



Postmodern Vietnamese Literature



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[*Abstract*]

This study explores postmodernism in Vietnamese literature. While there has been much dispute among critics regarding postmodernism in Vietnamese literature, postmodernism is now thought to be something that cannot be denied. Vietnamese postmodernism has Vietnamese characteristics and is strongly influenced by American literature. The structure of some Vietnamese short stories is similar to that of some American writers. In the writings of Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Ihab Hassan, for example, we find out many characteristics which are ascribed to postmodern Vietnamese literature. We propose the use of the term 'Lao Tzu discourse' which is to include the main concepts of postmodernism such as chaos, nothingness and fragmentation. We propose that postmodern Vietnamese Literature appeared in the 1940s with the collection, *Fall Spring Poems* (1942), and is also seen with the prose of Nguyen Khai and Nguyen Minh Chau in the 1980s, and the drama written by Luu Quang Vu in the 1980s. There now exists a large group of postmodern Vietnamese writers, like Le Dat, Thanh

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Thao, Bao Ninh, Cao Duy Son, Nguyen Ngoc Tu and Nguyen Binh Phuong, among others.

Keywords: Vietnam; Vietnamese postmodernism; Postmodernism; Lao Tzu discourse; Keyboard writing.

I. Introduction.

It cannot be denied that there is a Vietnamese postmodern literature. As Vietnam shifts to integrate into the world, there is a national desire to create a good reputation in fields ranging from economics to science to literature. The appearance of postmodern literature is indisputable. The question is who is calling it postmodern literature?

II. Literature review

2.1. 'Pen writing' or 'keyboard writing'?

Regarding postmodernism in literature in the past (Lyotard 1979; Jameson 1991; Hutcheon 2002), many in Vietnam opposed it claiming that it was some sort of nonsense of the Western research community and many feel that it was not in keeping with the aesthetics that were encouraged in our literatures. Others very cautiously suggested that postmodern elements did exist in the artistic creations of our countrymen. However, it is now said that postmodernism can be found in Vietnamese literature after the 1986 reform came about, and perhaps a bit earlier.

Material conditions point that Vietnam is in a juncture of postmodernity because of the public access to computers and the internet. Those who have gone "digital" are willing to spend most of their day living in the imaginary world on the screen (including TV) (Baudrillard 1983), and it can be said that in this respect Vietnam is not much different from developed countries. Computers have affected most aspects of human life. This

technology has set forth a series of "postmodernist" reactions in economics, philosophy, politics, etc.. It could be said that most living writers in Vietnam are of the postmodern era because they use computers to write. Few writers write their material by hand nowadays. It would accurate to say that "writing" is almost always "typing", and "pen writing" should be changed to "keyboard writing."

In Vietnam, literary products have tended to be postmodernist when written through the computer. Writers today can now copy, paste, erase, etc., thus writing is no longer the same as it was in the past. Nowadays, writers do not think with pen in hand placing each word in linear time on paper, creating perhaps comprehensible jottings and sentimental pieces following the classical Aristotelian organic unity of effect. "Keyboard thinking" is leaping along with each letter that is typed with rapid progression from phrase to phrase, each passage being cut and pasted quite easily. This has the effect of allowing the author to feel connected to the phenomena. "Keyboard thinking" allows the experience of *verfremdungseffekt* (intermittent) which approaches rule in a liberal manner. "Keyboard writing" uses discontinuous rather than adjacent penmanship, which is random and makes use of chaos rather than order.

Of course, the role of writers and storytellers is now entirely different. Those who are postmodern are intellectual and versatile. They arrange things so well that they do not seem to be creative and the blatant fabrications in fiction is not obvious. A limited narrator is one who says what he knows honestly, concealing what is generally fictional. As a result, we can see the difference between that of the writings of postmodernists with that of "traditional" writers. One might think that with such a difference, the new form would be shunned or even boycotted. Those writers who follow the old ways of thinking consider literary changes to be haphazard, arbitrary, and bordering on anarchy. The struggle will last until the new form is strong enough to supersede the old.

At this time the new—postmodern literature—is gradually

ascending the throne and confirming its position in our country, and writers who are in good form today are no longer engaged in "seamless paper thinking". Their discourse is illusory and they create a chaotic sequence of words in the narration demonstrating their use of "keyboard thinking" (for example, *The Sorrow of War* by Bao Ninh). Their characters have multiple appearances and their lives are oftentimes fragmented. Their plot suddenly mutates and there is no story (*Sitting* by Nguyen Binh Phuong is one example), or there is countless petty discourse intends to show that creativity is superior to gossip; life is sacrificed to chaos. The nature of literature is to tell a fabricated version of the truth, and existence is a text or form of discourse that is "walking about where it wants", meeting the readers' wants. Sometimes, it appears as a funny parody, or a festive situation.

