

William J. Searle

Women, Vietnamese,
Other: The Depiction
of Women in Vietnam-
ese Short Fiction

If heaven forces us to be naked,
Then we are naked.
If heaven allows us to have an under-
shirt,
Then we wear it.
—*The Tale of the Kieu*

Writing to artists in 1951, Ho Chi Minh stated: “To fulfill his task, the cultural fighter needs a firm point of view and correct ideas... The goods of the resistance, the country and the people must be considered above all else.” (Linh intro. xi). As charismatic and as patriotic as he most certainly was, Uncle Ho was no literary critic. In later years not all Vietnamese writers could follow his dictate. Even before the celebrated period of liberation in the late 1980s, known as *Doi Moi*, writers, especially women writers, rejected Socialist realism and composed social realism. With the advent of *Doi Moi*, voices critical of the political status quo and the loss of traditional values, like those of Duong Thu Huong and Le Minh Khue, became more strident. A brief overview of short fiction by Vietnamese women reveals a cruel transition from the ideal to a much dicier, much more problematic portrait of the contemporary Vietnamese woman.

One pole of my discussion is delineated by Wendy N. Duong in an article entitled “From Madame Butterfly to the Statue of the Awaiting Wife in North Vietnam.” Ms. Duong stresses the contrast between the delicate portrait of Puccini’s Madame Butterfly who kills herself for love to the Vietnamese legend obviously made of much sterner stuff—the story of the awaiting woman in North Vietnam. According to the legend, a young wife and mother waited and waited for her warrior husband to return from battle, until finally she could wait no longer. But let Ms. Duong finish her story:

But she did not give up. So one day, she carried the child to the top of the mountain, where she could see the panorama of ships at sea and horses galloping through the forests. The woman stood there, holding her child, waiting for her warrior husband, looking at the sea and forests below so that she could spot him on the day the troops would return. She waited and waited and waited, enduring the wind, the rain, the cold and heat of seasons. She forgot all concepts of time or notions of her surroundings. Day after day, month after month, year after year, she stood there.

And eventually she turned into stone, a rock, lonely yet persevering, on top of the mountain overlooking the immense sea and forests of North Vietnam. The Vietnamese gave the rock a name: “The Statue of the Awaiting Wife.” (Duong 22-23)

Thus the ideal of the long suffering, ever patient, ever resilient Vietnamese woman, is the first pole of my argument.

For the other side of the proverbial coin, I turn to Stephanie Fahey’s article, “Vietnam’s women in the renovation era.” Though the essay is socio-economic in nature rather than a literary study, it does point out a reconstruction of women’s image in contemporary Vietnam, one that is dictated more by the global economy than by traditional values. With an economy in the early 1990s increasing at eight to ten percent a year, consumerism among Vietnamese women in the cities has become rampant. Furthermore, according to Fahey, “Vietnamese women seem to be increasingly conscious of fashion and body shape” (238). She notes the origin of beauty contests, aerobics classes, even a modeling agency called, and I swear this is true, CATS, which was licensed in Vietnam in 1995. “Everywhere,” Fahey writes, “one sees beauty parlors and hairdressers, newspapers full of advertisements for cosmetic surgery—face lift, peeling, breast

augmentation—and an endless number of bridal shops” (228). Apparently, at least in urban areas, the historic heroic role of Vietnamese women is being undermined by what can best be called the commodification of women. “It is clear, however,” Fahey concludes her essay, “that the beauty contest is replacing the revolutionary war as the battleground for defining femininities in Vietnam” (245). It is also clear, I might add, that the shift in emphasis has been duly noted by women writers. My thesis is thus a modest one; the portrait of Vietnamese women in short fiction acts as a barometer of social change and a woman’s journey to an urban area will just increase the pressure for transformation.

