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# **SUVANNABHUMI:**

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SUVANNABHUMI means “The Land of Gold” in Pali, which location implies Southeast Asia.  
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# Special Topic on Vietnamese Literature





## FOREWORD

### VIETNAMESE LITERATURE: DIVERSE READINGS BY THE INSIDE



**Guest Editors** Chi P. Pham\* · Uma Jayaraman\*\*

This special issue explores Vietnamese Literature in relation to non-Vietnamese literary works, some of which are part of the canon in English. Over the years, Vietnamese literature has been interpreted using western perspectives. It has largely been taught in international academia. Research has been mostly published by international scholars, with a handful of Vietnamese scholars writing from the diaspora. In other words, the difference and diversity in political, cultural, and educational backgrounds of these academics shaped popular perspectives and interpretations of Vietnamese literature.

Understandably, these widespread views seldom approximate cultural and political realities of the Vietnamese experience. At

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\* **Chi P. Pham** is a Literary Studies researcher at the Institute of Literature, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences. This project is part of her long-standing intellectual curiosity about the invisibility and marginality of people and associated knowledge in Vietnam and elsewhere that are not normal but politically, socially, and historically associated. [chiphamvvh@gmail.com](mailto:chiphamvvh@gmail.com)

\*\* **Uma Jayaraman** is a diaspora scholar and has published both critical and creative works in her discipline. She currently lives in Singapore where she teaches academic writing at the National University of Singapore. Uma Jayaraman is the writing adviser for the special issue, and gave extensive input to the contributors in this respect, remaining cognizant of the unique flavor that the Vietnamese figures of speech bring to the English usage seen across the articles. [umajay90@gmail.com](mailto:umajay90@gmail.com)

present, scholarship from Vietnam is almost invisible as far as international perception is concerned. Further, both the inability and unwillingness of Vietnamese academics to publish outside Vietnam due to cultural, political, and educational reasons also cause a significant absence of perspectives from insiders. Thus, the current perception of Vietnamese works is limited to social allegories, depictions of the mainstream politics, or illustrations of the exotic.

This special issue includes interpretations of Vietnamese literary works by academics from Vietnam, with the aim of presenting the insider's view of Vietnamese writings. The contributors of this issue are researchers or professors in governmental academic institutions in Vietnam. Though these scholars largely grew up and studied in Vietnam, their experiences as postgraduate trainees and visiting research fellows in other countries exposed them to other languages and cultures such as those of English, French, Russian and the Chinese. The exposure helped them bring both unique and authentic perspectives to works of their homeland. The model that each contributor adopts to study Vietnamese literatures in the global context is based on the "juxtaposition model," (Friedman 2011: 753-762) where they compare a Vietnamese text to a well-known text from a foreign culture and language. This is in order to identify potential cultural, historical, and philosophical dialogues and establish a more diverse perspective of Vietnamese literature that goes beyond the political, historical, and geographical division.

The guest editors advised the contributors on their work and were keen to retain the register of articles in this context. Some of the expressions and idioms unique to Vietnamese speech and writing have been retained to reiterate the purpose of the issue, which is to present an insider's view of local literature.

## Reference

Friedman, Susan Stanford. 2011. "Why Not Compare?," *PMLA*, 126(3): 753-762



## Re-writing World Literature through Juxtaposition: Decolonizing Comparative Literature in Vietnam



Chi P. Pham\* · Ninh H. Do\*\*

### [ *Abstract* ]

Postcolonial critics have criticized Comparative Literature for exclusively studying literatures from the non-Western world through Western lenses. In other words, postcolonial criticism asserts that theorists and practitioners of comparative literature have traced the "assistance" of the classic "comparison and contrast" approach to an imperialist discourse, which sustains the superiority of Western cultures and economies. As a countermeasure to reading through the comparative lens, literary theories have offered a "juxtapositional model of comparison" that connects texts across cultures, places, and times. This paper examines practices of Comparative Literature in Vietnam, revealing how the engagement with decolonizing processes leads to a knowledge production that is paradoxically colonial. The paper also analyses implementations of this model in reading select Vietnamese works and highlights how conventional comparisons, largely based on historical influences and reception, maintain the

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\*\* Researcher at the Institute of Literature, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences. In this paper, Dr. Ninh H. Do provides sample cases of juxtaposing three Vietnamese literary works alongside three non-Vietnamese literary works. [haininhph@yahoo.com](mailto:haininhph@yahoo.com)

colonial mapping of World Literature, centralizing Western, and more particularly, English Literature and in the process marginalizing the others. Therefore, the practice of juxtaposing Vietnamese literary works with canonical works of the World Literature will provoke dialogues and raise awareness of hitherto marginalized works to an international readership. In this process, the paper considers the contemporary interest of Comparative Literature practice in trans- national, trans-regional, trans-historical, and trans-cultural perspectives.

**Keywords:** juxtapositional model of comparison, decolonization, Comparative Literature, Vietnamese Literature, World Literature

## I . Introduction

Comparative studies emerged in Europe in the context of the discovery of the New World and increased contact with non-Western peoples and cultures that led to colonialism (Cheah 2009: 536). Postcolonial critics have criticized comparative studies for tending towards Western colonialism and producing knowledge about the "other" as homogeneous, rigid, and lifeless. This was all with the aim of constructing the East-West divide where the non-West was constructed as inferior and the West superior. In other words, from perspectives of postcolonial criticism, theorists and practitioners of Comparative Literature recognized the "assistance" of the classic "comparison and contrast" approach to the imperialist discourse that promotes and retains the superiority of Western culture and economy. Instead, postcolonial critics in Literary Studies offered the "juxtapositional model of comparison" in order to move beyond imperialist practices in traditional comparison. This model connects literary texts across cultures, places, and times, moving "toward a *conjunctive* or *relational* model informed by cross-cultural, cross-geographical, and indeed, world-scale contacts, juxtapositions, borrowings, and bartering" (Moraru 2014). According to Susan Stanford Friedman, this manner of Comparative Literature promotes



a “juxtapositional model of comparison” and is determined by accidental contiguity, genealogical isolation, and ethical encounter.” (Friedman 2011: 785). This paper examines practices of Comparative Literature in Vietnam, revealing how they have engaged with the decolonizing processes and paradoxically fallen into essentialism, a tendency in knowledge production that postcolonial scholars identify as a type of imperialism. The paper also analyses some implementations of this model in approaching some Vietnamese literary works. Conventional comparisons, largely based on historical influences and reception, contribute to maintaining the colonial mapping of World Literature, where Western Literature, particularly English Literature, is dominantly visible, with everything else remaining invisible. Meanwhile, ways of juxtaposing Vietnamese literary works with canonical works of the world will reveal and provoke potential dialogues and encounter, creating in international readers, particular those who read in English, an awareness about the literatures from other parts of the world. The perception of World Literature thus becomes ethnically inclusive.

## **II. Decolonizing Orientation in Comparative Literature in Vietnam**

Postcolonial critics opine that Comparative Literature exclusively studies Literatures of the Other or of the Non-Western World from standardized perspectives of Western Literature and scholarship. Conventionally, comparatists are supposed to “defend” Literatures of the Other for “development or democracy.” However, what is problematic is that those goals are only from Western standards—the flag that the West has always held high in its journey to maintain and develop its economic, political, and cultural dominance over the world since the nineteenth century. With this comparison, Western Literature is considered to be orthodox and the standard of literariness (“mainstream or canonical literature”); and, literatures outside Europe are considered not worthy of being the object of literary study (Gugelberger 1991: 505). Moreover, traditional Comparative Literature implies the inequality between the “dominant side and the Other,” the “hierarchical order,” and

instrumentalism, all embodiments of imperialist knowledge (Felski and Friedman 2013: 1-30). However, in the 1960s, when the national liberation movements in colonial countries won consecutive victories, the West began to doubt its intellectual hegemony over the world. Western scholarship “[chose] to designate the unfamiliar, but for the limitations of its own perspectives” (Gugelberger 1991: 507). In this context, Postcolonial Criticism emerged and has been “one of the most dynamic areas in contemporary literary studies” (Nixon 2005: 233).

From perspectives of postcolonial criticism, comparative literary theorists and practitioners have recognized the “assistance” of the classic “comparison and contrast” approach to the colonial discourse about the superiority of Western culture and economy. Gayatri Spivak, a pioneer of postcolonial criticism and professor of comparative literature (Columbia University, USA), highlights the “ethical unacceptability of violence” implicit in these descriptions of other literatures and cultures in Western comparative scholarship. It relates to what she addresses as “the unexamined, dull anthropologism of cultural relativism” (Spivak 2009: 613-616). Professor of literary studies and postcolonial theorist Graham Huggan (University of Leeds, UK) argues that portrayals of the alien, the uniqueness, and the superiority of cultures and literatures outside the West—a consequence of the classic “comparison, contrast” method in comparative literature—constitute an effective tool of imperial power. This form of comparison implicitly assumes the inferiority of non-Western cultures and literatures in the developing world set by Western standards (Huggan 2001: 1-30). Similarly, Edward Said, a pioneer of postcolonial theory and a leading comparatist argues that stories about the East are always formatted in such a way that it can become the East of the West, so that “we,” the West, can “possess and control” it (Said 2014: 19).

Theorists of comparative literature, who are also pioneers of postcolonial criticism, argue that it is necessary “to reverse the epistemic violence inflicted on the cultural other that has resulted from the complicity between knowledge production and colonial/neocolonial domination” (Cheah 2009: 536). Comparatists need to overcome the domination of political conceptions of space

and time when approaching literatures outside the West. Walter Dignolo proposes the decolonial methodology of comparison. This comparison points out political biases and interests in traditional comparative methods, analyzing the network of colonial powers in processes of knowledge production (Dignolo 2013: 99-119). Dignolberger asserts that Western comparatists "have to learn to live with" or "become part of" the literatures from outside the West, treating them with respect, as part of the World Literature. He is of the view that by accepting the position of other literatures on the map of World Literature, highlighting significant cultural otherness, "we hope... to end colonialism and neocolonialism, political and mental" (Dignolberger 191: 506).

Comparative Literature, as a science that studies literatures of different languages, has been extensively and systematically introduced and practiced in Vietnam. Evidently, there exist many monographs and edited research books about theoretical issues and implementations of Comparative Literature in Vietnam, especially since the 1990s. Considered to be achievements are the monographs *Những vấn đề lý luận của văn học so sánh* (Theoretical Issues of Comparative Literature, Social Science Press, 1995, 178 pages), *Lý luận văn học so sánh* (Theory of Comparative Literature (Social Science Press, 1998, 227 pages), and *Nghiên cứu văn học lý luận và ứng dụng* (Studying and Implementing Literary Theories (Hanoi University of Education Press, 1999, 262 pages) by Nguyễn Văn Dân. The first decade of the twenty-first century saw the publication of the following books: *Văn học so sánh – Lý luận và ứng dụng* (Comparative Literature-Theory and Application, Social Science Press, Hanoi, 2001, 801 pages), edited by Lưu Văn Bổng; *Từ văn học so sánh đến thi học so sánh* (From Comparative Literature to Comparative Poetics (Literature Press, Hanoi, 2002, 371 pages), edited by Phương Lưu; *Văn học so sánh – nghiên cứu và dịch thuật* (Comparative Literature-Research and Translation, National University Press, Ho Chi Minh City, 2003, 343 pages), edited by of the Faculty of Literature and Journalism, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City; *Những bình diện chủ yếu của văn học so sánh* (Main Aspects of Comparative Literature, Social Science Press, Hanoi, 2004, 423 pages), edited by Lưu Văn Bổng; and *Văn*

*học so sánh nghiên cứu và triển vọng* (Comparative Literature, Studies and Prospects, Hanoi University of Education Press, Hanoi, 2005, 439 pages), edited by Trần Đình Sử, Lê Nhâm Thìn and Lê Lưu Oanh. The second decade saw Lưu Văn Bổng's editing of the 618-page monograph *Văn học so sánh - Một khoa học kết liên phức hợp* (Comparative Literature-An Interdisciplinary Science, Social Science Press, Hanoi, 2017); and Lê Từ Hiên's editing of the 419-page book *Văn học so sánh - Từ ô cửa đến chân trời* (Comparative Literature-From the Window to the Sky Horizon, Social Science Press, Hanoi 2017). Most recently, in 2020, literary theorist Trần Đình Sử published the monograph *Cơ sở văn học so sánh* (Bases of Comparative Literature, Hanoi University of Education Press, Hanoi, 2020, 235 pages). Over and above, there are several articles that introduce, translate and study Comparative Literature in journals from the 1920s to the present.<sup>1</sup>

Noticeably, most practices of Comparative Literature in Vietnam tend towards the cultural, historical, and social contexts of the literary works. In other words, Vietnamese comparatists implement the work of contextualization. Such a method is seen to be useful in examining influences and inheritances among literary works of different cultures. The dominating method is visible in Nguyễn Văn Dân's definition, which identifies three main research objectives of Comparative Literature. These are direct relationships (intercultural influences and borrowings); similarities other than direct relationships (the similarities between cultures arise not from their influence but similar socio-historical conditions); and independent differences" (Luu Van Bong 2001: 44). Trần Thanh Đạm, in the article "Văn học so sánh với chúng ta" (Comparative Literature for Us), also agrees with this point of view, and defines the goal of Comparative Literature "from its birth to the present" as "to study literature as a field of cultural and artistic exchange of people within and between communities through the ages" (Trần Thanh Đạm 2003: 13). Theorist Trần Đình Sử defines Comparative Literature as the research discipline that aims to "determine

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<sup>1</sup> Information of this paragraph is drawn from records at the National Library in Hanoi and in publications by Lưu Văn Bổng (2001), Trần Đình Sử, Lê Nhâm Thìn and Lê Lưu Oanh (2005), and Cao Thị Hồng (2013).

relationships of exchanges, influences, and transfers among values as well as new creations that are not repeated between different literatures in the world.” He asserts that “no literature can exist without its relationship with other literatures” (2020: 1). These arguments show that researchers in Vietnam focus on the historical connections between the works presented for comparison and focus on the historical and social contexts associated with the birth and survival of the literary works.