Is Vietnamese postmodern literature an import, is it a domestic evolution? It is both, of course. Vietnam is backward compared to other countries and learning from the foreign literature cannot be denied. In Vietnam, postmodern literature has penetrated local culture. Most Vietnamese writers can perceive the spirit of postmodernism but not its structure or voice. While *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez was first translated into Vietnamese in the 1980s, it was not until the 2000s that *The Old Dead Children* by Nguyen Binh Phuong was written. This novel used the same dual structure [a story in reality (Liem's family) and a myth about his ancestors related to the preservation and use of treasure] and contained sexual themes. But one can see the difference between the two writers by the rough and swaggering voice of the barren, poor midlander of Vietnam. *The Old Dead Children* may be the best work of this "keyboard writing".

Similarly, *The Crystal Messenger* (1988) by Pham Thi Hoai, embodies similarities with *The Tin Drum* (Gunter Grass), by way of its unusual characters, Oscar and Be Hon. This does not mean that Vietnamese literature ranks lower; it does reflect the Vietnamese postmodern writers' use of foreign techniques. We can see the closeness in structure (a type of nonstructure) when comparing *God's Opportunities* (1999) by Nguyen Viet Ha and

Soul *Mountain* (1989, translated into Vietnamese in 2002) by Gao Xingjian. Personally, I found the structure of Nguyen Viet Ha's book better than that of Gao Xingjian's in the way of storytelling and building characters.

In fact, Nguyen Minh Chau admits to imitating Gabriel Garcia Marquez in the way he reproduced and processed his images. And he did produce magical elements in his excellent story *Giat Market*. But the philosophy of his book, which was not oriented towards "loneliness" as in Marquez's work, has been called "paralysis of awareness" because when people get accustomed to slavery as Khung's cow, absolute freedom is quite undesirable. One intended message is that those who are blind and dumb do not know the way, even though the path was previously been mapped out by others.

As with romantic literature, postmodern Vietnamese literature is also a multi-component mixed solution. Classical, modern and postmodern elements are all to be found. This is the identity of Vietnamese postmodernism.

2.2. Is 'uniqueness' postmodern?

Each literary era boasts of trademark uniqueness. *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616) was, for example, unique at the time of Renaissance though in later years would lose its uniqueness. *Inspiration in Autumn* by Du Fu (712-770) was excellent and unique in the Chinese middle ages. *Chi Pheo* by Nam Cao (1915-1951) was unique in the Vietnamese modern period of 1930-1945. A rule of literature is constantly to create uniqueness and later on displace it. Literature is poor when it does not transform. It may as well be considered dead.

In general, we usually consider uniqueness as a quality that defines a classic. This however does not follow because each period has its own unique style. Nothing is generally unique forever.

Postmodernism in Vietnam establishes its own aesthetic of uniqueness. It should be noted that many writers now write in

the modern style rather than the postmodern style. Some of these writers are artists who write to express their inner selves, in the style and manner of old expressions. In this context, anyone who does not write in the postmodern style is lazy, unable to engage in innovative thinking, or someone who wants to write something "popular" for the monetary reward. Such writers are not expected to be innovative. They choose to follow fixed paths.

A unique living writer today is Nguyen Ngoc Tu (1976-). Though this "keyboard" writer has just produced some collections of short stories, it is through *The Endless Field* that she joined the ranks of the greatest Vietnam writers. Making her work unique is her reworking of a famous story about a field that was full of magic but very familiar to readers. It seems that in each of the Vietnamese people remains a field of unconsciousness, a depth of the soul where they empathize, feel happiness, and suffer in these fields of a thousand years. Nguyen Ngoc Tu has clearly created a new style of writing, a certain postmodernist "uniqueness".

Many feel that the best Vietnamese novel of the twentieth century is *The Sorrow of War* by Bao Ninh (1952-). Ninh associated the feeling of sadness with war, death, and destruction, while many Vietnamese writers of his time insisted on a more positive engagement. He was, of course, immediately criticized. This opposing view did not deny that the war was fought to unify the country. He depicted soldiers' lives which was often hidden. For this, Bao Ninh made a new view of history. The immense loss and sadness of victory provided a new dimension to the experience. Obviously, victory brought joy. But the aftermath also compelled for a collective reflection on the physical and emotional damage brought by the war. This is a uniquely postmodernist perspective in Vietnamese literature.

