war had made him a “stranger to his old life” (269), had turned him into “a moral pauper” (273), had drained him emotionally and had led to the break-up of his relationship with Shabana. In *Spiral Road* Masud recalls how he had accidentally brought about the deaths of civilians and how this experience had left him feeling “stained and dirty” (121), and ultimately transformed him.

Homecoming, which is dedicated to “Australians who went to fight in Vietnam and came away to discover the war within themselves,” tells the story of one such soldier, Martin Godwin, who served in the Vietnam War and returned to Australia displaying symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Now in his fifties, he is still haunted by memories of the war which insert themselves into his everyday life; he suffers panic attacks, is prone to outbursts of violence, and is plagued by self-doubt and feelings of emptiness. Having lost his Christian faith and aware of his vulnerability, he hardly knows what to do with his life and tries to manage his predicament by withdrawing into solitude. He is earning his living as a handyman, can barely make ends meet, regularly consults a psychiatrist whose advice he does not heed, and although he is intellectually gifted, he regularly fails the university courses

¹¹ In the “Acknowledgments” he records his debt to “the two Vietnam veterans, who prefer not to be named, for their narratives that sparked the ideas for this novel.”

he signs up to. Satisfactory personal relationships, other than with his erstwhile mates from Vietnam, elude him. Unable to communicate anything of his wartime experiences to his family, he proves incapable of resuming a meaningful relationship with his increasingly bewildered wife Moira, who divorces him (see 58), and with his son Frank, who cannot deal with his silence (see 185) and attempts suicide. Martin starts a tentative relationship with a younger woman called Nora, but because of the impotence which has afflicted him since the war, he is unable to consummate it. Nora never asks him about his experience in Vietnam but comforts him when he has nightmares about it. When she suffers a stroke, she is institutionalized and declines into a mental world of her own. Martin returns to his solitary life, paying her only occasional visits.

If Martin's life takes an unexpected turn for the better, this is largely due to two formative experiences: the first is the interest in Buddhism aroused in him by his visit to an ashram his son Frank had spoken of; the second is his meeting Frank's Vietnamese partner Maria who describes herself as "born in a Buddhist tradition" (190). Martin's spontaneous visit to the ashram plays a crucial role in his development. Having previously been dismissive of what he regarded as his son's dabbling in Buddhism (45), Martin enters the place with some trepidation and Khan is careful to sketch his evident discomfort, both mental and physical. At first the ashram proves not to be "what he had imagined" (205); he is skeptical of the institution's ability to fulfill its professed objective of "promoting peace and harmony, both individually and globally" (205), so much so that he regrets taking a detour to visit the place. But when he joins a couple of sessions being run by a former academic from Chicago, he soon finds himself "trapped in a world of unexplored ideas" (208). Unsettled by what he hears he begins to participate. While he acknowledges that his own values have been shaped by Christianity, a religion he no longer practices, he comes to see the relevance to his own situation of the American's teaching on the relationship of personal misfortune to universal experience shared by all humanity. The American's decision to forsake a prime university position and successful clinical practice in favour of a life of contemplation impresses Martin deeply, confronting him as it does with an example of how it is possible to reinvent oneself and begin life anew.

During the years after his return to Australia Martin attempts to shut out his memories of the war, but is regularly disturbed by flashbacks evoking the sounds of Vietnam and an unspecified "tropical afternoon" there (12), by dreams of episodes which happened during his war service, and by nightmares full of "images of agonized faces and burning landscapes" (96). He takes showers in the middle of the night as a form of "ritualistic cleansing" (59). As an art lover he sees his own panic reflected in Munch's famous painting "The Scream" (20) or in Albert Tucker's painting "Army Shower," which prompts him to wonder, "Did Tucker know about the burden of memories that could not be exorcised?" (155).

Throughout the novel the reader wonders what it is that Martin is hiding, what trauma is connected with that "part of an afternoon from the Vietnam days" (58) which he is afraid to reveal to his psychiatrist. When he receives a visit from Ken Davis, one of his company from Vietnam, who is now seeking political office and who seeks to pressurize him by appealing to the loyalty of mateship not to reveal something he had done during the war, Martin in a fit of revulsion decides to tell all to his friend Colin. And everything that had "festered" (103) inside him since Vietnam flows out—the torching of a village, his witnessing the rape and murder of a young woman, his own cowardice in fleeing the scene rather than trying to prevent the worst from happening, his failure to report the incident, and his shame that "everything important had deserted him at a time when he needed his humanity—love,

generosity ... compassion" (228). That single incident is the source of the guilt which has never left him. The novel ends with him speaking out about Ken's actions in Vietnam (see 260) and fetching Nora back from the home to the house he has bought outside Daylesford, not far from his son and Maria, where he resolves to look after her.