Saliently, Comparative Literature theorists and practitioners in Vietnam emphasize what can be addressed as the national mission of Comparative Literature, that is, Comparative Literature is seen to aim at raising the status of national literature in the wake of rising cultural interference and immigration in Vietnam and around the world. Authors Trần Đình Sử, Lã Nhâm Thìn, and Lê Lưu Oanh write that without Comparative Literature, we will miss the chance of recognizing the status, position, and prestige of our national literature in the world communities of literatures. "Without comparative literature," the group of scholars asserts, "we lose the ability to appreciate self-created beauties and potentials of our national literature in the face of constantly migrations of ethnic groups from Europe and Asia to this S shaped-land" (Trần Đình Sử, Lã Nhâm Thìn, Lê Lưu Oanh 2005: 4). In the preface to his monograph *Cơ sở văn học so sánh*, Trần Đình Sử argues similarly: "Implementing comparative literature is first to gain internationally updated definitions of literature and second is to realize the position and identity of our national literature in the world literary map. Thus, comparative literature is particularly essential in the context of present-day globalization which threatens the existence of national cultures, embodied in national literature" (2020: 1).

Even in implementing the parallel model of Comparative Literature, a model that studies literatures "without actual relationships, the parallel study is likely to place more emphasis on the importance of cross-country literary study" (Cao 207: 40). Vietnamese researchers still aim to highlight national identities that are demonstrated in national literature. Revealing "relations of aesthetic values among communities" and "the commonality in thought, emotion, psychology, and aesthetics" between Vietnamese

literature and others provide Vietnamese scholars with the opportunity of indicating universality and the humanity of their national literature (Trần Đình Sử, Lê Nhân Thìn, Lê Lưu Oanh 2004: 10). Thus, the parallel comparison is seen as a method of promoting the status of the national literature on the world literary map. In other words, Comparative Literature in Vietnam carries a political mission that is to affirm the existence and development of the national literature.

Such political mission is explicit in works that compare Vietnamese Literature with literatures from China and France, the countries that once colonized Vietnam. These works include *Từ văn học so sánh đến thi học so sánh* (From Comparative Literature to Comparative Poetics, 2002) by Phương Lưu and *Việt Nam và phương Tây tiếp nhận và giao thoa trong văn học* (Vietnam and the West: Reception and Exchanges in Literature, Education Press, Hà Nội, 2007) by Đặng Anh Đào. These highlight the identity and richness of Vietnamese Literature. Lưu Văn Bồng, in his latest book, quoted above, compares Vietnamese Socialist literature with Soviet Literature, arguing that the former plays an important role in the development of this literary movement in the world, and thus deserves the attention of international readers. In general, discussion and practice of Comparative Literature in Vietnam largely highlighted the uniqueness, difference, and superiority of Vietnamese national literature. In other words, in Vietnam, national literature constitutes the aim of practices and theories in Comparative Literature.

Underlying such national orientation in Comparative Literature is the emphasis on the aspect of context in Literary Studies in Vietnam. Put differently, attaching literary works to their inherent historical, cultural, and social contexts becomes the primary concern of Vietnamese theorists and practitioners of Comparative Literature. They have given comparative literature a political mission, which is to enrich the national culture and literature and make that culture and literature potentially comparable to those from other countries, particularly those from the West. Indeed, the political mission of Comparative Literature in Vietnam engages with ongoing decolonization, a process that aimed to remove the colonial regime and its legacies, by building and maintaining an idealized homogenous and

hegemonic nation. Regardless of historically differing regimes in the Vietnamese government, the fate of the nation, particularly national sovereignty and homogeneity, still constitutes the overriding, ultimate goal of “good” Vietnamese writers, both scholarly and creative. Even in the time of Reform in 1986, political documents of the Party-led government insist that all cultural and creative activities must contribute to the nation’s socialist construction and independence (Đảng cộng sản Việt Nam 1993: 54–55). In general, the quest for national sovereignty and homogeneity remains the central concern of Vietnamese nation-makers, both intellectuals, and officials. In this context, practices of Comparative Literature in Vietnam that aim to construct and promote the existence and value of national literature, reflect and engage with the continuous decolonization in Vietnam.

Paradoxically, this objective demonstrates that Comparative Literature in Vietnam, despite aiming at countering Western hegemony implied in traditional Comparative Literature, still relies on the imperialist perspective that underlies and maintains hegemony. This is the perspective of the political division of space (a division of national territories) and of the hierarchy among those divided territories. Lưu Văn Bổng emphasizes that those practices are imperialist, particularly in the context of increasing global migrations. He writes: “We cannot oppose Western hegemony by alternating it with an Eastern hegemony, or Asianism, Africanism, or Latin Americanism.” He suggests that “*we*” should be alert, equal, and sincerely respectful in references and connections with the world, which transforms due to cultural exchanges and the integration of people (2005: 239-240, emphasis added).

Ostensibly, Comparative Literature in Vietnam takes national literature, not the “trans-, inter-cross” or accidental, random interaction between literary works of different cultures and languages, as the object and purpose of research. In other words, *contextualizing* literary works in their historical, social, cultural, and textual contexts remains the principle for Comparative Literature in Vietnam. According to Christian Moraru (professor at the University of North Carolina, USA), such tendency embodies the colonial vision of space. Under this vision, the world is dichotomized and

segregated into the world of "us" and the world of "others," "developed, modernized" and "backward, undeveloped." In the field of literature, such vision echoes in the way of a "separation pattern" based on the divide of central and peripheral texts, the texts here and out there, the texts of our culture and other cultures (Moraru 2014).

### **III. Juxtaposition as a Way of Decolonizing Comparative Literature**

In the decolonizing mode of Postcolonial Criticism, international practitioners and theorists of Comparative Literature have proposed methods of re-approaching "world literatures" to overcome the imperial hierarchical relations of knowledge. According to Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, "world literature" is a thematic approach to literature, whereby it is possible to include authors of various periods and cultures, unaffected by political spaces such as center and periphery or Europe and non-Europe (Thomsen 2008: 61-102). Likewise, Vilashini Cooppan considers "world literature" a product of globalization; each literature has echoes of another literature and from another era. Therefore, there is no spatial and historical division between literatures of different languages (Cooppan 2004: 10-36). Pascale Casanova defines "international literary space" as a way of looking at texts in relation to collections of texts, literary works, and aesthetic debates. In this space, a given work enters a harmonious relationship with other texts and finds the foundation for its originality and uniqueness; further, it not only uncovers similarities and differences but also finds patterns and models to which all texts belong (Casanova 2004). This is a way of looking at the interactions and interdependencies between texts belonging to different localities; these interactions and dependencies transcend traditional boundaries of language, culture, and history. Thus, under Postcolonial Criticism, recent discussions and implementations of Comparative Literature have formed an attempt at decolonization; they desire to end the dominance of Western culture and knowledge by promoting the appreciation for non-Western literatures.



In this context, the juxtaposition model is one of these efforts to decolonize traditional Comparative Literature. The model is one of the strategies of comparatists in escaping imperialist and colonialist concepts and knowledge about World Literatures. The model is proposed by Susan Friedman in her article "Why Not Compare" published in *PMLA* 126.3 (2011). Friedman appears to be influenced by Gilles Deleuze' and Félix Guattari's concept of "rhizome" when she emphasizes the method of the *decontextualization* of comparison. This comparison does not consider the different geographical-historical and cultural associations of the texts. Instead, this method analyses connections of texts from different cultures, places, and times; bringing texts from one context to another without being concerned with their geographical-historical and culturally unrelated adherences. Based on Derrida's view of "unconditioned" attachments and the "non-closure of contexts," Friedman explains that a literary text has many potential contexts unrelated to the language, ethnicity, era, or species to which the work belongs. Decontextualization—by placing the work in relation to other unfamiliar works—is a way of revealing other latent contexts of an object, as well as explaining that a literary text has many *potential* contexts which are not just linguistic, national, temporal, or generic; comparisons based on decontextualization are a way of making visible other potential contexts of a text usually made invisible through a comparison based on contextualization. Ways of "transplanting," "writing anew," "cutting" or "pasting" a text in another text and context will bring about changes of rethinking familiar and initial assumptions of texts being compared, suggesting alternative appreciations of the texts, and thus making them forever new. With the juxtaposition model, she argues that texts are capable of continuously generating new meanings, depending on interactions and the parallels that arise when texts are randomly placed beside each other.

Friedman synthesizes three ways of juxtaposition in Comparative Literature: "collision," "reciprocal defamilization," and "collage." Collision is a way of reading out connections and differences that arise from the disparate and different historical and geographical contexts of two works. In this comparatists must

"listen, speak, and live with" diverse communities and new ways of thinking that emerge when "extremely juxtaposing" disparate, non-conflicting but not compatible works. Reciprocal defamilization accepts the unfamiliarity or the strangeness that emerges in comparison, thereby developing a sense of symbiosis and coexistence of different cultures. According to Friedman, breaking away from familiar meanings derived from familiar contexts makes the compared texts parts of a larger system of meaning; these texts themselves have the potential to open their doors to other influences and scopes that emerge in the comparisons. In this way, the compared texts enter a dialogue with each other because they acknowledge the existence of things different from them. Thus, this approach has the potential to untangle the antagonistic relationship between "We" and the "Other" that sustains the imperial domination of knowledge. Lastly, Collage, Friedman writes, is borrowed from dadaism and modern poetics, which juxtapose unrelated sentences. This method maintains the distinct specificity of each compared work, rejecting hierarchical order and instrumentalism, all with the aim of confirming new generalizations based on points which the texts share with each other. Friedman uses the equivalent terms "cultural juxtaposition" or "cultural collage" to refer to extreme juxtapositions of texts that come from different cultural, geo-historical regions. Putting texts side by side—studying their comparability and incomparability—gives rise to both new textual and contextual meanings.

Friedman and other comparatists believe that the juxtaposition model helps to escape from the imperialist knowledge implied in the classic "contrast and compare." In another article, Friedman (2013) highlights that such substitution is necessary because traditional Comparative Literature has its roots in the ambition to acquire encyclopedic knowledge shaped by nineteenth-century humanistic thought in Europe. The way of reduction ignores the uniqueness of the compared texts, making these texts only variations of a common normative framework and relying on an underestimation of these cultures in relation to other cultures. The juxtapositional model will help to avoid the assessment that Western Literature is the standard when considering literary works outside

the West. Besides, this model helps to make literary works, regardless of regions and cultures, visible and audible on the map of World Literature.

Comparing unrelated literary texts conforms to the postcolonial politics of space that Sara Upstone highlights in her book *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel* (2009). According to her, spatial politics has been deeply rooted in the politics of the nation; an awareness of territorial boundaries involves colonial control. Postcolonial reading, as a way of postcolonial resistance, offers a fluid and open form of space in attempts of re-envisioning the colonial divide of the world. Or in the words of Morau, the postcolonial re-envisioning of space aims at revising residual imperialist visions of the world embodied in "a separateness-based model shaped by the center/margin, "in here"/"out there," our culture/theirs, and other similar *disjunctions*" (Moraru 2014). Accordingly, spatiality in postcolonial reading is seen in a widely divergent definition, which refers to not only physical aspects (such as politically-bound locations) but also to conceptual aspects (such as texts themselves as spatial entities) of space. Upstone's postcolonial reading of space potentially provides this special issue the possibility of reading across culturally different texts for potential communications and connection. All aim at making marginalized literary works visible to world readers.