When it comes to postmodern writing, most researchers around the world take note of unique innovations, and these are sometimes extreme. For example, Donald Barthelme (1931-1989) presented something unique with his short story *The Glass*

Mountain in which he numbered each sentence. Postmodern literature has innovative features which have specific cultural and individual markers and it is also associated with cryptic-ness and challenge. Because of this, any "cryptic" literary phenomenon would always be labeled as postmodern. In contrast, anything that is understandable would not be called postmodern. This is true for the most part, but not absolutely. A unique phenomenon is considered postmodern if it meets the following criteria.

2.3. Lao Tzu discourse: 'nature', 'chaos', 'games'

Lao Tzu (5th-4th century BCE) taught people to "live naturally" (Forbes, A.; Henley, D., 2012) but he did not mention some things about "chaos" or "games". However, if we "live naturally", we will inevitably be confronted with the two aforementioned principles as the nature of nature is "chaos" and also follows "game" rules. When referring to the basic principles of postmodern philosophy, we use in this discussion the *Lao Tzu discourse*.

Postmodernism is associated with innovation and there is no repetition within its creative subject. So, "innovation" itself has a criterion that could be called postmodern. However, innovation in literature does not meet all the time any of the four criteria: the *world is chaotic, life is nothing, life is a text, existence is a game*. These four are our basic presuppositions of what the postmodern is.

Actually, no postmodern work satisfies all four categories and if it meets just one of the four, that work can be called postmodern. Postmodern writers follow "nature" in feeling and reasoning. Conspicuous expression is not there in the narrative process. Whether the narrative is in the third or first person, postmodern narrators try to resign overall and eventual voice. Their discourse is what is most used by characters in the story. They become witnesses but at the same time hesitate in expression.

"Self-dialogue" is the method most often used by narrators

in postmodern storytelling. But that method always has the characteristic of trying to betray itself. A discourse which does not use a "dual voice" is not likely to be postmodern. This narrative often creates parody, irony, or humor in the text. Laughter in postmodern literature is self-depreciating laughter. It is both awakening and reflective.

Nguyen Huy Thiep's short stories contain a lot of this parodic laughter. He is a master Vietnamese writer of postmodern short stories. "Keyboard" Thiep (1950-) is good at using reflexive laughter to wake and warn people about shortcomings and mistakes which could be avoided. Thiep's parodic images are of kings, generals, and workers from history, literature, and life.

Respecting the chaos of the world, writers look at life as it is. The natural movement of life will answer for itself in all situations. In postmodernity, artists intervene to make the situation more complicated. Modern artists are seen as using the process of participation in order to stabilize the chaos. We call this process *Confucius discourse*. Meanwhile, as mentioned, the postmodern aesthetic process is to be described as *Lao Tzu discourse*. Accordingly, chaos was natural for all existence so no intervention is taken to escape it. Artists cannot and should not be involved. Postmodern writers have done this well. Characters in their novels are built up from fragments, a lack of coherence being the tradition. They deny any unique brightness. They decentralize characters and do not build 'nail characters' to hang, hook the other characters onto. Each character has a destiny and dependence only because of their selection.

With *Decentralization* and *multi-subjectivity*, the postmodern is influenced by the ideas of "chaos" and "games". According to postmodern writers, life is always chaotic in nature and order is only temporary, and always has its "rules". Meeting both requirements, any literary work can stand in *Lao Tzu discourse*.

Poetry pioneered in the postmodernist territory. If Dadaism (known mostly through poetry from 1916 to 1922) was considered as the beginning of postmodernism (Hassan 1998: 591), the germ

of postmodern poetry in Vietnam was New Poetry (Han Mac Tu, 1912-1940, as an example). It was not until the second generation that postmodernism was really revealed in the poetry of Hoang Cam (1922-2010), Tran Dan (1926-1997) and Le Dat (1929-2008). In the collection of poems *Shadow of Words*, the poem of the same title by Le Dat, endeared many readers. Yet few people feel that they know what that poem means. It is generally known that the poem employs the complex intertextuality of love stories, stories of loss, separation, and desire of happiness

Being apart, now I can see you
As a small young childhood
You gone white full bent missed frame
Rainy seasons few clouds of fall
Restless garden in season blossoms go away
You are still around but where are you
Afternoon at Au Lau
shadow of words shakes bridge standing

Now postmodern poetry is essentially a continuation of surrealistic poetry. Dadaism poetry was so innovative and reckless that it ignored the ability of readers to understand it, and so it died at a young age. However, Surrealistic poetry which was born later (after 1924) has had long-lasting vitality.

Postmodernism in Vietnamese literature at present is not notable because there are so few good Vietnamese writers. In fact, there has never yet been an excellent postmodern Vietnamese writer. However, it is felt that there does exist a Vietnamese type of postmodern literature.