The French Indo-China War and Its Aftermath

Let us consider the fictional depiction of the early years in the struggle for Vietnamese independence, the French Indo-China War. Nguyen Thi Vinh’s poignant story, “Two Sisters,” was written during the war, but because of French censorship was not published until 1958. It appears in James Banerian’s collection, *Vietnamese Short Stories: An Introduction*, published in 1985. It is worth noting that Banerian dedicates his anthology “to all Vietnamese writers and artists who are still imprisoned or suffering under communist persecution.” The story itself, however, is beyond politics, echoing a legendary chord. In it two sisters, both with infant children, are separated from their husbands. Both are encouraged by letters from their absent husbands to await their return patiently. Dung, the elder sister, is advised by Lam, her husband, an officer in the colonial forces, that if he should be slain, “then do all you can to raise our child to take after me” (60). Much later Nhan, the younger sister, hears from her spouse, Tuan, who writes, “In this stage, there are more duties for me. Take care of the baby and wait for my return. That day our country will be totally independent” (68). In the meantime, Dung learns of her husband’s death defending Hanoi, and amidst relocations to avoid the conflict, the two sisters share child-care duties and learn the trade of weaving to survive.

Though their lives are difficult, united the two strengthen each other. Then Nhan learns that Vietnamese are returning from China to Hanoi, and furthermore someone is watching over their old home. Of course, Nhan’s hopes get the better of her, for it must be Tuan, her husband. Since Dung refuses to return to the city where Lam was killed, Nhan is torn between love for her sister and for her husband. As the two separate, Dung strikes a pose, “standing cold and stiff as a statue” (67), all too reminiscent of the rock formation representing a North Vietnamese woman

awaiting her husband's return. Not finding Tuan in Hanoi, Nhan sees herself as a victim and a traitor, a victim because she was duped by her own hopes, a traitor because she abandoned her sister. The ravages of war prevent her return to her sister who is herself a fatality of aerial bombardment. As the story concludes, a guilt-ridden Nhan remains waiting for her husband.

Perhaps even more wrenching in its depiction of the heroic female is Le Minh Khue's story entitled "A Small Tragedy," written in 1990, and published in her wonderful collection, *The Stars, The Earth, The River*, in 1997. The focus of the story is on the terrible consequences of self-protective behavior—the selfish action of an eventually successful cadre who abandoned his wife and child to the rigors of the land reforms during and shortly after the French Indo-China War.

The narrator of the story, an impoverished female newspaper reporter who makes her living writing sensational stories in contemporary Vietnam, jettisons her article of a son who killed his father, to share in the family celebration, the engagement of her cousin to a wealthy exiled Vietnamese with a French passport. In this context, the sins of her uncle Tuyen gradually unfold. Hitching a ride with three other reporters, she at first learns that her uncle was indirectly responsible for the deaths of thousands. During the American war, against all common sense, her uncle had ordered thousands of North Vietnamese youths to repair bomb craters in broad daylight, a time when American planes always struck. The resultant slaughter of hundreds was termed a "magnificent heroic struggle." Later in 1976, he ordered thousands of young North Vietnamese to work on an irrigation project in a geologically unstable area. When a mountain collapsed, 186 people were smothered to death. His later idea of digging fish ponds during the monsoon tipped the ecological balance causing both flooding and starvation. While the reporters know of these failures, they fear to write about them. As one of them remarks: "In our country things are funny: everything is kept secret. In order to protect someone's reputation, everything becomes vague, no one knows what to make of anything" (188).

As "A Small Tragedy" progresses, however, the narrator gradually reveals her uncle's responsibility for sins closer to home. "I used to think," the reporter writes, "that in old times, people just made up the story of 'The Stone Woman Waiting for her Husband's Return'" (206). But for her aunt, her Uncle Tuyen's first wife, a woman of noble blood, the motif becomes a cruel twist of fate. In the time of the Land Reform Campaigns

of the 1950s, Tuyen's now pregnant wife worked the land alone, simply because "it was forbidden to hire anyone to work for you" (207). Her husband, more concerned for his life and career than the safety of wife and future child, "disappeared into the boiling sea that was politics in those days" (207), abandoning her to her destiny. The narrator writes:

By early 1953, Uncle Tuyen, who had joined the government in the provincial town, could already sense the smell of death pervading the political atmosphere in the countryside. He wrote a letter telling his wife not to worry because he would return when peace was established. (207)

The narrator's mother is imprisoned for trying to provide her starving and dispossessed sister-in-law with food, her father is bludgeoned to death by an enraged mob for the crime of owning a small tract of land, and decades later her brother is fired from his job for daring to mention the murder of his father in those savage times when the phrase "class warfare" became all too real. Before Tuyen's first wife dies of a severe case of tuberculosis, she is able to give up her son to a kinswoman, who, in turn, spirits him away first to Haiphong, then to Saigon, and finally in 1970 to France. Uncle Tuyen resurfaces years later, with a revolutionarily pure new wife and an enviable political status in North Vietnam. He never even visited his wife's grave, the narrator notes, though he could have done so secretly.