Traditional Comparative Literature—dominated by the context-based approach—has become powerless in the face of global migration—crossing political, geographical, and conceptual boundaries—of literary currents, flow of ideas, and \flow of people. Furthermore, as said, comparison in general, and in Comparative Literature, in particular, have been re-evaluated by postcolonial critics. Accordingly, the comparison is unable to escape from judgments that conform to hierarchical binaries such as center-marginal and developed-undeveloped. Scholars of Comparative Literature start feeling the "complicity" of comparative literature with colonialism and ethnocentrism. Friedman and her collaborator, Rita Felski, emphasize that the "contradiction and comparison" model has led to the condemnation of Comparative Literature as a "collusion" or unity with colonialism and European

centralism (2013: 1). Specifically, Comparative Literature resembles the process of assimilation in colonialism as it assumes of a common ladder for the development of all human cultures, where countries outside the West is always on the lower rank and all its diversities are cut, molded, and reduced in order to conform to Western standards. Meanwhile, the juxtaposition model respects the random and uncertain interaction and dialogue between unfamiliar literary works. With respect for difference and unfamiliarity, and an emphasis on the meaning of interaction and dialogue between unfamiliar works, this model contributes to dissolving Western intellectual hegemony and imperialist judgments about foreign literatures that are implicit in the traditional "comparison and contrast" practices of Comparative Literature.

On the other hand, sticking to the traditional "compare and contrast" mode of Comparative Literature brings a methodological crisis in an era where cultures are brought closer together than ever before due to the proliferation of new media and forms of migration (Felski and Friedman 2013: 1). In other words, traditional Comparative Literature becomes powerless in the face of global migration, crossing the political, geographical, and conceptual boundaries of flows of texts, ideas, and people. By making it possible for unfamiliar works to interact, collide, understand each other's differences, and create new meanings from those relationships, the model reflects the movements and interactions that appear to be unimpeded by geographical and political boundaries. The juxtaposition model makes Comparative Literature essential in the age of globalization. Friedman (2009) asserts that Comparative Literature increasingly becomes urgent than ever in many fields, including Literary Studies, where the process of globalization has developed comparative analyses of literature and culture at the transnational or planetary level (2009: 753).

The juxtapositional model of Comparative Literature has not been studied in Vietnam. The juxtaposition of Comparative Literature—a way of separating works from their adherent contexts, placing them next to unfamiliar works in search of new meanings and potential contexts—has not been introduced yet in Vietnam.

Randomly placing Vietnamese literary works with those coming from different cultures will generate new and potentially significant dialogues in multiple literary or non-literary contexts. The aim is to reveal meanings and contexts that are latent within their pre-existing, conventional contexts. The attempt by scholars of Comparative Literature to juxtapose canonical and non-canonical texts adds visibility to hitherto invisible non-Western literatures. This way of “reading without maps” would revise the colonial *canonization of world literatures* (Den Tandt 2005: 17-32). For instance, putting the novel *The Soul Factory* (*Nhà máy chế tạo linh hồn*, 2020) by Nguyễn Nguyên Phước (1976) next to the long story *Castle* (1926) by Franz Kafka (1883-1924), regardless of their historical and geographic disconnections, exposes them to a discussion about ways of discussing hidden, invisible powers. The character Lâm in *The Soul Factory* applies for a job at the Soul Factory. He receives the job without providing any identity-related documents. Right from the beginning, he has been full of doubts about the factory’s work of producing souls. Lâm tries his best to find out about the factory’s strange works. He even approaches a girl working in the factory, and another girl residing nearby to get information and provoke them to escape, all while satisfying his sexual needs. However, like all the other workers in the factory, the girls, either intimidated or satisfied with their existing lives, refuse to run away with Lâm. In the end, Lâm exits the factory alone, anxious about the threat of terrible punishment awaiting him. The juxtaposition of *The Soul Factory* with Kafka’s *Castle* provokes thought about the existence of invisible powers across temporal and spatial boundaries, which unreasonably threaten the peace and safety of human beings. These invisible powers imprison human souls, destroying their aspirations, and demotivating their efforts. They are omnipresent, knowing everything, controlling everything, and making people fearful, inferior, complacent, and silent. The two novels remind human beings about their eternal anxiety, confusion, and insecurity living in a modernized world.

Secondly, juxtaposing the Vietnamese novel *Primordial Stage of Beings* (Thoạt kỳ thủy, 2004) by Nguyễn Bình Phương (1965-) and the American novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1926) by William

*Faulkner (1897-1962) reveals complex evocations about the psychological world of human beings. Both works center around characters who are mad. The Sound and the Fury includes continuous internal monologues of members of the Compson family: the youngest brother Benjy has been suffering from a mental illness since childhood, while the eldest Quentin is always entertaining thoughts of suicide; the third son Jason is cruel and selfish. Following the ambiguous, disconnected, and chaotic stories of each of these "psychologically disturbed" characters, readers gradually unveil a world full of sounds and fury, of mysteries intense but deep. The world visualized by the insane Benjy, one this is filled with sounds, images, and scents perceived by primitive instincts, becomes timeless, confusing, and hazy (Anderson 1990, 311-324). Similarly, the world of the mad in Primordial Stage of Beings by Nguyễn Bình Phương is filled with psychological flows of Tính, character with an unusual mentality and mood. Born to a family where the father is alcoholic, rude, and grumpy, Tính has evolved a habit of gnawing dishes, killing insects, and looking at knives and fire. Around Tính are also unusual people—the former soldier Hung with a traumatic brain injury; the eccentric writer Phùng; among other crazy people. Comparing The Primordial Stage of Beings and The Sound and the Fury reveals the social criticism of the former, as the latter is widely perceived as a reflection of American society in an era of turmoil and social decline. Considering The Sound and the Fury in this manner makes Primordial Stage of Beings a reflection of war trauma prevailing post-1975 Vietnamese society. Nguyễn Bình Phương explores the depths of the unconscious, tracing the evil and violent identities of people through haunting images, like the owl being swept away in a river, a dog's eyes as yellow as the moon, and the color blood red. The shadow of war appears shortly in narratives of the veteran Hung, in memories of people, and through the atmosphere of enlisting in the army. However, it lingers in people's mental and material worlds, in the sequelae of Hung's wounds, in the sobs of those who sent their loved ones off to the battlefields, and in the unjust deaths. Placed side by side, the two novels potentially provoke conversations about the decline of values that tie people to their families and society, and the reemergence of threatening wild human instincts.*

Thirdly, the play *The Blue Chrysanthus over the Marshland* (Hoa cúc xanh trên đầm lầy, 1988) by the nationally-recognized playwright Lư Quang Vũ (1948-1988) includes elements of science fiction: the invention of robots to fulfill human beings' lack of lovers and companions, as well as robots' journey to escape from the humans to turn to the natural world. The play ends with a message that the land where the blue chrysanthus grow and blossom is the homeland of robots. The story about modern robots with true emotions and love and fighting against people's domination provokes dialogue with the canon of science fiction by Jules Verne, Robert Anson Heinlein, Herbert George Wells, and Alexander Romanovich Belyaev. Comparing *The Blue Chrysanthus* with the Czech play *R. U. R. (Rossum's Universal Robots, 1920)* by Karel Čapek provokes a dialogue about the invention of robots and how it reflects humans desire for mental and physical freedom. It is possible to read through the works the familiar critique against scientific discoveries and associated industrialization and scientific materialism, both engaged by science fiction (Ball 2011: 163). On the other hand, the two can be read as a record of human desire to escape the world of suppression and surveillance brought up by modern science. In *The Blue Chrysanthus*, the character Hoàng creates a robot in the image of his former lover (Liên B) and also of a friend (Vân B). Both reflect Hoàng's desire to obtain the love and the friendship he lost in a love triangle that involved him and real Liên and Vân. Moreover, in inventing two robots of different functions, Hoàng shows his ambition to live differently than those around him who are common and miserably enslaved. In creating robots who are "completely new, noble, loving, and merciful" (Lư Quang Vũ 1997: 400-401), he intends to transcend his situation. Presenting Lư Quang Vũ's play in this manner offers a new way of reading Čapek's depictions of robots awakening into the uniqueness of humanity. Humans have the capacity to feel and to create. Juxtaposed, both works discuss human existence as they cross historically-bound critiques against science and industrialization.

Conventional comparisons, largely based on historical influences and receptions, contribute to maintaining the imperialist mapping of world literature, where Western Literature, particularly

English Literature, is dominantly visible and the other literatures are invisible. Juxtaposing Vietnamese works with those that are not geographically, historically, and linguistically related to or influenced by them helps to deconstruct forms of hegemony, and guides reading towards equality and mutual respect for knowledge production across the world. Vietnamese Literature, when placed beside classic literary works, produce new meanings that can even converse with those canonized in World Literature. More interestingly, when placed next to Vietnamese works, these classic literary works are exposed to new contexts and new meanings. Thus, with the juxtapositional model, the map of World Literature becomes more inclusive and dynamic, taking into account literary works from diverse cultures around the world.

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## The Preponderance of Indigenous Experience Or the Naivety of Modern Man over the “Trap of Nature”?:

Juxtaposing Nature in *The Story of Pao* (Ngô Quang Hải)  
and *Into the Wild* (Sean Penn)



Duong T. Le\*

### [ Abstract ]

Derived from the juxtapositional model of Comparative Literature, this article analyzes two movies, *The Story of Pao* (Chuyện của Pao, directed by Ngô Quang Hải) and *Into the Wild* (directed by Sean Penn), using eco-criticism and focusing on two specific aspects: looking for the relationship between “culture” and “nature” and questioning the ideology that puts people at the center of the natural world. Specifically, the article points out similar tones in discovering and praising the beauty of nature, and at the same time, focuses on explaining the “disagreement” and “harmony” in behaviors of different communities towards Mother Nature in these two films. Finally, *The Story of Pao* and *Into the Wild* are both read as discourses that participate in the repositioning of human beings in the natural world. The purpose of juxtaposition, therefore, is to seek a new existential dimension for the works, providing an opportunity to uncover and reveal hidden layers of meaning of each text.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, nature, civilization, wilderness,  
decontextualization

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## I . Introduction

*Why not compare?* This question, taken from the title of Susan Stanford Friedman's article, becomes the inspiration for this study. Is it impossible to put two unfamiliar and incompatible works side by side in an attempt to find a common ground between them? In practice, this approach is prone to skepticism from traditional comparative thinking, but from the juxtapositional model of Comparative Literature that has been developed in the West in the early twenty-first century, placing unfamiliar works side by side gives an opportunity to reveal hidden meanings, and to a certain extent, even creates more new meanings.

In juxtaposing two movies, *The Story of Pao* (2006) directed by Ngô Quang Hải (1967- ) and *Into the Wild* (2007) directed by Sean Penn (1960- ), and discovering filmic conversations in terms of ecological issues, the article emphasizes the relationship between "culture" and "nature," and then calls into question the anthropocentrism which dominates Western thought since ancient times. This article focuses on comparing two aspects, namely, the aesthetic viewpoint and the behaviors of different communities towards the natural world in the two above-mentioned films, once again re-examining the dialectical relationship between nature and man. In fact, there is no connection between these two works, whether overtly or implicitly in terms of space, time, or plot. *The Story of Pao* narrates the story of a young girl growing up in the mountain of Northeast Vietnam in the 2000s, while *Into the Wild* talks about a young American in the 1990s. But when removed from traditional contexts of geography, history, and culture, and placed in a new contexts that promise collisions, interactions, and sometimes even oppositions, familiar readings and interpretations may more or less not work well. *The Story of Pao* is not only a growing-up journey of a Hmong girl but also one of the models for a lifestyle that is in harmony with the nature of an ethnic minority in a developing country. *Into the Wild*, on the contrary, is a typical story of modern, urbanized man in a highly-developed country, who wants to escape the artificial and boring reality by committing himself to the wild. This comparative method allows us to make a

“decentralization,” that is, translating texts from one context to another without being limited by the ties of geographical and historical conditions. Hence, the work from the lesser-known Vietnamese Cinema is placed next to a well-known Japanese film, without the baggage of “mismatching.” This article, therefore, proposes a new research approach for Vietnamese cinema in light of openness, interculturality, and decontextualization.