It should be noted that in current Vietnamese literature, only modern writing is easily published and available to the public. Most of readers like stories which are exciting and

coherent, or are about human effort overcoming all obstacles. Few have an interest in reading creative works which only suggest.

Happily, although there are few progressive Vietnamese writers, there is a perceived ongoing evolution of aesthetic thinking. Over the decades, some familiar names may be listed—Nguyen Khai (1930-2008), Nguyen Minh Chau (1930-1989), Le Dat; and a next generation writers Nguyen Huy Thiep, Bao Ninh, Luu Quang Vu (1948-1988), Nguyen Quang Thieu (1957-), Pham Thi Hoai (1960-), Cao Duy Son (1956-), Ta Duy Anh (1959-), Nguyen Binh Phuong (1965-), and Nguyen Ngoc Tu. Their works are considered to be the best of Vietnamese literature over the last three decades.

Cao Duy Son is known for *Old House on the Spring*. The story was written in the minimalist style of American postmodernists such as Raymond Carver (1939-1988) and Tobias Wolff (1945-). The story focuses on a teacher's loneliness and unhappiness (a typical Raymond Carver's character). He spent all his life devoted to benevolence, righteousness, and beauty but eventually he was left with nothing. The plot is not unusual, but the way it was told is wonderful. In addition, the story contained highly iconic images. Besides being a teacher he was also an intellectual and a normal man in certain circumstances. Because it is not presented clearly, it is pleasurable for postmodern readers who found themselves to be respected and to have a voice in creative literature.

2.4. When did Vietnamese postmodern literature first appear?

It is difficult to answer this question. Different researchers have different opinions on this. Personally, when I compared earlier domestic literature with foreign literature to attempt discovering the distinguishing characteristics of Vietnamese literature, I came to think that Nguyen Khai was a pioneer in the field of innovative prose from modern literature to postmodernism. This can be seen when looking at his transition from epic inspiration to normal life inspiration. Along with that process, there is the

transformation of the central role: from the images of the soldiers who praise the movement romantically (*Conflict, 1959-1962; Peanut Season, 1960*) to the little civilian touched with satire, irony, nostalgia (*Meeting at the End of Year, A Hanoi Person*). The conversion process is revealed in the titles of the stories. Nguyen Khai made his postmodern project more pronounced with his *It is God Who Smiles* in 2003. Although this is a memoir describing his writing life, it shows that his vision is no longer as robust as it used to be.

In the world of poetry, postmodernism was embraced by Le Dat and Hoang Cam. There was also a group of surrealists who composed a collection titled *Fall Spring Poems* (1942). Due to the distinctive nature of the poetry, it is considered to be an innovative and pioneering verbal art form. What poetry achieved was followed by narrative and drama. The said "games" philosophy in postmodern creativity is expressed in poetry very clearly. The poems had its own rules. We live in time, and time is transparent, with no beginning and no end. We know that people and everything depend on time but there has perhaps been no one who has paid attention to the color of time. It was not until Doan Phu Tu (1910-1989) wrote *The Color of Time* that we learned the time has its color, has a wealth of tone, has variations by itself.

Vietnamese drama is extremely weak with only a few names that can be mentioned: Doan Phu Tu, Nguyen Huy Tuong (1912-1960) and Luu Quang Vu. Vietnamese people are good at poetry. Poetry appears everywhere. There is always poetry at any time. Poetry exists with farming, fighting, love, forlornness, and even with quarrels. The Vietnamese cannot live without poetry. Therefore, Vietnamese's poetry is fairly good. It's always at the top of the list of Vietnamese art forms but drama could be said to be at the bottom of that list. The Vietnamese drama of Nguyen Huy Tuong is a historical achievement and Luu Quang Vu was a noted postmodern dramatist. Unfortunately, he died young.

Nguyen Khai, Nguyen Minh Chau, Thanh Thao (1946-), and

other "keyboard writers" will have no invariant ego as artist but they did have accomplishments in each different period, each realizing the plight, the beauty and the happiness in life. It should be noted that changing the creative look did not mean turning ones back on the past. It is simply a new awareness, a new integration into the mainstream of a new form of artistic thinking in response to the changes of the country and humanity.

2.5. Chaos in "The General Retires"

Chaos is one of the key concepts of postmodernism. Researchers use it as a core criterion to distinguish the postmodern sense of modernity. This feature is easily seen in any postmodern literary works. While many writers present chaos through the structure and imagery, Nguyen Huy Thiep has shown chaos at once in the title of his short story *The General Retires*.