Her uncle who had planned his own career and those of his children by his second wife so well—that they had secure positions in post-war Vietnam and he himself a comfortable retirement complete with villa and automobile—had not counted on his first son's return to Vietnam, that son's falling in love with his daughter by his second marriage, and their incestuous living together before marriage. The sad news is revealed to his first son, who flees the scene only to commit suicide in a Saigon hotel. The frame of the story, suggesting the banality of evil, deals with a son who murdered and mutilated his father; in the main tale, the reverse is also true, for a father psychologically maims and indirectly murders his own son. Of her uncle, the narrator writes, "I had never seen a face like this, a melancholy so infinite that nothing in the world could lessen it. Perhaps behind every happiness or every sorrow lies the imprint of a particular culture" (214).

The American War

By 1968, the bloodiest year of the American War, female heroism extended beyond those stoic wives and mothers who waited for their men to return to encompass teenage girls caught, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, in the crossfire. Two Vietnamese women writers, one from the south, Tran Thi Thu Van who writes under the pseudonym Nha Ca, and one from the north, Le Minh Khue, present the war through the eyes of idealistic teenagers. The earlier tale, the tripartite “A Story For Lovers” by Nha Ca takes place during the Tet Offensive in the occupied city of Hue. It first presents the innocent romance between Diem and her fiancé Phan, who intend to marry before Phan’s induction into the military, shortly after the New Year. Quiet, sentimental blissfulness is interrupted by the NVA capture of Hue narrated in Diem’s affectionate, but increasingly desperate letters to Phan. A grim postscript details the extensive suffering of South Vietnamese civilians trapped in the middle of street warfare fought by two implacable foes.

In this story, found in Banerian’s collection, the enemy is clearly the North Vietnamese who summarily execute students, conscript male townspeople as fellow liberators, and force teenage girls, first, to become carriers of ammunition and then later bearers of the wounded. Entire families are either killed outright in the crossfire or become decimated by slow attrition. With no rations allotted to civilians, who can only rely on food they may have stored, hardly enough for a month-long siege, starving dogs become predatory, scavenging dead bodies. Diem and some members of her family decide to flee, while her grandfather and wounded sister remain behind to fend off the dogs from devouring the body of her dead brother who accidentally fell to his death trying to avoid conscription by the North Vietnamese. The postscript reveals that the bodies of her sister, brother, and grandfather were partially devoured by dogs, Diem was killed by a bomb and her body, too, partially eaten by the predatory canines. There is furthermore a gruesome twist to Diem’s promise that “If this ring should ever fall off my finger, I’ll die” (131), for she is found without a finger or ring on it by Phan. We read, “When her body was taken to be wrapped for burial, they found her ring finger lying in her entrails—no one knew why this was so—and the ring was gone” (137). As the story concludes, Phan rides along with an empty bicycle beside him with his own ring tied on its handlebars.

Perhaps more highly motivated, many a North Vietnamese woman volunteered to be in harm’s way, a point amply illustrated in Le Minh Khue’s

story "Distant Stars," a tale in which uncommon valor becomes a common virtue. Listen to the narrator Dinh comment on the random hazards of keeping the Ho Chi Minh trail clear of unexploded American bombs:

It couldn't just be bad luck. [Thao's] body carried nine wounds both big and small already. Nho had five. I had the fewest, only four. I had one scar on my stomach that had been severe enough to consign me to the military hospital for three months. Being buried by an avalanche was normal. (16)

The girls detonate bombs in broad daylight often under fire from enemy aircraft, take pride in not requesting help from men, refuse medical aid for bruises, abrasions, and cuts, and boast about holding their ground, not withdrawing from a strategic hill under bombardment. Yet, for all their heroism, they remain teenagers, dwelling upon their hair and makeup, striking attractive poses to be admired by passing soldiers, and gossiping about male compatriots in the region. They even dream about future careers, but as Dinh notes:

...These things were for later, after the war. When the trail we were protecting here was evenly paved with asphalt. Electricity would flow on wires deep into the forest and timber mills would run all day and night. All three of us understood this. We understood and believed it with a fierce faith. (4)

They were filled to the brim with enthusiasm, filled with love for their comrades, or as Dinh observes: "That was the love of people in smoke and fire, the people of war. It was a selfless, passionate, and carefree love, only found in the hearts of soldiers" (20).