Juxtaposing and viewing the films from an ecocritical perspective, the article draws particular attention to the cultural and ideological sources of ecological risks. Wang Nuo (王諾), who considers this the pivot of ecocriticism, asserts that the field studies the relationship between literature and nature on the basis of ecologism, especially ecological holism; it elucidates cultural and ideological sources of ecological risks, and at the same time drawing attention to ecological aesthetics and other artistic manifestations of the ecology (王諾 2010: 69). Thus, through literary criticism, ecocriticism discovers “the profound genesis of ecological risks hidden in cultural modalities” and on that basis, aims at adjusting outlooks on the relationship between man and nature, and establishing ways of living that uphold ecology (Đỗ Văn Hiếu 2016: 78). Ecocriticism, accordingly, overtakes the limits of aesthetic criticism when reconsidering how models of social development and human communities have influenced the relationship between man and nature, thus requiring literary criticism to be more associated with studying the nature of culture and society and ethnic cultural psychology. This perspective is used to “reread” *The Story of Pao* and *Into the Wild*.

In terms of ecological aesthetics, *The Story of Pao* and *Into the Wild* both suggest a path where one can find signs of a world that is both poetic and wild, and where people are allowed to express in an intense and undisguised way a yearning that is both ancient and contemporary, i.e. *the desire for nature*. The two clearly represent the mindset of attachment, even voluntary dependence on nature, for the survival of an ethnic minority who lives in a dangerous and remote mountainous area in Vietnam; a typical example of a struggle to break free from bondage to the material world and the breakthrough effort to find the truth of life in the natural world for

those who belong to the civilized world. They seem to be quite distinct in terms of thinking between the East and the West, between civilization and primitiveness, between developing and developed, between mountainous and urban areas, but in reality, when placed side by side, they reflect similarities and differences of human behaviors towards nature. These similarities and differences will be clarified through the following two points.

## **II . The Aesthetic Potential of Nature and the Invitation to Travel**

Eco-critics have advocated taking ecology as the center and seen it as an anchor for eco-critical endeavors. This tendency sees nature as an entity; "[N]ature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironized as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect" (Barry 2009: 243). The fact that literary and cinematic works depict or discover the beauty of nature is also one of the recognitions for the aforementioned trend. From the perspective of the juxtapositional model, the films *Into the Wild* and *The Story of Pao*, of course, show two completely separate pictures of nature, corresponding to the geographical features of the two regions. Nature, in the meaning of the wild, untouched landscape and natural sources, even though belonging to different cultures, places, and times, has similarities in its natural beauty, making viewers soar in a sense of freedom, comfort, and peace. It urges people, at least once, to dare to give up familiar limitations of modern life and to enjoy the pleasures of the primitive life. This "random contiguity," promises to create an intertextual and intercultural network that is a trend of today's society.

A coincidence, of course, is absolutely not a reason for me to make a comparison, i.e. these two films are both adapted from literary works and tell true stories.

The film *The Story of Pao* (Ngô Quang Hải) is based on the literary work *The Lip Lute Behind the Stone Fence* by Nguyễn Bích Thúy. It narrates the journey of Pao, a young Hmong girl, to find her mother. Pao lives with her father, a younger brother, and her



father's eldest wife (often called old mother or mother Kía). Since the person who gave birth to her, the mother Sim (father's second wife), could not stand cohabitation, poverty, and an awkward life, she left Pao and her sisters to the first wife to nurture them. After decades of enduring a loveless marriage and desperation to have a child, Mother Kía chose to commit suicide. Many other events followed, Pao set out to find her mother Sim to bring some comfort to her father in his last days. The journey to find her mother gradually uncovers secrets of love and human relationships, and presents the material and spiritual-cultural life of the Hmong in Hà Giang, Vietnam.

Meanwhile, *Into the Wild* is a 2007 American film, adapted from the hit book of the same title by Jon Krakauer. It is about the true adventure of the 23-year-old Christopher McCandless. McCandless just graduated from college with honors. Coming from a well-to-do family, as well as being smart and talented, Chris faces a promising future. But he is fed up with his materialistic life, as well as life with the hypocrisy of society.

Aside from being haunted by his parents' quarrels during his childhood days, Chris also discovers that his father abandoned his first family. After a graduation party, Chris decides to erase all traces of himself, and changes his name to Alexander Supertramp—“Alex Superwanderer.” He starts his journey to Alaska. In a deserted patch of forest in the Stampede Trail, Chris sees a bus converted as a shelter for reindeer hunters. This bus immediately becomes Chris's home, and begins a life hunting wild animals for food. After four months, he is pressed to leave the place but melted ice causes the river to rise; he could not cross the river. Without medicine and assistance, Chris suffers from tree root poisoning and dies, severely malnourished at 30 kg. His body is found two weeks later.

Both films, made in the style of a travelogue, focus on the central character's displacement, both in time and in space. In this style, characters start the journey when they are pulled from their familiar and peaceful living environment. The challenges that come gradually reveal their disposition and motivation in the face of events that transform them. Pao in *The Story of Pao* makes a

journey to find her mother, which is, in fact, the journey to find an intimate connection that she lost during her childhood. In contrast, Chris in *Into the Wild* cuts off all ties with family and social institutions, leaving him alone to step into the wild following the call of the ideal life that he believes in.

*Into the Wild* and *The Story of Pao* feature quests for truth, that in effect also presents a sense of nature. Following Pao and Chris' footsteps are natural scenes associated with the characteristics of two geographical regions. For instance, *The Story of Pao* offers a wild but charming natural surroundings of Northeast Vietnam, overwhelming and delicate. Somehow, it is also the nature that subconsciously creates human character.

The establishing shot in *The Story of Pao* shows towering mountains mixed with clouds. This scene more or less predicts the visual structure of the entire film. Nature is always present in every situation and narrative of the characters. The most commonly used scenes are of mountains and clouds, both majestic and mysterious, both inviting and challenging. The camera has maximized the immensity of the mountains, or the full vitality of the green forests stretching along the roadside, following each step of the main character from Đồng Văn (Hà Giang) to Sa Pa (Lào Cai) to Mộc Châu (Sơn La). The frames are bright and wide, helping the viewer to capture the breathtaking beauty, which is typical of the mountainous landscape in the North of Vietnam. Sometimes, the scene shows clouds afloat, and at times with bright yellow canola flowers, white mountain ebony, or green cornfields, creating a real visual impression for the film. Cinematographer Cordelia Beresford tends to put nature at the center, with the camera angle usually placed behind the character, giving the impression that the foreground, nature, is bold. The Đồng Văn Stone Plateau in the film *The Story of Pao* is beautiful, splendid, intimate, simple, poetic and melancholic, all in all romantic and miserable. In a beautiful extreme long shot, people are small but not covered by nature, and existing amidst nature innocently and strongly. The original living space in *The Story of Pao* might be an interesting suggestion for contemporary living in Vietnam—a lifestyle that is open, in harmony with nature, which reflects architectural tastes of urban housing in

recent years. It is also an architectural style that strongly expresses the desire of modern urban dwellers.

The main theme in *The Story of Pao* seems unrelated to ecology but focuses on the fate of man and love. But on the background, viewers can in turn find the connection between nature and people. At the same time, from the perspective of human ecology, the film shows bold topography, regions, and other natural factors, such as climate, which create the identity of the Hmong ethnic group. They are as strong as stone, but also soft as flowers, and innocent as grass.

*Into the Wild* features nature in North America. As soon as released, Sean Penn's movie immediately created a strong aftershock, especially for young people who love to explore and adventure. The film has a tragic ending but from beginning to end, not tinged with sadness at all. Simply, each scene in Chris's journey is a beautiful picture of that deep, mysterious ancient forest in the Pacific Northwest. There are treacherous canyons and vast deserts farther south. There is the golden wheat field in the northern prairies in the scene where Chris drives a harvester—a place he appears to be fond of. It may have felt heaven for Chris to run around with wild horses. There is the majesty of the raging waves in a river that Chris crosses with powerful paddle movements. There is a smooth beach where Chris finds his own footprints in the early morning. There is a forest of thorn leaves covered with white snow or precarious cliff and so on. The gorgeous beauty of the North American landscape in the west of Mississippi is shown in a sheer extreme long shot. The beautiful angles and country music of Eddie Vedder have succeeded in attracting audiences to fully focus on the screen and touch their feelings. In *Into the Wild*, scenes of urban life are few and mostly blurred, or are done with quick, rushed, and sometimes soundless shots. In contrast, natural scenes are shot slowly, like a beautiful flashback that the filmmaker did not want to skip too quickly. This method creates asymmetry, where nature is presented with a dominant, open, spacious advantage, in contrast to urban life where people are always stuck in a closed, crowded space (car, house, motel, restaurant, schoolyard).

Geography makes a difference in the natural landscapes of *Into the Wild* and *The Story of Pao*. It is worth mentioning here is that the aesthetic potential of nature, as discovered by the filmmakers' artistic sense and the characters' passionate eyes, becomes an endless source of inspiration. Both *Into the Wild* and *The Story of Pao* are like an invitation to travel for those who love freedom and adventures. Chris chooses to return to nature, accepting that he would also be like an animal or a tree, vulnerable and could die of hunger and lack of water. He immerses himself in the simple beauty of nature. Taking the pseudonym Alexander Supertramp, and rejecting material needs and human attachments, he identifies himself as an "aesthetic traveler" (Ebert 2007). For him, the meaning of life is new experiences. This meaning is highlighted in Sean Penn's movie.

The film is divided into several chapters, each chapter a journey, at times of difficulty, of hardship, of sadness and isolation, of joy in harmony with nature, of happiness with kind friends. The old, experienced middle-aged people Chris meets on the trip had different fates, cultural backgrounds, and life experiences, but they were completely convinced by Chris's plan to conquer cold, dangerous Alaska, and wished him well.

Alaska is probably the most mentioned keyword in the movie *Into the Wild*. As Chris's destination, it also becomes a measure of his courage, a symbol of the desire to commit and face challenges. Alaska with its unspoiled beauty becomes the setting for many other Hollywood movies: *Never Cry Wolf* (1983) by Carroll Ballard, *The Edge* (1997) by Lee Tamahori, and *The Grey* (2011) by Joe Carnahan.

Chris's journey in *Into the Wild* is also reminiscent of Jean-Marc Vallee in the film *Wild* (2014), based on the memoir *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (2012) by Cheryl Strayed. After going through years of disorientation due to the death of a loved one and a painful divorce, Cheryl Strayed (Reese Witherspoon) is determined to pack her backpack and set out to conquer the famous Pacific Crest Road. *Wild* captures powerfully the fears and joys of a young woman moving forward, in the face of all difficulties in a deeply emotional journey that ultimately heals her

wounds. Although the inspiration for the trip is not as compelling as *Into the Wild* and *The Story of Pao*, *Wild* was still able to make people fall in love with nature, in its splendor and harshness. Meanwhile, the house Pao lives in, which we will analyze later in the article, more or less represents the dream of a structure in harmony with nature. Lũng Cầm Cultural Village, Đồng Văn Stone Plateau-Hà Giang, the main setting of *The Story of Pao*, became a tourist destination after the film was released.

As a psychological drama, nature in *The Story of Pao* is perceived to embody emotions, as it is always in harmony with man. Everything exudes rhythm, freshness, and femininity. On the other hand, *Into the Wild's* documentary style imbues nature with masculinity and strength with its dominant use of cold colors. Despite the differences in cinematic perspective, *Into the Wild* and *The Story of Pao*, set side by side, can be both be read as consensual discourses that espouse ecology-centered sensibility, with special attention to the hidden beauty of the natural world.

### III. Juxtaposing Two Models of Behavior towards Nature

The relationship of "culture" and "nature" requires an unlocking of terms. The term "nature," says John S. Habgood (2002), has multiple and overlapping meanings. In this paper, "nature" is understood according to its Latin etymology "natura," which means "things that belong to the universe" and differ from the man-made world (Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt 2018). "Culture," according to UNESCO, is "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, that encompasses, not only art and literature, but lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs" (UNESCO 2001). In this definition, "beliefs" and "values" are hard to be evaluated directly, yet can be assessed through related habits and acts. However, it should be remembered that nature is basically fluid, and some of its factors are determined by humans. This reality leads to the fact that nature and culture "do not simply oppose each other, but also intermingle with one another" (Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt 2018). The relationship between man

and nature has become increasingly complex in the modern era when in underdeveloped areas, “nature” is swallowed up by “culture” as a result of environmental destruction. This is the primary concern of ecocriticism.