Chaos, in the sense that it is something disordered and not a rule or inconsistency, is a combination of many differences that are not subject to the judgment of others. In *The General Retires*, the general, the son, and the daughter-in-law are all aware of an existing chaos. The general is fiercely opposed to this state of being. The daughter-in-law calls the status quo "chaos" but she accepts the general's view and adjusts to his ideas. Meanwhile, the general's son gets a western education and is does accept the concept and existence of "chaos".

Being aware to the contemporary life, Nguyen Huy Thiep didn't choose to give his story the titles of *The General in the Battlefield* or *The General Goes to War*. Instead he chose *The General Retires*. This title says a lot. Immediately, readers will form a mental picture of the old general. His gestures will no longer be imposing and must show only a helplessness and bitterness before the world that is moving quickly in a way that is completely different from that of the past. The problems the general faces are not about war and death but about living, and yet the general's concern is not about his life but that of his descendants.

When talking about "generals", we might imagine a bright, central position from which a majestic general is leading everybody. But this story is about a retired general. This means he has no power and no strength. There has been a dissolution of power. This dissolution in a life parallels narratives in earlier chronicles of epic works. Quite importantly, with the dissolution of power, moral values which are no longer appropriate cease to exist.

The general's name is Thuan. The narrator presents his background clearly: "My father, Thuan, was the oldest son of the Nguyen family. In our village, the Nguyens are a very large family with more male descendants than just about anyone except for maybe the Vus. My grandfather was a Confucian scholar, who, later in life, taught school. He had two wives. His first wife died a few day after giving birth to my father, forcing my grandfather to take another step" (Thiep 2003: 38). Even with that, the general's life isn't presented seamlessly. Mainly, the general is portrayed a short time after he retired.

The title *The General Retires* implies that this is the story of a general who has retired, lost all power and lives in a "labyrinth" of life. But he experiences few problems related to actual retirement. A few events are presented quite simply: At the age of 70 (a high age) the general left the army to return to a house which he built eight years previously in a suburban village. His wife had been senile. The general's son, the narrator "I" named Thuan (and this name is mentioned only once) did the telling. He was 37 years old, married, and he had two daughters, Vi and Mi. His daughter-in-law named Thuy, was a doctor in the maternity hospital. The general's material life was prosperous in a time of renewal in the country. Shortly after he went home, the general's wife died. The general wanted to do the housework but his daughter-in-law would not let him. Later, the general visited his former unit and died on the battlefield. His body was buried in a martyrs' cemetery somewhere in Cao Bang.

According to this sequence of events we will see a picture

of a general that is not unlike that of other retired generals. Accustomed to living a military life, the general is seen as having a loving wife and children, and he shows that he can feel the suffering of his servants by wanting to do manual work with them. He wanted to live as an equal to everyone (he gave his clothing away to all equally), he did not accept crime (an event about a fetus) and he had his own view of what is an unethical action (Thuy has an affair with Khong). In short, even after he retired the general continued to be a shining example of morality.

However, he himself is a tragic person. The tragedy derives from his unfamiliarity with the community and the chaotic movement of life. It can be said that the general embodies infinite loneliness. Throughout his life he lived in selflessness for a noble ideal, but when he went to live in the village, the general found himself to be "outside of life". In peacetime, society has its own criteria and people have different goals. As is shown in the work, in peacetime people wish to get rich and acquire material things, and people lose those qualities that were once thought to be good.

The general's helplessness is expressed wherever he goes and with whoever he forms a relationship. That is, of course, except on the battlefield, which has been a full life for him. It is no coincidence that the narrator has the general sacrificing his body on the battlefield. Death in battle also carries postmodern nuances, and thus no one knows the reason for the general's death or the manner of his death. This is completely different from traditional epic narratives. In *The General Retires*, only a few words are written about the general's death as family members receive the news. Avoiding a grand narrative of death is a method of postmodern writers. If anyone compares the events in this story with the nation's history he can not know whether his death is related to France, the United States, or China. The death of the general is really a tantalizing sociological reading.

Blurring the death, the narrator does not focus on causes

or events or the funeral (this is how solemn epic narratives treated heroes), showing that praise for the community is not the main object of this work. Here we can say that Nguyen Huy Thiep is one of the first Vietnamese writers to reject the use of epic in prose. Rather, he poses and solves problems of postmodern individuals.

This view reflects national social rules. During the war, "community" as the ideal always comes first. Before the time of death, before the moment when one has a choice between freedom or death, a true patriot has only one option and that is to die for national independence and freedom—"my death for my country". In peacetime, life is no longer so simple. Earning a living and competing in the activities of daily life causes human factors to emerge. The "community" does not have a single supreme principle. In peacetime, people have a great many options, and personal choices tend to be pragmatic, and benefiting only the individual. However, their choices, positive or negative, depend on how they perceive and assess. If they are embedded in a community, people will have few options and their thinking must conform to local ideals. When living with personal criteria, a wider variation in lifestyle and goals is possible. This manner lifestyle creates chaos in society. In this context it is extremely difficult to find a voice of unity. The general speaks with the voice of power and ideals. The general's son doesn't speak with the same voice. The general's daughter-in-law speaks in yet a different kind of voice, and the children's different still. All of these create the chaos, the "multi-voice" within a house that has "the shape of a barracks" but is not a barracks.