The Postwar Years

Le Minh Khue also bears witness to the disillusionment after the war, particularly with the empty comforts of peace. A case in point is her story "A Day on the Road," in which an unnamed female narrator registers the increasing consumerism not only in non-combatants but also in veterans after the war. In a clever twist, the narrator is the one who went off to war, while her lover Duc stayed behind in Hanoi and remains faithful only after a fashion, for he soon displays a new passion, an acquisitive materialism that shocks the narrator. Even before the end of the war, she notices that his new furniture has a snobby appearance and is even more stunned when he refers to her comrades-in-arms as a "bunch of fanatics"

(40). A month after the war, Duc is enroute to Saigon to live what the narrator refers to as the “glittery life.” “As for Duc,” she caustically remarks, “he went looking for a more comfortable life in a city to whose liberation he had contributed almost nothing” (49).

They are separated for a year during which the narrator notices the increasing buying and selling even on the streets of Hanoi. Revolutionary ideals are soon lost as petty corruption becomes endemic, poor products flood the market, and basic living conditions become virtually unbearable, since government housing is overcrowded and rat infested. Her visit to Saigon to clarify her relationship with Duc reveals a disinterested lover, perhaps one pre-occupied with maintaining the lifestyle he already has:

It was apparent to me that he had attained what he wanted. He had a big sponge to wash his dishes with. He had a nylon broom. An imported nylon broom. An electric rice cooker. All the necessary appliances. Even a plastic toothpick holder. And he wore pajamas at home. They were gray, with stripes. I hated him in those pajamas. (44)

Metaphorically, Duc is a veritable prisoner of material desires.

The narrator wonders what happened to the shy young man, one frightened by wealth of any kind, and contrasts the now transformed Duc with a young female soldier, a naïve country girl, who was killed at seventeen years of age while at her post. Knowing that her relationship with Duc is over, she muses about the past and present, “Such simplicity, that pure rhythm of life that my generation had known and embraced, would be hard to find in the city Duc had come to love” (49). Later she rationalizes that those who participated in the revolutionary struggle were made stronger by their efforts, but her creator Le Minh Khue is quick to illustrate the erosion of wartime idealism in modern Hanoi, and she is not the only woman writer to document it.

Indeed the further one moves into the bowels of Hanoi, the further one is removed from the heroic ideal. In her tale, “Scenes from an Alley,” Khue satirically demonstrates the duality of financial prosperity, material gain on the one hand, moral loss on the other. The casualties of peace are loyalty between husband and wife and that between father and son. Qyut returns from Germany so wealthy that he is able to build a two-story house, the upper half of which he rents to a Westerner, who, it is rumored, pays extra to his landlord for being allowed to bring prostitutes to his room.

“Money makes money, as the saying goes,” (56) writes Khue. After the Westerner drunkenly runs over one of the denizens of the alley, Miss Ti Cam, a mute, mentally handicapped, pregnant teenager, her mother receives one thousand American dollars in compensation. All of the inhabitants of the alley quickly realize that “a blue-eyed, long nosed man was a gold mine” (62).

Quyt now acts as a pimp, bringing prostitutes to the Westerner’s room; his wife not only flirts with him, but at least on one occasion services the Westerner herself. Another neighbor, Toan, who after the war became rich by accepting bribes in Saigon, is now a successful businessman. Like many in his class in Hanoi, according to Khue, he prefers night club life, massages, hookers, a mistress, and two attractive secretaries, one a mini-skirted beauty who pushes her breasts into his back while she rubs his neck. Toan’s only problems are a wife who beats him out of jealous rage and a senile ninety-year-old father with a bladder control problem. At the death of Miss Ti Cam, we read, “Something like the flash of great discovery appeared to cross his face and he brightened up for a moment” (59). Why not, both Toan and his wife reason, leave the old gent outside one night while the drunken Westerner races in? Khue delightfully paraphrases their rationale:

This family was rich already. But who would turn down a few million more? If luck came their way and the drunk Westerner happened to plow into their 90-year old father, they wouldn’t accept only 10 million. No, it would have to be more. Double that. Westerners were very rich. Anyway, the most important thing was to have a legal way to rid the roster of the old man’s name. (61).