Up to now, the debate about the relationship between people/culture and the environment/nature or either human-centered view or nonhuman-centered views (Kopnina et al. 2018: 110) has not ceased. The two most common opposing arguments are: man is born to master and possess nature as Descartes put it, or only “crazy” people “bring machines to declare war on nature” as Erasme puts it (Vernier 2002). Accordingly, the relationship between man and nature is established by a dualistic worldview: human/subject-nature/object. This view was later questioned by Western anthropologists who argued for a different perspective when scholars studied non-Western cultures, particularly hunter-gatherer communities living in Asia, Africa, or even in both Latin America and North America (Phan Thị Hoàn 2019: 25). In the case of *Into the Wild* and *The Story of Pao*, the critique towards the dualistic worldview, i.e. human/subject-nature/object, becomes clear and drastic when two cultures, East-West, or two states of living, civilized-wild, are put side by side. This “juxtaposition” stems from a reconsideration of influences that models of social development and ways of living have on the relationship between humans and nature. The two models of behavior towards nature, as seen in the protagonists Pao and Chris, are equivalent to the differences between Eastern and Western cultures. The East is characterized by stability, while the West is more associated with mobility, “the former is more natural, the latter is more artificial” (李1949: 37-38). The West values logic, hence being more likely to underestimate the significance of the environment, while the East assumes that life is always changing, transforming from one state to another, thus appreciating the relationship between an object and the overall surrounding environment (Nisbett 2003). Undoubtedly, it is not the matter of criticizing or choosing between the two models yet elucidating them from the perspective of cultural identity of each community.

In *The Story of Pao*, we see the compatibility of the Hmong

minority community with nature in the highlands, where it is lush and poetic. The desire for discovering, conquering, and mastering nature is more or less revealed in those who belong to the modern world of *Into the Wild*; although it is more or less “covered” by the so-called desire to live in harmony with nature. The title *Into the Wild* partly shows that people are looking for a way to return to the wild rather than live in nature.

*The Story of Pao* is also reminiscent of Farley Mowat’s *People of the Deer* (1952), which presents the author’s research on the life of the aboriginal people Ihalmiut in Keewatin (Canada) before the impact of the market economy. The intrusion of signs of the civilized world has threatened the survival of the reindeer, a source of life and existence for the tribe. This kind of ecological rupture compels intervention from ecocritics. In contrast, *The Story of Pao* shows nature dominating local culture, while conversely, the indigenous culture of the Hmong regulating behavior amidst nature.

Comparatively, *The Story of Pao* is about life that is primitive, where people live fully with nature, and where they do not need to make a choice, because they were born and raised in the natural environment. They commune with nature instinctively and rather innocently. Meanwhile, *Into the Wild* reflects a tendency to choose, albeit quite extremely, an approach that is to search for the natural world to escape the real world. Does nature in *Into the Wild* become teleological considering Chris’s dreamlike escape brimming with mental recollections of relationships that are intense but are actually empty? Is it a passionate adventure to explore an unmaterialistic life? Or is it a beautiful, fruitful journey that is also too costly for finding answers about the essence of life? Chris’s trip may find itself answering these three questions. There is naiveté, but also reason, strength and weakness, isolation and social cohesion, and there is achievement, but at the cost of one’s life.

### **3.1. *Into the Wild* and a Sore Misunderstanding of Nature**

From the very beginning, Chris appears as a typical example of the spirit of fierce resistance against civilized society. He comes from a wealthy family, his father is a genius, and his mother is

a resourceful and astute person. He also graduated from Emory University with a formidable academic record and even secured a place in at the Harvard University Law School. However, Chris sets everything aside to embark on a difficult path. His first, low-level resistance is his refusal to buy a new car; instead, he keeps an old Datsun. The level of protest gradually increases, when Chris decides without hesitation to destroy all his his pieces of identification, donate his savings of more than \$ 24,000 to charity “for those who need it” (Penn 2007), and even burn his remaining cash. He leaves his car in a faraway place and hitchhikes to start his adventure. He also goes alone into the deep Alaska forest without a hunting license. The climax of his rejection of civilized society comes when he passionately tells Ron Franz, “Mr. Franz, I think that “career” is just an invention of the 20th century and I don’t want it” (Penn 2007). Perhaps it may not be easy to understand Chris’s boredom. But Chris himself, an excellent and sensitive young man, must have soon realized that the world does not offer the things he really needs. Money, fame, or a new car does not matter when the world is a stage where everyone, including his parents, plays a role. In a meeting with the hippie couple Jan and Rambey along the journey, Chris bitterly but wittily describes his parents as “living fake somewhere” (Penn 2007). Haunted by a human world that is unreal and cumbersome, Chris finds his ideal while fondly reading books about wildlife. He believes in nature because nature tells no lies. After completing his education, Chris decides to go back to the wild. He considers it a revival because it helps him free from what he addresses as “boring history, oppression, rituals and obligations, an absolute freedom and that road always goes to the West” (Penn 2007). In the wild, he enjoys “majestic mountains, snowy rivers, hunting, just wildness, in wilderness” escaping from “this sick society” (Penn 2007). This shows that Chris is certainly not the only individual of his generation who has intensely explored the dark side of modern society and Chris’ journey may be followed by someone else.

Clearly, Chris always puts himself in self-examination, criticism, inference, and fierce struggle between opposing categories:



civilization-wildness, real-unreal, freedom-bondage. Chris’s story easily reminds of the American writer, poet, philosopher, naturalist, and historian Henri David Thoreau who wrote *Walden*. In 1845, with only an ax, Thoreau went alone to the mountain beside Walden Lagoon near the town of Concord, Massachusetts, and lived there for two years, growing beans, potatoes, corn, radishes. Thoreau’s simple and poetic lifestyle and ideas have had a great influence on American society. The young Chris himself seems to be a “fan” of this idea. Thoreau’s guiding principle became Chris’s life motto: “Above all of love, money, fame, justice, just give me the truth” (Penn 2007). Chris’s face always sparkles with the joy of someone who dares to go against the sun, dares to break through the dream of prosperity and fame that many people covet, to venture into the wild and pure nature with a philosophy of minimalist living. Let us not forget that ecocriticism, even now in America, continues to take on a literary task posed by three important American authors in the nineteenth century. As a transcendental writer, Thoreau was among those who belong to the first who achieved a “cultural independence” from European models. *Walden* is considered foundational in “ecocentred” writing (Barry 2015: 241). Thus, undoubtedly, Chris’s inclination for the wild is a vibrant contemporary embodiment of Thoreau’s idea as seen through the shots of “praising nature, (the) meaning of the life and wildness of America” (Barry 2015: 240).

Chris’s awareness of the natural world grows with each step of the journey. At first, nature seems to be an idealized world, a place for humans to conquer and to heal the soul. This idea is, to some extent, comparable to Wang Nuo (王諾)’s notions his essay 生態批評的美學原則 (Aesthetic Principles of Ecocriticism), where he analyzes works by 19<sup>th</sup> century writers Percy Bysshe Shelley, Jane Austen, Ralph Waldo Emerson. For Wang, these authors indulged in nature, paying attention to nature’s beauty but more importantly, blissfully appreciating the reciprocal relationship between nature and man’s inner mind, and how it can be a way to achieve spiritual release. Their lack of confidants and isolation drive them to return to nature to look

for empathy, and even passion. This is against the ecological aesthetics of engagement, which emphasizes that to be in harmony with nature, man must forget himself and become one with nature; only then they can he discover its true beauty (王 2010: 22).

The young Chris, greatly interested in books about nature, finds himself desolate in such a noisy and gaudy life, acknowledging that everything he has been through is pointless. Nature thus becomes “the reciprocal natural object,” from which Chris attempts to prove who and what he needs. Hence, it should be examined whether his use of nature as a resistance against civilization is also a manifestation of human-centered consciousness.

There comes a moment which can be described as aggressive, where the weak in nature is conquered with a gun; or as foolish, because of the urges of human instinct like hunger. Chris shoots down a wild deer, then struggles to preserve it; he eventually agonizes in killing a living creature. This sequence of actions in the scene is full of metaphors. Chris’s moment of awakening to his relationship with nature, far removed from the desire to oppress and dominate is also a premonition of the instability of the relationship between nature and culture. While Chris died with a satisfied smile, having dwelt in a place he longed for, his tragedy is a clearly a correctable one. He has misjudged nature. His readings from books are clearly not enough to orient him about nature. He may have been seen holding books by Lev Tolstoi or by Jack London, or often quotes Thoreau from memory but these pages only describe nature that is too beautiful and ideal. In reality, it is harsh and uncertain. This is once reiterated London in the short story *To Build a Fire*, which exemplifies the naturalist movement’s tendency of depicting the conflict between man and nature. A story of two versions (1902 and 1908), it tells the story of an unknown young man who ventures into the deep woods of the Yukon territory. Underestimating the harsh natural conditions and ignoring warnings about the dangers of crossing the forest alone in extreme cold, he ends up freezing to death alone. Strangely, this

story applies to Chris. Has Chris read this story, clearly a cautionary tale? Towards the end, Chris must have realized the need to understand nature.

Chris's overconfidence imbues in him a false safety in nature; save for a few books, he does not bring anything for self-defense, or at the very least pieces of medicine or a compass. When he is poisoned, he fails to read the instructions in his plant manual he brought. The following words are enlarged on screen: *edible, inedible, starving, dying*. They reflect the dual nature of the natural world. As he faces death, Chris painfully admits being "trapped in the wild." Defeated, he embodied human limitations and inability to grasp essence of nature. The abandoned bus in the middle of the snowy white forest where Chris dies appears to allude to the disparity in the relationship between civilization and wilderness. Chris is completely at a disadvantage as compared to natives like Pao in *The Story of Pao*.

### **3.2. *The Story of Pao* as an Exemplar of Eastern Ecological Thought**

Pao is born and raised in the mountains of Northeast Vietnam—her adaptability to her surroundings cannot be disputed. Her first journey was still towards other mountains; even the markets or small towns she visited were that of other ethnic minorities. *The Story of Pao* expresses the nostalgia for a peaceful and harmonious living space, where man and nature have a magical connection, completely corresponding to the spirit of ecological aesthetics towards a harmony between humans and the natural world (曾繁仁 2010). In contrast to Chris in *Into the Wild*, Pao, her family, and the rest of her ethnic group get along with nature based on local knowledge and experiences. As examined below, the world of the Hmong in *The Story of Pao* shows a life in harmony with nature.

#### **3.2.1. *Interdependence and Harmony between the Natural World and Man***

Hmongs have always lived in the hinterlands, amidst forests and high mountains (Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến 2014; Bùi Đình 1950). This determines their attitude towards the natural world (Cư Hòa Văn et

al. 1994: 7-8). In the film, Hmong life and spirituality require harmony with the natural environment in the Đồng Văn Stone Plateau, Hà Giang. This harmony may be observed in the Hmong housing, livelihood and cuisine.

For Hmongs, a house does not just shelter one from the elements but bears the very imprint of ethnic culture. It is a space where Hmong work takes place—winemaking, sewing, embroidery, and animal husbandry. A self-sufficient economy may be found under one roof. Pao's house is a traditional *Trình tường*,<sup>1</sup> made of materials taken directly from nature. Stones abound and are used to fortify pillars and fences. Structurally, Pao's house clearly reflects Hmong psychology. The house is overlooking an open space, providing a vast perspective; behind the house are mountains and hills, a backrest for the structure; at the heart of it is an often well-lit large courtyard where one can conveniently dwell; the front garden is usually teeming with vegetables. The household's reliance on nature makes the house "a unit of ecological balance" (Đoàn Trúc Quỳnh 2013: 161) between man and nature. Even the beauty of Pao's campus is mostly seen from the inside to the outside; through the main gate or window, viewers immediately apprehend nature everywhere, creating a completely open living space. It is a classic structure with bold colors, in total contrast to the concrete, suffocating jungle of modern Vietnamese cities.

Living in the mountains and moving frequently, Hmongs have learned to be self-sufficient and highly dependent on nature. Like Hmong generations before them, Pao's family lives in close contact with the forest which provide them food sources (Nguyễn Thi Quế Loan 2015: 43). They cultivate the highlands, collect wild vegetables, and graze goats. Even after their biological mother left, Pao and her siblings "drank goat's milk during the daytime, chewed on their old mother's breast at night" (Ngô Quang Hải 2006). Men worked away from home to earn while women bartered domestic animals and vegetables.

The distance and the ruggedness of the terrain also determine

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<sup>1</sup> *Trình tường*: a house is built on a flat land, with roof made of straw, and walls made entirely of thick rammed earth without any columns or piles as pillars.

the mode of transport and communication to the outside world. Hmongs choose to attend fairs to interact with other ethnic groups. In *The Story of Pao*, the protagonist went to markets thrice, to barter, and even to date. Markets are considered spaces for opening and firming up relationships, as well as bridging forbidden ones (meeting an old lover, for instance). The fair helps Hmongs to overcome being geographically obstructed (Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến 2014: 223-224). Thus, in the face of harsh living conditions, Hmongs have harbored a harmonious culture, taking nature as master, flexibly improvising with difficulties brought by it. Moreover, they use resources available in nature. *The Story of Pao* joyfully sings of a romance with mountains, forests, trees, and animals, hardly affected by modern economy.