So, there is an implicit conflict between the principles: the first is harmony and equality which is of the general while the other is the practical calculations of postmodern people. As a result of this conflict, we can see that Nguyen Huy Thiep had come to feel the validity of new principles in a new age, that of postmodernity.

The subjects of postmodernism, the "grand narratives" (such

as living principles and moral and aesthetic models, terms formulated by F. Lyotard), which were legitimate in social life, have now become obsolete. This is a very important aspect of postmodern awareness. Once an issue is accepted in a community, it becomes a criteria against which everything else can be evaluated. With postmodernists, there is no absolute right or wrong and there is no one thing that is legitimate. There is the risk that once everyone in the community speaks in a perpetual discourse, it will be the only standard of the time. Such discourse can easily penetrate into the unconscious and become an unconscious power. Consequently, there comes to be little criticism within a society and growth and stability are hard to attain.

Therefore, postmodernists continuously break away with grand narratives. In this case, development within society, literature, and the arts occurs on the boundary of grand narrative innovations, and during the shift between petit and grand narratives.

Returning the time of Nguyen Huy Thiep's composition, we could see that Vietnam was undergoing a comprehensive renovation of the economy, science and technology, along with arts and culture. In addition, Vietnam has been importing many foreign products and ideas to raise local living standards. This process has created many crossroads in lifestyle and in the perception of human beings. So, people have come to accept a new aesthetic criteria—a postmodern criteria, and this is gradually being legitimized in the lives of everybody.

In this context, Nguyen Huy Thiep chose a daring way that soon became mainstream in Vietnamese literature: the vision, the feeling, and the writing of postmodernism. An important problem of humans in post-war times is experienced by the general who has lost the untouched majesty of an eagle with wings spread in the open sky. This happened simply because the general grew to be old and power was transferred to another generation. When a command economy shifts to that of a market economy, a new style of management is needed, along with a new way of

thinking and living. The general's descendants were able to adapt to the new reality.

Only the general's situation is pitiful. When a society makes a sudden shift from a command economy to a market economy, the people of that society will focus on this new possibility: *earning money*. Hence the villa (a prior symbol of beauty) that the general built after a lifetime of hard battle was transformed into a garden-pond-barn used to raise and sell dogs, fish, and plants (the income being the new kind of beauty). The general's family lives on the resource of the garden. Thuy is a householder, so her voice is full of power. She is like a *general* in that house. Women took the throne and so many paradoxical things happened. Thuy committed adultery and her husband did not dare say or do anything. He wandered through the streets as he waited for his wife to finishing her liaison to go home. In addition, Thuy told people that they should dig up jars in the pond to show her absolute power in the general's house. It should be noted that Thuy is a doctor and therefore an educated person. This is a time when more women are educated. With knowledge and money one has strength and power, and Thuy has both. In this case the story could be renamed *Thuy, the King or Female King*.

Thuy and her husband's generation seem to enjoy life, but the generation of the general thinks that it is disordered. Especially bad is the relationship between Thuy and Khong. The general says to his son, "You're meek. And that's because you can't stand to live alone" (Thiep 2003: 55). There is serious dialogue between the general and those of the following generations. When a granddaughter innocently asked him about the words of a song, "The road to the battlefield is beautiful at this time of year, Grandfather?" the general shouts. "Your mother! Know-it-all!" (Thiep 2003: 56). Of course, the general doesn't abuse the grandchildren who are very innocent. Instead he criticizes the author who wrote the song or the teacher who put the song into his grandchildren's mind. The problem here is not about who is right or wrong—it is about perception. The general sees the differences in society after the war is over. He doesn't

like it but he can't do anything about it. The new society is operating with its own discourse, not unifying chaos but with chaos being commonplace.

A characteristic of postmodern literature is the listing of events with dizzying speed. Narrators show events and the readers receive and absorb. If the readers don't think, they can not understand the works. So, in the postmodern time, reading is synonymous with creating. Reading can no longer be enjoyed leisurely, heart to heart, as it could before. One can no longer trust the author to spell everything out clearly in his work. In the flowing lines of numerous events, we get many things to think about.