Martin's experience in Vietnam is thus the source of the psychological problems he has to deal with in later life. Before he left on war service, he had had no understanding of war; it had been merely "a distant occurrence involving people with whom he had no connection" (31). By the end of his tour of duty he has gone through a series of horrific experiences beginning with his own first accidental killing of a Vietnamese girl soldier (see 146, 198) and the violent deaths of his mates Barry and Stan, who got blown to pieces before his eyes (see 10, 97, 147), continuing with his reluctant participation in the torching of a Vietnamese village (see 10-11), and concluding with the gang-rape and murder of a village girl (see 224ff) by four of his mates. It is the image of the girl who was raped which returns frequently to haunt him and to remind him that he could have prevented the horror if he had had the courage to do so (see 9, 62, 85, 260).

Apart from the psychological effects of the war on an individual exemplified by the case of Martin, Khan also reminds us of some of the more far-reaching consequences of military conflict, namely those due to chemical warfare. Martin's research into the effects of the war on troops elicits a response from an academic who has investigated the effects of spraying 100,000 tons of dioxin over most of South Vietnam, but who is nevertheless unable to reach any satisfactory conclusion as to whether such exposure can cause depression or physical abnormalities in later life (see 105-106). This misguided opinion is later shown to be false when Ron's second child is "born without fingers" and the horrified Ron attributes this to the fact that "we brought something back with us! ... Something inside us" (45). This tragic development fuels Martin's concern that his own exposure to chemical warfare in Vietnam may have contributed to Frank's depression and may yet affect the health of Maria's baby (see 79, 192).

The representation of Vietnam, the Vietnamese and their culture is essential to the conception of the novel. The Vietnamese appear both as victims in the wartime scenes in their own country and as migrants in the peacetime scenes set in Australia. Martin's encounters with them during the war unsettle him, and not just because they are ostensibly his "enemy." When his company enters a village in search of men, they find only an old woman who in spite of their weaponry defies them with her lack of fear and her unwavering stare, and who grins at them "as if she were privy to some secret knowledge far more precious than anything that they wished to know" (10). The mysterious words she addresses to them seem to express that knowledge:

The angry eyes of the dragon are rings of white fire. It will follow you from behind—under the sea, across land and sky, burrow into your being, live inside you, nibbling for the rest of your life. You too will know what it is to be hunted.
(9, italics in the original)

The old woman's prediction unnerves the soldiers who go on to commit the rape in the next village they come to, but it also foreshadows Martin's later trauma, which is confirmed in one of his subsequent dreams when he hears a Vietnamese voice saying, "War with us over ... You kill no more Vietnamese. Now you fight yourself ... Inside" (38; cf. 189). The Vietnamese villagers themselves are described as patient and unafraid: "Accustomed to foreign men invading their homes" (225), they are cunning enough "to offer [them] harmless intelligence, [to] appear innocent and [to] give the impression of being cooperative" (225). They are also rightly confident that the foreigners would ultimately tire and go home.

The moral strength and resilience displayed by the Vietnamese people is evident too in the Australian scenes of the novel. In a surprising twist of the plot Khan introduces Frank's partner Maria. From the name Martin expects her to be Italian, and he is somewhat taken aback when he encounters a young lady reading the business section of *The Age*, who turns out to be Vietnamese, whose parents were among the first boat people to come to Australia, and who was herself "born on a boat" (67). She nevertheless feels secure in her Vietnamese-Australian identity and, echoing a constant theme in Khan's work, she accepts that she will "always live as a fractured being" (194). The confidence with which she and her father have faced their new lives in Australia while continuing to recognize Vietnam as their home, as a "sacred place" (164), makes a great impression on Martin who, unlike them, has come to regard himself as "a stranger in a strange land" (69). It is above all the strength they derive from their Buddhist beliefs which has helped them to come to terms with their experience of exile and diaspora. They exemplify a life lived on Buddhist principles and they are able to impart their principle of acceptance to Martin through the force of example. "As a child," Maria tells him, "I learned that when there are difficulties that can't be easily resolved, you accommodate them in your life instead of struggling and fighting as though they are enemies. That way problems become a part of every day's landscape" (193). As Mercanti points out, "it is through Maria's honesty and her resilience in surmounting the consequences of war that Martin's quest for self-acceptance is ... encouraged" (6). Martin's growing friendship with her, his conversations with her clear-sighted father Nguyen, and his respect Maria's values both in her own family and in her relationship with his son Frank, prove instrumental in his healing. Indeed, it is one of the greatest attributes—and ironies—of this novel that it is the Vietnamese who prove instrumental in helping to heal a Vietnam veteran.