Cuisine also reflects the material realities of the ethnic group. What they eat, how they prepare it, and where they source it, show how they easily adapt to nature. This shows that indeed, “each culture is, basically, the corollary of how its community survive and adapt to the surrounding nature” (Nguyễn Từ Chi 2003: 563). In *The Story of Pao*, the Hmong of Northeast Vietnam live in a almost rocky terrain, and thus are forced to cultivate on steep lands. Maize plays a prominent part in agricultural life, a source of food and raw material for local specialties like corn cakes and wines. This is shown in the film. Maize abounds in Pao’s space, its produce representing a melding of human relations. As it is used by, say women who usually prepare cornbread for the men who are away, it ensures the carrying out of social functions that is derived from a productive interaction between nature and culture.

For Jules Pretty and Sarah Pilgrim (2008), every ethnic groups life ways, house, and cuisine, or indigenous knowledge manifest the relationship between “nature” and “culture.” Indigenous knowledge provides cultural insights into the natural environment, the state of existing species, and ecological interactions. These establish ways of reasonably using natural resources and hence allows human to live sustainably within environmental limits. *The Story of Pao* demonstrates how Hmongs are able to an appropriate system of indigenous knowledge to ensure a balanced and harmonios life with nature.

### ***3.2.2. The Interplay between Nature and Hmong Identity***

In *The Story of Pao*, nature is seen as having a deep impression upon the worldview of Hmongs. They often use nature as a means for comparison. Pao's father states that his tree "is wilting." Mother Kía character considers there are essential interconnections between human and the stream water: "when it rains, the stream water is muddy, but it can't stay muddy forever, people are also the same" (Ngô Quang Hải 2006). Pao particularly emphasizes the importance of stone as the sign of human fate: "Whether you live for 20 years, 30 years, or stay until you die, you are just a stone as the foot of the pillar" (Ngô Quang Hải 2006).

For Hmongs, the stone is an eternal presence and may also be associated with the spiritual world. Hmongs accept and adapt to the harshness of rocks. These constitute their distinctive identity. Rocks also characterize Hmong values—intelligence, agility, courage, honesty, grit, and free. They are passionate about personal freedom. Choosing to live in isolation in the mountains is also a way for them to achieve freedom. This thirst for freedom convincingly explains the life choices of the characters of the film. The old mother, after many years of patiently working as a "stone as the foot of the pillars" (Ngô Quang Hải 2006), drops everything, and even fakes her suicide in order to flee to a new land with a new partner. Pao, at first uneasy hearing the sound of Chử's lip lute behind the stone fence, dares to "cross the fence" and dates the boy at the year-end market. Love remains the strongest ethnic value among the Hmongs, aside from the desire for freedom and self-control (Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến 2014: 210). Previous ethnographic studies show that Hmongs are liberal and open-minded idea of love, even allowing sexual intercourse before marriage. In the film, this is dramatized in the instances of two couples: the old mother Kía-Chử's father; and Chử-Pao. Though generations apart, their love basks in free will, reminiscent of the ways of Hmongs. Director Ngô Quang Hải paints the freedom in Pao and Chử's love through wide, bright, romantic frames, associated with the melodious sound of the lip lute and lush shots of nature and the highland market. Both characters are portrayed as both shy but brave. Again and again, fate and individuality intertwine with the natural world.

*The Story of Pao* is perhaps an implicit but powerful counterargument against a human-centered view. Here, man is in harmony with nature, as Zeng Fanren (曾繁仁) puts it that: “The symbiotic relationship between human and nature is the only plausible path.” (曾繁仁 2010: 466). Such cases have led to the emergence of “‘ecological humanism’ and ‘ecological totalism’ from the ecological theory that is better suited with the law of social development and later considered as the theoretical foundations of modern ecological aesthetics” (曾繁仁 2010: 466). The symbiosis between man and nature can be viewed as an ideal way of life which has been depicted in modern ecological movies, like *Little Forest* by Jun’ichi Mori and *Wood Job* by Shinobu Yaguchi. It is fully compatible with the stance of eco-criticism: declaring war on the “center,” and focusing on the harmony between man and nature. Therefore, this film more or less participates in strongly promoting the movement to protect nature in Vietnam.

The characters in *The Story of Pao* rarely interpret the natural world, but all the scenes and the stories take place amidst nature. Nature plays such a large part in the life of Hmongs life that it does not need to be discoursed. In contrast, *Into the Wild* permeates with quotes, dialogues, and narratives about nature, sometimes too passionate, veiling at some point the dangerous, dark side of nature. The “spiritual revolution” of the journey back to the wild is overemphasized that the “natural trap” is blurs. The violence of nature, which Chris did not care about from the beginning to the end of the journey, itself taught him a final lesson: Happiness only exists when shared. His story is not just one of courage, but also of foolishness, while expressing a dialectic relationship between society and nature, and contemplating about materialism in modern times.

#### IV. Conclusion

Interpreting *The Story of Pao* on its own only gives yields a love story imbued with the humanity of a people living in the high mountains of Vietnam. On its own, *Into the Wild* offers a painful journey of a young American. Read together, the films break

boundaries and reveal aesthetic similarities about the natural world. They even show the cultural characteristics of human communities as they behave in the presence of nature. *The Story of Pao* is like a dream, a slow-moving recollection of the ideal Eastern life as lived by an ethnic—a life in harmony with nature. *Into the Wild* re-explores the dialectical relationship between man and nature. Is Christopher McCandless ultimately an avant-garde hero or a dreamy idealist, a rebellious 1990s Thoreau, or another other lost son of America, a reckless, prideful, and pitiful victim struggling with the precarious balance between man and nature? Could modern man live in the wild and completely reject the material world? Has man appreciated the essence of nature or remained ambivalent about it?

*The Story of Pao* and *Into the Wild* allow us to imagine the changing position of man in the presence of nature. In the beginning, man is but a speck in the grandeur of nature (in the case of *The Story of Pao*, man relies on nature). Gradually, humans have learned to cope with the forces of nature, even conquering and transforming it. When they have achieved a high point of evolution, they immediately feel the loss of balance, and yearned to reintegrate into the unfamiliar primitive life (as in *Into the Wild*). The comparative reading of these two films enabled us to uncover diverse and dynamic interpretations. Decontextualized, *The Story of Pao* and *Into the Wild* serve as powerful statements about ecocriticism.

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**Discourse of Minority Communities:**  
**Comparing Archetypal Heroes in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's**  
**“The Tiger’s Heart” (1971)**  
**and John Steinbeck’s *The Pearl* (1947)**



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[ *Abstract* ]

This article compares archetypal heroes in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's “The Tiger’s Heart” and John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*. It aims to explore the voices of marginalized groups and ethnic minorities who suffer amidst the clash of civilizations. In exploring cultural communication between minority and mainstream communities as embodied by the archetypal heroes in the two works, this article highlights implications of resistance against values of the dominant. The method of “mythization” in modern Eastern and Western Literature, as this article argues, demonstrates the importance of minority discourses in as far as cultural conflicts in the globalizing world are concerned.

**Keywords:** Archetypal hero, folk narratives, minority discourses, minority communities, mythical thinking

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## I . Introduction

*The Pearl* is a short novel by John Steinbeck, winner of the 1962 Nobel Prize in Literature. The novel first appeared in 1945 in *The Woman's Home Companion* and was published in 1947. Despite being written after "the years of greatness, (1936-1939)" (Hayashi 1993) the work in its condensed form "has generated more contradictory criticism than any other work by Steinbeck" (Owens 1985: 35). The author reconstructs a modern parable based on popular Mexican folk narratives about the deep mysteries of the human heart, the nature of good and evil, the power of love, and the lofty values of family. Meanwhile, "Trái tim hổ" ("The Tiger's Heart," 1971) is the first story in the series *Những ngọn gió Hua Tát* (*The Winds of Hua Tát*, 1989), which established Nguyễn Huy Thiệp as the most recognized writer in modern Vietnamese Literature. Based on folk narratives of ethnic minorities in the Vietnamese Northwest mountainous region, this story is animated by the essence of its mythic characters' indigenous culture. It poses different questions about victory and failure, happiness and sorrow, and love and envy. The works of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp and Steinbeck concern the position of marginalized classes and communities often disadvantaged and oppressed. This study will analyze the process of cultural dialogue between minority and mainstream communities, re-examining the values that are surrendered to the dominant. Simultaneously, this study intends to explore the "remythification" of Eastern and Western modern literature and the emergence of minority discourse at a time of cultural conflict and globalization. The archetypal method will be used to examine the heroes in the two works.

For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the term "minority" connotes "a certain position, a speaking position for the purpose of creating literature" (2015: 12). "Minority" literature, for this article, are those outside or along the periphery of mainstream literature. At the border, minority literature continuously transforms, rejects all standards to maintain power, and even blurs taxonomic categories. They liberate language and look for things outside language (Deleuze and Guattari 2015). By dreaming the alienated dream, that

is "knowing to create a minority" (Deleuze and Guattari 2015: 95), and putting themselves in the position of minority, and observing from this perspective, authors writing about disadvantaged communities have developed a conversation between this marginalized group and the dominant. Meanwhile, the term "other" refers to colonists who are marginalized by colonial discourse. This concept elucidates the constraints that provide colonized with a sense of identity dependence. "In post-colonial theory, it can refer to the colonized others who are marginalized by imperial discourse, identified by their difference from the centre and, perhaps crucially, become the focus of anticipated mastery by the imperial 'ego'" (Ashcroft et al. 2007: 154-156).

This article compares archetypal heroes in the two literary works to contribute to the dialogue between minority and official communities. Additionally, this study also examines the identity of minority communities through Native American discourse in Steinbeck and ethnic minority discourse in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp.

## **II. Cultural Identity and Mythical Thinking**

The twentieth century was regarded as a century of violent changes in both the West and the East. Economic crises widened the divide between rich and poor, and cruel wars broke cultures and shattered values. From an artistic standpoint, this tumultuous era compelled new modes of artistic expression. Among them is "mythization," which according to E.M. Melentinsky began in the 1910s in the Europe (2004: 24), 1950s and 1960s in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (2004: 500). This "renaissance" of myth in literature not only returned to folklore, but also strived to create new myths that capture the multifaceted realities of modern life, as well as the deep conflicts in the spiritual life of man (Melentinsky 2004).

As a central phenomenon in the history of human culture, myth contributes to identifying a culture and shapes thinking of individuals and the community. The vitality of myth is such that "even when a culture no longer believes that its myths are true explanations, these stories often survive as receptacles of important

cultural values" (Murfin and Ray 2003: 284). The lasting influence of myths in cultural history is reflected in existing cultural values and mythical thinking. Being considered the foundation of human thought, the way of mythical thinking is permanently present in human consciousness, political systems, and artistic creation. In the technocratic era, the return to myth has taken place strongly in the field of literature and proved effective in portraying the spiritual face of the times and "showing awareness of some new existential problems" (Đặng 2020).

Notably, although recreating myth to explain life, penetrating the complex spiritual world of people, and connecting literature with history, philosophy, and religion in the modern context, this process of transformation and creation has never been separated from cultural identity. Discussing cultural identity, Arnold Grod in *Theories of Culture* focusses on specific groups and the different interactions between cultures and individuals. According to him, "identity is generally understood as an emergence of a set of characteristics by which an individual is recognised as such. Cultural identity is based on characteristics by which the individual is recognised as a member of a culture" (2019: 180). Within cultures, the system of myth and archetype that individuals in a culture share is closely related to cultural identity. Mysterious stories throughout history often contain the eternal cultural values of a community, and the sharing of such myths by individuals has contributed to the strengthening of cultural identity. This article explores the rebirth of the archetypal hero in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's "The Tiger's Heart" and John Steinbeck's *Pearl*, as it also studies cultural identity and the cultural roots in the mythical thinking of the two writers. It unravels national cultural characteristics, unique community consciousness, and socio-historical contexts formative to minority discourses.

The post-war and renovation period after 1975 is considered a turning point in the Vietnam's transformation. After two fierce and bloody modern wars, Vietnamese Literature intensively evolved, embodying a tensions between the old and new, backward and progressive, the ideal and broken reality. The postwar period, particularly the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) and the accompanying economic reforms and social upheaval, reshaped Vietnamese

traditional cultural identity. This complex and vibrant social context promoted democratization, awakened individuals, and modernized literary sensibility. It was in this context that Nguyễn Huy Thiệp emerged as an honest and humane writer, a breath of fresh air in the literary landscape.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp is considered phenomenal for his unique writing style. A master of the short story, he wrote with a distinct mythical sensibility. "Nearly all of his stories present components of myth, legend, folk song, and proverb," as evidenced by the fact that "almost all of his stories present materials of story, legend, folk song, and proverb" (Philimonova 2001: 59). These are consciously embedded, making "the folk living in his works...an independent and vast subject" (Philimonova 2001: 60). "I usually find traditional values," Nguyễn Huy Thiệp said. "I believe that a writer must begin with his country's most primitive experiences. In some way, we need to start with the Vietnamese people's national origins" (Nguyễn 2001: 383). Not only are folklore and cultural identity a significant source, but the end or purpose of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's artistic journey. Amidst the complicated and multifaceted postwar context, folklore animates his mythical thinking especially in a country with dualistic cultural values and hidden conflicts.