Thuy is a doctor at the maternity hospital where abortions are done and the fetuses are fed to the dogs. This is so shocking that even people who have a good imagination find it hard to accept. However, this could happen in real life and this reappears in the story obsessively. I do not know how many doctors do this (only a few?) but Nguyen Huy Thiep presents this detail in this story to show a moral difference in postmodern times. The writer has made a legend of the "difference" in human life.

Or when telling a story about a poet named Khong, the narrator uses only the name *Khong* (in Vietnamese the name means *Confucius*) but behind that there is a terrible collapse of an idol. The name makes readers think of Confucius, the sage and founder of Confucianism, a humanist who specializes in kindness, wisdom, and faith. One line that he is famous for is *Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself*. But now, the narrator tells of the poet Khong who charmed the other's wife, and he gives him a job that smells—"he worked at the fish sauce factory" (Thiep 2003: 54). By associating these things in the readers' mind, this serves to disgrace the saint.

In a poetic manner, the narrator dwells on the 'I' who was almost cuckolded by the wife (or had been cuckolded) and gives bitter comments about the randomness and irony of fate. "I went to the library to borrow some books as an experiment. I read

Lorca, Whitman, etc. I vaguely felt that exceptional artists are frighteningly lonely. Suddenly, I saw that Khong was right. I was only pissed off that he was so ill-bred. Why didn't he show his poems to somebody else besides my wife?" (Thiep 2003: 55). "The dedoublement" appears in this review, the narrator admits it *right* on the one hand, and abuses *ill-bred* on the other hand. It is a state of postmodern sense. The spokesman isn't going to disadvantage of himself by criticizing an opponent. So judgements are not from one view but from many views. The multi-value point of view is also an expression of postmodern chaos.

Returning to the general's loneliness, the house that he spent money to build was designed to be half villa and half barrack. A balance between the two was, of course, alien to him. The nature of strangeness lies in the difference between *unique* and *multiple*. The general's mansion is inhabited, but it became a cluttered mess. It was a good place to run a business rather than a place for an old person.

By looking at the relationships of the neighbors, the reader can also see that things are topsy-turvy. They suggest solitude. The general's villa is far from a rural area but it is not near a city. This type of chaotic space is neither familiar nor unfamiliar. A multipolarity is also seen in people's relationships. The relationships of the general and the children with his relatives have not gone well. Because he was so far away for so long, memory of him in the villagers' minds are only that of a proud general. Meanwhile, the relationship between Thuy, who takes the rich person's view, and Bong, a poor person, is quite complex. Bong rants, "Damn those intellectuals! They look down on working people. If I didn't respect his father, I'd never knock on their door" (Thiep 2003: 43), but whenever needing money he'd come by to borrow. Thus, what the characters do and what they say does not match. This has created a "fragmentary" nature in the character with loneliness being the inevitable result.

In the story, the general isn't the only one feel lonely—even the narrator, who is considered to be a trendy intellectual. He exclaims, "I felt very lonely. My children also seemed lonely. And

so did the gamblers. And so did my father" (Thiep 2003: 51). But loneliness of the "I" seems to be temporary. His words came after the death of his mother. But the biggest threat is to the kids. When Mi and Vi saw Bong open the dead grandmother's mouth to put money into it (following the superstition that the dead need money to carry them to the afterlife), Mi asked her father, "Why do you still have to pay for the ferry after you've died? Why were coins put in Grandmother's mouth?" Vi said: "Father, does it have to do with the saying, 'Shut your mouth, keep the money'?" I was crying: "You kids won't understand," I said. "I don't understand myself. It's all superstition." Vi said, "I understand. You need a lot of money in this life. Even when you're dead" (Thiep 2003: 51). The dialogue between the 14-year old child and the 12-year-old child shows the face of the times. In peacetime, people have come to pay more attention to money and every family wants to have more money. The two children view life through an innocent child's eyes and they say things that adults feel that they should not say.

To think a little further, we see that Vi's questions make metaphors about the way of living (Shut your mouth and keep the money) and the *object of daily life* (to obtain more money). That is a way of life that is completely foreign to the general who is somewhat of an intellectual like "I" who seems to spend his days buried in scientific topics. As a result, the more strange a person feels, the more chaotic life seems to get. He would have a hard time taking part in daily life and he'd find it difficult to find his direction in society. Feeling strange among people comes from not having the same voice as the majority of people. That must be true throughout the history of mankind.