In this tale, the waiting North Vietnamese wife is transformed into an angry spouse waiting for her philandering husband to return from his sexual escapades. And there is yet another reason for her to wait. Despite the couple’s best intentions, and the quite accidental braining of the old man by a tossed brick, the doctor tells Toan and his wife: “He can’t walk yet, but he’s still very strong. If you take good care of him, he may even live to be a hundred!” In “Scenes from an Alley,” we have filial piety, that cornerstone of traditional Vietnamese values, in name only.

Relationships in the Renovation Era

In brief, within the confines of Hanoi, the spark between couples is long gone. Take, for example, Duong Thu Huong’s nostalgic story “Re-

lections of Spring,” published in a collection entitled *Night Again: Contemporary Fiction from Vietnam*, edited by Linh Dinh, appearing in 1996, in which we read of a respected economic planner who chose a marriage of convenience over love and now regrets the decision. A car’s mechanical problems force him to visit a tea-shop which in turn opens a treasure chest of memories, for the young teenage girl working there reminds him of his true love, a shy country girl who, twenty years earlier, was always kind to the impoverished student who boarded in the neighborhood. His road to success was both circuitous and spiritually perilous, for it was filled with anxiety, tension, compromises, and ultimately profound loss. His justification to himself depicts the predicament of many a young professional in contemporary Vietnam:

“I really did love her back then...I really did love...” Then why hadn’t he gone back to that town to find her? Finished with his studies, he was assigned a job by the government. Then he had to apply for housing. Then he was involved with a female colleague. Life worries. There was a secret agreement, then the marriage license. That was his wife, unattractive yet dogged in her pursuit of his life, who used every trick imaginable to make him yield to the harsh demands of necessity...And then what? Children, problems at work. A promotion. Steps forward and backward. Years spent overseas to get a doctorate...Everything had to be tabulated. (23)

Returning to Hanoi, he daydreams about his former love incessantly, and suffering from insomnia works on his project late at night. Ironically, as though his teenage lover were his muse, inspiring him to do his best, his project is received with great admiration, with even his enemies “congratulating him” (25). By means of deft brushstrokes, Duong describes his current relationship with his wife. On one occasion, as he daydreams of his true love, his wife asks if he is admiring her. “Yes, yes, I’m admiring you,” he answered, “squashing the cigarette butt in the ashtray.” (23). In much of Vietnamese short fiction, a romantic or heroic past is privileged over the stark present.

Another interrupted automobile trip—perhaps a metaphor of the disruption inherent in modern life—is used by Le Minh Khue in a story entitled “An Evening Away from the City” to further contrast the self-sacrificing past with self-indulgent contemporary life. When the story’s pro-

tagonist Tan and her dearest friend served in the military, they were inseparable. Even at the war's end, they enrolled in the same school. While Vien quickly became pregnant by a medical student and left her studies, the more vivacious and opportunistic Tan climbed the social ladder, making friend after friend of those "notables" who had parents in high positions. Unlike Vien, who married out of passion, Tan marries a considerably older, wealthier man out of convenience.

Realizing that her friend resides in the region where her car broke down, Tan decides to visit her former colleague. Appalled by the two bratty school-age children, and a diarrhea-stricken baby, not to mention the sordid condition in which her friend lives, where the family dog devours the infant's fecal matter, Tan promises to have her friend re-enrolled at school; relatives would have to care for Vien's children, she believes. But Tan's compassion in the country dissolves once she returns to Hanoi. She is so socially active she never inquires about her friend's readmission to school, never bothers to write her, never really bothers to care. A trip to several European countries is just another excuse not to help a former comrade-in-arms. Her kindly, unattractive husband accurately sums up the situation when he thinks "that shallowness could be a kind of crime" (177).