Similarly, Steinbeck's work is shaped by a period of great change in the United States, including a time of prosperity and recession (1929-1933) and two world wars (1914-1918, 1939- 1945) (Hamby 2005). Steinbeck was born in 1902 in Salinas, California, an area known for its fertile land, rugged mountains, and vast fields that are frequently shrouded in fog. It was a land inhabited by Indians for millennia before the conquest of the West. Unlike other contemporary American, Steinbeck is inextricably associated with the American West, specifically the poverty and marginalization of many of its citizens. The rural and folklife experiences of Steinbeck's miserable youth inspired him to write masterpieces about the problems of disadvantaged individuals and minorities severely affected by the Great Depression and postwar instability. As with Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Steinbeck spent his youth as a correspondent during World War II. The battlefield experience led him to express concern for the unlucky and rage against war. However, Steinbeck's

successful mythological works, like those of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, do not focus on issues of war, but rather on the narratives of the disadvantaged. Steinbeck lived long to see further social disintegration in the 1960s, the rise of dictatorships, the intensification of economic injustice, and the beginnings of environmental crisis.

American culture's desire to build the nation in the context of diversity has also become a deep source of conflict. And while Steinbeck was truly interested in the American spirit that vivified rapid industrialization and the country's rise as a superpower, he ended up exploring its internal conflicts as may be seen in the contending cultures, particularly that of the minorities and indigenous. This he did this in *The Pearl*, a work which successfully deploys mythologization.

Steinbeck's *The Pearl* is avowedly inspired by a Mexican folk narrative detailed in *The Log from the Sea Cortez* (1995) about a great pearl that brought its finder both wisdom and disaster during a 1940 journey to the Gulf of California. Meanwhile, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's *The Winds of Hua Tát* portrays the lives of people in a world shaped by indigenous myth, folktales, and legends. All were inspired by his years of isolation in the vast Northwest mountains.

On the one hand, we have Steinbeck, stating in the beginning of *The Pearl*: "If this story is a parable, perhaps everyone derives his or her own meaning from it and reads his or her own life into it" (1948: [preface]). On the other hand, we have Nguyễn Huy Thiệp saying: "Those traditional stories may reflect much human sorrow, but it is through an understanding of those experiences that our soul develops moral wisdom, dignity, and humanity" (2021: 12-13). While Steinbeck transforms a brief folk narrative into a complicated novella, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp favors a concise narrative with diverse metaphors. Juxtaposed, their archetypal heroes are show similarities and distinctions.

### III. Archetypal Heroes in "The Tiger's Heart" and *The Pearl*

The hero is one of humanity's earliest and most enduring of



archetypes. This is constantly reconstructed over time, depending on cultures and eras, though always in line with basic motifs (Nguyễn 2017). These stories frequently extol the hero's exploits, courageous virtues, and self-sacrifices for the benefit of the community. Thus, the hero serves as a living embodiment of the community's conception of moral standards and aesthetics. Accordingly, literary works reflect social phenomena and the voices of individuals and groups through this archetype (Nguyễn 2021).

The strange attractiveness of the hero in mythology worldwide drove Joseph Campbell, an American mythologist, to explore and formulate a standard model of this archetype. Campbell (2004) separates the seventeen stages of the hero's journey into three primary rites in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*: departure, initiation, and return. Additionally, Campbell emphasizes that not all hero myths follow the seventeen stages; some focus on a single stage, while others organize the stages according to respective internal logics. Following Campbell's work, David Adams Leeming (1981) divides the hero's journey into eight stages but retained the three primary rites in *Mythology: The Voyage of the Hero*. This article will utilize the aforementioned frameworks to compare the heroes in the "The Tiger's Heart" and *The Pearl*.

*The Pearl* narrates the story of Kino, an Indian fisherman who lives in La Paz, Mexico, with his wife, Juana, and their small child, Coyotito. Kino is young and strong with a "brown forehead," "his eyes were warm and fierce and bright" (Steinbeck 1948: 4). However, he always "felt weak and afraid and angry" (Steinbeck 1948: 10) when faced with Spanish doctor, who represents the race that conquered his forbears. In the "The Tiger's Heart," two Black Thais, Pùà and Khó, live in Hua Tát, a small town in Northwest Vietnam. Pùà is a beautiful girl with "skin as white as a peeled egg, silky and long hair, and lips as red lipstick" yet she is "paralyzed in both legs, lying in one place for a long time" (Nguyễn 2021: 13). Khó is an orphaned parent isolated from everyone due to his poverty and ugliness.

Both Kino and Kho are illiterate minority who seek peace for those they love. Kino is the family's breadwinner and a strong

defender of Juana and Coyotito. His nobility is illustrated by his tenacious opposition to the doctor's servants, who refused to treat his child. While defending the pearl and his family from pursuers, Kino decides to throw the pearl to the ocean to be free. On the other hand, Khó's heroic traits are highlighted by an endless pursuit of evil tigers and his incredible achievement of killing tigers for the treatment for Púa by a tiger's heart.

<Table 1> Rites and Stages in the Heroes' Life Cycle

Act	Stage	Khó	Kino
Departure	The Call to Adventure	Púa is a beautiful girl but has both legs paralyzed	Coyotito is stung by a scorpion and close to death
	Refusal of the Call		
	Supernatural Aid		
	The Crossing of the First Threshold		Kino and his wife took their son to the doctor's house, and the doctor refused them because Kino is poor; Kino finds a great pearl
	Belly of the Whale		
Initiation	The Road of Trials	The Killing tigers and treatment for Púa by a tiger's heart	Kino goes to town to sell the pearl, and the pearl buyers collude to cheat Kino; greedy people try to steal the pearl; Kino kills his attacker. Kino flees with his wife and son to the capital to sell the pearl; Kino kills three hunters
	The Meeting with the Goddess		
	Woman as the Temptress		
	Atonement with the Father		
	Apotheosis		
	The Ultimate Boon		

Act	Stage	Khó	Kino
Return	Refusal of the Return	The villagers see Khó and the dead tiger carcass. The strangest part is that someone stole the tiger's heart, and Khó and Pùà die shortly afterwards	Kino and his wife return to the town and throw the pearl into the deep sea
	The Magic Flight		
	Rescue from Without		
	The Crossing of the Return Threshold		
	Master of the Two Worlds		
	Freedom to Live		

Both heroes share the basic stages—the call to adventure, quest and challenge, return. Both embody typical motifs in their extraordinary missions—Khó kills the tiger to get its heart necessary, the cure for Pùà, and Kino murders four hunters to protect his family. However, both also deconstructs and re-establishes the archetype to reflect the spirit of their times. Both characters resemble the archetype in early stage: Khó is an orphan, and Kino has almost no recollection of his youth; yet, ancient memories and folk wisdom permeate their consciousness. Both Khó and Kino are lone heroes facing the dark shadow of civilization. Khó kills the tiger, a wild animal revered in Asian culture as the "lord of the mountain." Kino leads his little family in evading an attempt by hunters to rob the pearl; he kills them to protect his family. Neither of the protagonists are given any supernatural or heavenly aid in their quest. They both risk life and limb with only a deep spiritual belief in the future.

What sets them apart is the way they ended, which may be located in the archetypal stage of imperfect return and the absence of canonization. "The Tiger's Heart" concludes with an unexpected episode that contrasts from normal folk narrative motifs: someone steals the tiger's heart; Khó loses the opportunity to marry Pùà; and his death leaves haunts the conscience of people around him. In *The Pearl*, Kino loses everything when throws the pearl back into the sea, but he experiences illumination. He grows stronger and wise, understanding the essence of evil. Finally, he gives up ambition to achieve true freedom.

Khó and Kino share a similar social class origin, both being disadvantaged ethnic minorities. Khó lives in Hua Tát, a small, isolated village where everyone "lives a simple life" and engages heavily on agriculture and hunting (Nguyễn 2021: 11). He is also disfigured in the manner of Quasimodo, with "his face pockmarked by smallpox; his hands reach his knees, his legs are thin, and he moves as if he were running all the time" (Nguyễn 2021: 15). This further isolates Khó, who never attends village meetings or festivals. Meanwhile, Kino is a poor fisherman who lives in a small cottage by the seaside of La Paz town with his wife and children. His only possession is an old boat he inherited from his grandfather, the family's only source of income. Kino's Indian heritage always reminds him of the ruthlessness of the wealthy and white races, which consider the as "lowly creatures...as though they were simple animals" (Steinbeck 1948: 19). This makes Kino constantly feel helpless, fearful, and defeated.

The status, background, and initial circumstances of the hero all have an impact on the character's fate, as well as their motivation to embark on the journey. From the familiar and ordinary world, the hero embarks on a journey to a strange world. The dynamics of this spatial change are generalized by Campbell in the goals of important journeys and tasks such as searching for identity, love, the promised land, knowledge, revenge, or rescuing the community. The heroes in works under consideration serve the same purpose: Khó is tasked to kill the tiger and Kino attempts to sell the pearl because of his desire for a better life. Khó wants to marry Pùà, but only on the condition he retrieves a tiger's heart for the girl's healing. If Kino succeeds in selling the pearl, he will be able to send Coyotito to school.

With Kino, suffering and happiness go hand in hand. When the scorpion stings his son, he is fortunate enough to find the rare pearl. This becomes a reason for everyone to try outsmarting Kino. When his son suddenly dies, he begins to understand the true nature and face of evil and forges a spiritual bond with his minority community. With Khó, existence seems to be intertwined with his awful name (Khó means "hard"). Khó suffers greatly in life, having lived an unhappy childhood, and only to be defeated by thieves in

his moment of glory. Along with ambition, each embody their community's context-dependent aesthetic and moral standards.

Carroll Britch and Cliff Lewis highlight the Indian dilemma and conflict in the face of Western culture in "Shadow of the Indian in John Steinbeck's Fiction" (1984). In essence, Steinbeck's main concern is the Indians' impasse, and he aims to go deep into their choices and prognosis. With the Indian hero, the shame of his race's being second class and historically persecuted by colonizers motivate him to bow down to oppressors. When luck strikes with the discovery of the pearl, Kino plans to change his life, marry his wife in church, buy new clothes and a rifle, and send his son to school. His ambition transforms from outward prosperity to inner spiritual liberation. These dreams also depict his people's economic, political, and cultural marginalization and reveal opposition against white domination. Unlike Kino, Khó's quest to hunt, kill, and obtain the tiger's heart is not for fortune, but to obtain a vital cure for Pù's condition. It also becomes his way of transcending his community's prejudice against his kind. Additionally, the hero's status in the return rite varies significantly between the two characters. Despite his many losses and being out of touch with reality, Kino experiences epiphany as he realizes the downside of ambitions. Khó's story begins and ends in solitude, but his sorrow serves as a spark for the entire Hua Tát to come alive.

Both stories conclude with the heroes' return, both imbued with the mark or intervention of the divine. Towards the end, Kino's neighbors consider him as "(having been) removed from human experience," "(having) gone through pain and (having) come out on the other side," and "(having been given an) almost magical protection" (Steinbeck 1948: 123). Meanwhile, as one reads the story of "Nàng Sinh," another one of the ten short stories that compose *The Winds of Hua Tát*, one is told that villagers have constructed a temple in honor of Khó in remembrance of his heroic mission in the past year. This detail also illustrates the diverse perspectives on canonization held by each community. Despite their differences in time and context, "The Tiger's Heart" and *The Pearl* share the same motif of searching for sacred objects to save lives. "The Tiger's Heart" seeks to awaken the community about minority discourses,

whereas *The Pearl* aims to enliven consciousness to moral values.

#### IV. A Liberating Discourse of Minority Communities

Examining the heroes in *The Pearl* and “The Tiger’s Heart” reveals archetypal similarities and differences that offer liberating discourses for minority groups. Through the heroes’ lives and fates, these works addressed impositions of the center to the periphery. Overall, both *The Pearl* and “The Tiger’s Heart” subvert the rule of the dominant, which has also been internalized by minority communities. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp is a writer influenced by folk culture, yet he consistently exhibits a very discerning creative process. This is evident in the way he plots his stories, which do not necessarily follow the logic of folk narratives.