The story has created a labyrinth for human perception. The funeral scene of the general's wife had wrapped in it the tragi-comedy of fate and the variety and polyphony of life: "My house was only five hundred meters from the cemetery, but if you took the main road through the village gate it would be two kilometers. On the small road it wasn't possible to push a hearse so the coffin had to be carried on the pallbearers'shoulders. There were thirty of them taking turns, with many men my wife

and I didn't recognize. They carried the coffin casually, as if it were a most natural thing to do, as if they were carrying a house-pillar. They chewed betel nuts, smoked, and chattered as they walked. When they rested, they stood and sat carelessly next to the coffin. One man, who was all sprawled out, said, "It's so cool here. If I weren't busy, I'd sleep here until nightfall." Bong said, "I beg you guys. Hurry up so we can all go home and eat" (Thiep 2003: 51). There is a panache and slowness of modern men as well as an innocence of postmodern people. The death, a tragic loss for the family, is to strangers only a death like any other and the funeral work that they are doing is just common work, too.

Above we mentioned that the general was somewhat unfamiliar to the children. Now, we will discuss something that is an Eastern characteristic. The general had only two granddaughters and that was thought to be a tragedy. His son had no sons. The narrator did not explain this but, in the Eastern way of thinking, when a man has no son, the family will likely not be able to care for the older generation and there is a meaningless sense of striving. In addition, when the general asked his granddaughters to bring him some easy-to-read books, he was told that there were no easy-to-read books there. This indicates that the general was feeling loneliness. The house was not for him, and life was not for him. His place was on the battlefield and he fell down on it. This was the first death of a soldier in Vietnamese postwar literature of postwar to have occurred without fighting.

But this is not unreasonable. Soldiers have difficulty adapting to post-war life and, even when they are alive they seem to have died. The general's death was also legendary, perhaps a metaphor for the death of a lifestyle to show the transformation of people. A new generation is born while the intense wars have been fought, and values change as life changes.

Thuy became a general. Thuy represents that which is postmodern. It is important that Thuy has accepted the changes

of the new era in her life. In this work, Thuy is a dedoublement character, a peculiar kind of postmodern character. Thuy's bad behavior as exemplified in the story of fetus, her affair with Khong, and her indifference to the death of her husband's mother, show a variation of a way of life which is practical and existential. But readers can not deny that Thuy has virtues. The general disliked dogs and so she stopped feeding them, she gave money to Co and his daughter so they could move his wife's grave, and she gave money to Bong too. But behind these good deeds there is a subtle coldness associated with the postmodern lifestyle. It is also a fact that Thuy hesitated before she made a decision. Thuy is unhappy that her husband's father did not like the way she got her money. Thuy regrets the relationship she had with Khong. Thuy did not like when her husband gave money to Bong. The woman who felt many moods also experienced many emotions. She is an active person. In this view, Thuy suffers the most and is a typical example of a postmodern person.

The main reason for her turmoil is that Thuy helped support the family. In this role, Thuy is thorough. In the house, everything large and small is managed by Thuy. The husband was only a shadow figure. When mourning the mother, or when there was anything to be solved, the "I" always had to rely on Thuy to do it. That is completely contrary to custom of "respecting men" in Vietnamese tradition. Thuy has really become the "king" of the story.

Nguyen Huy Thiep has addressed "respecting women" in his writings. His heroines are always brilliant, albeit they are very small in a busy life. Nguyen Huy Thiep seems to believe in women who live in a vast, chaotic and disorderly life. Reading *The General Retires*, we can see that besides the hustle-bustle of life, there seems to be ground water flowing which is forming a new criterion for life. That flow gets a good deal of its energy from Thuy. The woman has many mistakes (according to the traditional view) but at the same time she is also a person who proposes the beginning of postmodernism for a new era of the nation.

After the general retired the world did not have a "king" anymore. The unstableness of values and lifestyles proposed a neutral solution between the old and the new, between right and wrong, and between good and bad. A world without kings shows the chaos of that era and it asserts new values which are similar to the old values in that existence is both independence and dependence, with each breaking the other. Of course there will be no principles or ultimate truths in the realm without a king of chaos. However, chaos would be a premise for a new order, one which would be better and more useful.

III. Conclusion

It is time to declare that there does exist postmodern Vietnamese literature for otherwise we are just "ourselves" of several decades ago. In the context of the "love materials" of today, spiritual values are overlooked (literature in Vietnamese schools and life reflects this lack) so postmodern literature has difficulty finding a favorable place in today's Vietnamese life. Postmodern literature is only read by highly educated people because of its intellectual nature. It is a matter of taste—who seeks this experience and knowledge. To appreciate something more than the mundane, readers must wish to grow and expand, to wish to read the unknown, and to be able to explore and understand their own feelings. "The knowing" of postmodern literature is democratic and autonomous. Without that, there is no land to live for even unique, invaluable literary works.

Acknowledgements

This research is funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED) under grant number VII1.99-2012.18.

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Received: May 5, 2014; Reviewed: June 9, 2014; Accepted: June 15, 2014