A major focus of interest with *Homecoming* lies in the way Khan, a writer of Southeast Asian origin, engages with such essentially Australian themes as the country's participation in the Vietnam War and the often terrible experiences of the soldiers who returned home to a country that wanted only to forget the war they had fought.¹² There is much to be found in Australian literature that is familiar in Khan's choice of topic. Many of the themes he addresses are commonplaces to be found in some of the other Australian war novels which focus on homecoming, for example the melancholy and anxiety at the prospect of returning (in Nagle's *The Odd Angry Shot*); the inability of returned soldiers to talk about their experiences (in Jones's *The Rainy Season*); the focus on their postwar psychological problems and trauma (in Lord's *The Sharp End*); the impact of the war on family life (in Johnston's *My Brother Jack*); the marital strife that ensues (in Jones's *The Rainy Season*); the inability to form new relationships (in Stow's *Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*); the failure to

¹² Ham has an informative but depressing chapter on the uncomprehending and often abusive reception which the soldiers met with on their return and their reactions to it. Cf. Ham 560-573.

reintegrate into Australian society (in Stow's *Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*); the long term consequences of crimes such as rape committed during the war (in Lord's *The Sharp End*); the struggle with one's conscience and the burden of moral responsibility for one's actions during the war (in West's *The Ambassador*).

Homecoming is a novel of memory which skillfully interweaves past and present, while leaving unexplained until the very end the cause of Martin's trauma and the unexplained references to the "girl" which occasionally surface in the text. It is remarkable how faithfully the sequence of flashbacks, dreams and nightmares and their sudden interventions in Martin's consciousness reenacts the trauma of a returned soldier. It is noticeable, too, how Khan, like other authors who were not combatants themselves and whose concern lies in the aftermath of war in Australian society, reduces the actual scenes of war in the novel to the essential minimum necessary to motivate the later trauma. A further feature of the novel is Khan's reworking of some of the themes of his other fiction and essays, particularly his interest in flawed characters: "For me," he has said, "flaws in people are far more interesting and offer greater scope for exploration in fiction than virtues" ("Cruising: A Writer's Journey"). *Homecoming* offers examples of several such characters. "Vietnam," Frank says, "is like an archaeological dig. The deeper you go, the more you unearth" (179) and the novel would seem to confirm that. Indeed, a major feature of the book is Khan's particularly sympathetic approach to Vietnam and the Vietnamese. He is sensitive to the cultural and religious differences between Vietnamese and Australians, as we have seen. To the extent that it concerns itself with the situation of Vietnamese erstwhile boat people in Australia and their relationship to their homeland, it is in part also a novel of the diaspora. The Vietnamese presence in Australia is portrayed very positively and it is, of course, they who play a significant role in Martin's healing process and self-discovery. Khan convincingly portrays Martin's somewhat stumbling steps towards reconciling with them as well as the Buddhist belief which sustains them.

In as far as it is about a war, *Homecoming* is also, we should remember, an anti-war novel in the Australian tradition, a work which offers a very clear condemnation of war, of the brutalization and descent into barbarism that it entails, and of what Ron calls his "failure to remain human" (129). At several points in the novel Khan introduces Martin's fellow soldier and poetry lover, Colin, who has written a memoir about his experiences in Vietnam for which he has been unable to find a publisher. Martin dismisses the project out of hand: "There are already too many books about Vietnam" (21), he says. Anyone who has worked on the topic may be inclined to agree with him, but perhaps with *Homecoming* Khan has proved him wrong.

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Geoffrey Davis, MA (Oxon.), Dr.phil (Aachen), Dr.habil. (Essen), has taught at universities in Austria, France, Germany and Italy and held research fellowships at Cambridge University, Curtin University (Australia) and the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin. He wrote his doctorate in German studies on *Arnold Zweig in der DDR* and his post-doctoral dissertation (Habilitation) on *Voices of Justice and Reason: Apartheid and beyond in South African Literature*. He has been actively associated with the Bhasha Research Centre in Baroda, India for the past twelve years. His most recent co-edited books are *Performing Identities: The Celebration of Indigeneity* (2015) and *The Language Loss of the Indigenous* (2016). He is co-editor of *Cross/Cultures: Readings in the Post/Colonial Literatures and Cultures in English* and of the African studies journal *Matatu*. He is a past chair of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS) and of its European branch.

Email: geoffrey.davis@ifaar.rwth-aachen.de