No less self-centered is the female protagonist of Pham Thi Hoai's "Nine Down Makes Ten" who, in excruciating detail, delineates her relationships with nine previous lovers, listing their virtues and flaws, analyzing their temperaments and appearances, recording their treatment of her and hers of them. Seemingly every type of male in Hanoi is on her list: the trustworthy, benevolent government-employed technician, the frivolous musician, the handsome womanizer, the worldly older man, the impassioned idealist, the complex personality disguising itself as genius, the bright egotist, the possessive poet, and finally the pragmatic man of action. The last is the one she truly seems to want to marry, primarily because he reflects her own sense of practicality. As she has evaluated and scrutinized the previous eight, so the ninth does the same to her:

At our final meeting, he said, "In all areas including marriage, I am always faithful to a single measure of value: practical advantage." And on considering this measure, he determined that I was not the one to satisfy his requirement. Now he must bear the responsibility for his heartlessness. (86)

Too young to serve in the American War, having been born in 1961, Pham Thi Hoai, has no sense idealistic struggle, revolutionary fervor, or even sentimental romance to fall back on. In the world of “Nine Down Makes Ten,” men and women make commodities of each other.

The Best Generation

With the exception of one story taking place on the Ho Chi Minh trail, too often, the stories under consideration either deal with city life or a journey returning to it. Le Minh Khue’s final story in her marvelous collection, this one entitled “The River,” reverses the process, as the narrator, a male veteran, returns to the countryside to honor the aunt who raised him, in the traditional Vietnamese ceremony marking the hundredth day of her death. His journey home is a transition from the artificial to the natural, from the trite to the substantial, from modernity to history, from fragmentation to wholeness. As he returns to his roots, he is reconnected to his family, his land, the strength of his people.

Despite the perilous location of the family plot, his aunt and uncle, his surrogate parents, perform triple duty as parents, school teachers, and as citizen workers required to build and rebuild trenches and bomb shelters. The family home is destroyed on three separate occasions by American planes and on three separate occasions rebuilt. During the last B-52 strike in 1972, while the husband was on a week-long labor detail, his aunt gave birth to her last child with her frightened eighth-grade son serving as midwife attentively following his mother’s agonized directions. The same son took care of the family while the father was away, supervised the reconstruction of the bombed out house, and later served in the North Vietnamese Army. Their many children, insufficient teacher’s pay, and constant hardship never detracted from their selfless behavior. The narrator, as an NVA veteran no stranger to hardship himself, muses, “I still wonder if, were I in their position, I would have the strength to do the same” (225).

Reminiscing, wandering back in time, the narrator remembers a childhood haunt, a ruined fortification of the Le Dynasty that his aunt used to take him to. It is appropriate that he remembers a warrior king, as he lights the stick of incense in honor of his deceased aunt, a true heroine, an inspiration to her own family of patriots. The importance of the journey homeward, essentially a spiritual journey, is stressed below:

Just as my aunt had said, my heart felt calm returning to this place. I wanted to lie face down on the ground to enjoy the fresh and healthy taste of the soil, the smell of the earth, so far from the city, so far from the noise, not mixed with the smell of gasoline or nightclubs or the exotic dishes in urban cafes. (230)

Patriotism, loyalty to family, love of native soil, enrich, revitalize, rejuvenate not only our narrator, I believe, but all Vietnamese as well.

In the streets of Hanoi, Stephanie Fahey writes, one finds contradictory images of Vietnamese women. "Images left over from the pre-renovation period of women as war heroes appear alongside the new images of women as objects of beauty to sell 'modern' commodities" (227). While souvenir shops might sell wall hangings of the famous Trung sisters, who led a "short-lived rebellion against Chinese occupation in the first century" and the Women's Museum in Hanoi still displays photographs of female war heroes, "in nearby streets, the magazine *Tien Phong* (Pioneer) reports on forthcoming beauty contests sponsored by foreign firms such as Kodak, Singapore Airlines and Samsung" (227). In any case, the contrast between the two very divergent images, those of self-sacrifice versus those of self-indulgence, and the evolving transition between the two, is well documented by Vietnamese women writers who in their depiction of the Asian female provide a reasonable gauge of social change in Vietnam over the last fifty years.

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