The law of karma prevalent in Vietnamese folk narratives dictates that “The Tiger’s Heart” should afford Pù and Khó a happy ending. However, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s uncompromising realism constructs a sad and unexpected ending: the tiger’s heart is robbed and the hero’s achievements undermined. The lonely young hero does not escape the tragedy that has been following him from childhood. The absurd, comic ending sharply contrasts with the happy endings in folk narratives. However, it is this tragic ending that typifies the essence of existence in a way understood by an author “having a strong dislike for the usual conclusion” (Nguyễn 2021: 276).

This theme of self-reflection theme is also present in *The Pearl*. When discussing the pearl-making process, the narrator explains that in the past, pearl divers believed that these “were accidents, and the finding of one was luck, a little pat on the back by God or the gods or both” (Steinbeck 1948: 27). As a result, when Kino’s neighbors see him holding a pearl, they wonder “how such fortune could come to any man” (Steinbeck 1948: 36). However, as the narrative develops, it becomes obvious that the pearl does not only bring good fortune to its discoverer but also stir “something infinitely dark and evil in the town” (Steinbeck 1948: 35).

The characters in both works represent the response of minority groups to the repressions of the center. Kino's ambitions in *The Pearl*, consisting of prosperity and independence, are all part of the proverbial American dream, which offer the ideal of equal opportunity for all. "It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers... erected in older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class" (Adams 1932: 405). However, the forces of evil that conspire to keep Kino from achieving his life-changing ambition expose the American dream's darkness. The American dream is the exclusive property of its architects. It is not for indigenous peoples and is only meant to deceive illiterate natives like Kino.

Meanwhile, Khó does not have a happy family, and is fated for more tragedy. Despite this cold portrayal, the story still roots itself to Vietnamese culture which values family and community, and making sacrifices for the greater good. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp demonstrates that people's limiting beliefs and prejudices shape harshness of life and serve as hurdles that cause individuals to stumble miserably on their path to personal happiness. On the other hand, treasures like pearls or tiger's hearts are magnificent in their ability to alter one's life, destiny, putting back the trust and confidence to man. On the other hand, both stories also portray modern man's delusory aspirations for justice, happiness, and love. Reality is terribly harsh. These delusions ultimately bring about the destruction of the characters. Khó and Pù do not end up together, while Kino sees images of death as he throws away *the pearl*, as if cutting himself off from ghostly illusions. He even sees his son in a very sorry state, "lying in the little cave with the top of his headshot away" (Steinbeck 1948: 97).

Vietnamese culture, being part of the Eastern tradition, frequently emphasizes the importance of community and the position of the individual in relation to the community. Khó is misunderstood and ostracized, growing up alone like "a stray animal on an unknown path" (Nguyễn 2021: 14-15). Khó's reclusiveness shows his isolation from the community. To a certain extent, it

threatens the integrity of the community. Towards the end, even his success in slaying the tiger is forgotten upon his death; "people have forgotten it as many bitter things happen in this life" (Nguyễn 2021: 15). To emphasize the hero's isolation, the narrator hardly details Khó's journey to hunt the tiger and is only intimidated. His life, achievements, and death are coldly portrayed in the narrative.

Meanwhile, Kino learns to value the interconnection between individuals and communities within a cultural tradition. In the beginning of the story, the poor fishing village community banded together after hearing about what happened to Kino's boy: "The screams of the baby brought the neighbors" (Steinbeck 1948: 14). They follow Kino's family to the old doctor's house since the incident "(became) a neighborhood affair" (Steinbeck 1948: 16). They then silently disperse when the doctor starts dressing down Kino for his poverty and refuses to treat Coyotito. When Kino discovers the priceless pearl, his neighbors gather in his thatch cottage to "share their joy" and hear about Kino's plans for the future. Unfortunately, Kino's materialistic ambitions bring him isolation, and he "(feels) alone and unprotected" (Steinbeck 1948: 43). As his connection with the community breaks down, he faces a string of deceptions that awakens him. The doctor surprisingly changes his mind to treat Coyotito, but only to find out where he got *the pearl*. Some strangers attempt to steal *the pearl*, but fail. Meanwhile, the town's pearl dealers conspire to convince Kino to sell *the pearl* at a very low price. Unable to accept his being duped by the entire town, he flees to sell *the pearl* elsewhere. He is convinced that has "defied not the pearl buyers, but the whole structure, the whole way of life" (Steinbeck 1948: 77). Kino thinks that his success will uplift his community; his failure will mean continued oppression. Coyotito's being shot and killed in the encounter as they flee signals not only tragedy but failure. However, when the couple return to their homeland, and consequently return *the pearl* to the ocean, they reconnect to the community. Kino is transformed by his understanding of his position in that unjust society.

Folk narratives synthesize cultural beliefs, psychology, and collective experience. It affirms community traditions and values. These are usually transcended by works from modernity to represent



contemporary concerns. "The Tiger's Heart" talks about loneliness and isolation in a minority community rife with selfishness. It is no longer a community that encourages heroes to accomplish their destinies. Meanwhile, *The Pearl* portrays a character whose desire for freedom pushes him break the shackles of oppression by reconnecting with his true self.

Minority community discourse centers on responding to and resisting the dominance of the center. In the case of Steinbeck and Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, we see a return to the ideals of indigenous peoples believed to have been saved from the contamination of "civilization." Despite being part of the center, they interrogated dominant discourses as impositions on minority communities. Khó of "The Tiger's Heart" raises awareness about people from the highlands, a place Nguyễn Huy Thiệp immersed in for ten silent years. It is certain that he has found warmth and optimism in people like Khó, who dwell in idyllic, quiet villages, and almost mystical villages like Hua Tát. For Mai Anh Tuấn, "Nguyễn Huy Thiệp has continuously compelled readers to rethink mountains and ethnic groups" (2018) More precisely, he argues for a reversal of roles: ethnic minorities may be instrumental in restoring the lost values and soul of people from the plains. This may be the only way to keep progress and civilization. Prejudices of all forms have to be made obsolete.

## V. Conclusion

Juxtaposing "The Tiger's Heart" and *The Pearl* offers an interesting dialogue that transcends geographical, historical, or cultural contexts. Seen archetypally, the heroes are seen to embody folk consciousness amidst the hustle and bustle of contemporary culture. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp and John Steinbeck took the side of the downtrodden, honoring their exceptional dignity and goodness. Steinbeck's hero aspired to challenge and evade the impositions of powerful white community. Meanwhile, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's hero aspired to achieve the purest of human ideals amidst the flawed nature of his community. Both works espouse a productive minority

discourse that advocates for the protection and preservation cultural identity among ethnic groups. “If natives or others were always seen as secondary figures, imperfect replicas of the colonizer, wearers of borrowed cultural rags; if native society was invariably represented as disorderly or ethically degenerate; it was important that they remake themselves from scratch. It was essential that they reconstitute their identity on their own terms, that they Indianize, Africanize, or Caribbeanize themselves. They effectively needed to give birth to a new identity, to speak in a language that was chosen, not imposed” (Boehmer 2006: 344-345).

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## Constructing Women's Voices: Approaching Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* from Feminist Criticism



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### [ Abstract ]

This article explores how women's voices are constructed in *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway and *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* (*The Sorrow of War*) by Bảo Ninh. Specifically, this article approaches presentations of women's personalities and positions in the two novels that do not have obvious historical and geographical connections. The women's voices in the two novels, as this article suggests, are characterized by women's desire for self-determination, where they are able to free themselves from domination, and even influence men's psychology and actions. In comparing the characteristics of women's voices in the two works, the article aims to highlight different ways in which women assert their agency. The article affirms the potential contribution of cultural contexts in examining feminist voices and understanding how female figures are made to overcome default passivity and submission to male domination.

**Keywords:** Ernest Hemingway, Bảo Ninh, Women's Voices, Feminism

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## I . Introduction

Feminist criticism as a literary approach emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, expressing a sense of resistance to the long-standing male-centered ideas of patrilineality. This order recognizes male power, and the right to dominate women. Finnish critic Keskinen Mikko describes this inequality in this manner: “The masculine master has not only the power to speak but also to command, and the servant holds the position of quiet submission” (Mikko 2000: 1). Resisting the discrimination, and the “servant”/ “quiet submission” positioning, feminists call for the establishment of women's “voices” as a way of fighting against oppression. The voice, according to Mikko, “is common, as if naturally, taken to connote presence, immediate self-expression, and intentionality of a speaking subject” (Mikko 2000: 2). Mikko continues: “Not only does the voice sound fantastic but it also provides a heuristic ground for realizing such fantasies as equality and freedom of speech” (Mikko 2000: 12). Quoting the results of a survey on voice in feminist criticism by American musicologists Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones, Mikko asserts that the concept of “voice” has been used to mean “cultural agency, enfranchisement, sexual autonomy, and expressive political freedom, all of which has been denied to women” (Mikko 2000: 3). Thus, “voice” can be understood as a metaphor, and establishing “voice” alludes to women's attempts to regain their own experiences. Whether it is “silenced by oppression” or “amplified by feminist criticism,” voice “is a token of origin and essential, unchanging womanhood” (Mikko 2000: 4). It shows women's abilities to speak out as a way of resisting the oppression of a male-dominated culture.

In this article, I will explore how women's voices are constructed in two works, *The Sun Also Rises* by American novelist Ernest Hemingway and *The Sorrow of War* by Vietnamese novelist Bảo Ninh. The women's voices in the two novels, as this article

suggests, are characterized by women's desire for self-determination, where they are able to free themselves from domination, and even influence men's psychology and actions. the two works, the article aims to highlight different ways in which women assert their agency. The article affirms the potential contribution of cultural contexts in examining feminist voices and understanding how female figures are made to overcome default passivity and submission to male domination.

*The Sun Also Rises* is the first novel of Hemingway, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954. The work has two central characters Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley, both representing the “lost generation,” coping with life after years of severe physical and mental trauma. The novel evokes “the impermanence of love and the certainty of pain and death” (Harold Bloom 2007: 15). When published in 1926, it received mixed reception, and had since then become one of America’s widely reviewed novels. (Harold Bloom 2007: 13).

Meanwhile, *The Sorrow of War* is the first and only novel by Bảo Ninh. Published in 1990 under the title *Thân phận của tình yêu* (*The Fate of Love*), the novel is a “history of fate” and uses the point of view of North Vietnam soldier, Kiên, who fights the war against the US. Critic Hoàng Ngọc Hiến considers that novel as combining the themes of war, love, and creativity (1991: 114). As in *The Sun Also Rises*, the novel also depicts a love story, that of Kiên and Phương, amidst the the tragedy of wars. It is “a world with no home, no roof, no comforts [...], without real men, without real women, without feeling” (Bảo Ninh 1998: 28).

One way or another, all the female protagonists in *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Sorrow of War*, directly experience wars, losses, and disillusionment. The article will look at the female characters of the works from the context and consequences of their respective wars, by examining their representations and dynamics with the

male characters.

## II. Representation of Female Beauty

*The Sun Also Rises* and *The Sorrow of War* have different perceptions women. In *The Sun Also Rises*, the character Brett is described as embodying beauty that blends masculine and feminine features. Brett's body possesses "curves like the hull of a racing yacht" (Hemingway 2006: 22). Also, she knows how to accentuate her curves by wearing "a slipover jersey sweater and a tweed skirt" (Hemingway 2006: 22). Unlike traditional women, Brett has short hair "brushed back like a boy's" (Hemingway 2006: 22). Brett asserts her manliness in both her beliefs and lifestyle. She often appears in public places, discos, pubs, even bullrings—all male spaces. Brett's heavy drinking and smoking challenge conventions, instilling tension wherever she appears. A neighbor who witnesses Brett's drunken act comments: "Last night I found her not so gentle. Last night I formed another idea of her. But listen to what I tell you. She is très, très gentille. She is of very good family" (Hemingway 2006: 50). Brett is "not so gentille" because drunkenness is seen as an unconventional quality for women. This is also in contrast to her family background. For Rena Sanderson, Brett is "the epitome of the modern woman" (Sanderson 1996: 177).

Unlike Brett, Phương in *The Sorrow of War* is portrayed with dominant feminine characteristics. Her beauty is not expressed from a male-driven perspective. The narrative voices out Phương's appearance as sexy and attractive. Phương's beauty is "obvious, brilliant, reckless and outstanding" (Bảo Ninh 2007: 147). She has "white skin," "fair complexion" and "immortal and sparkling brown eyes" (Bảo Ninh 2007: 207). "Her hair waves heavy with water" (Bảo Ninh 2007: 114), "her soft fragrant embraces" (Bảo Ninh 2007: 128), and "a curtain of beautiful long hair almost covers his face" (Bảo



Ninh 2007: 154). All these make up the beauty of Hanoi women – feminine, sexy, and charming.

The discourse on hair suggests an interesting discussion. Hair as crowning glory may be related to the domination of political will, which Pheng Cheah describes as “the presumption of one culture’s frame of reference as universal and known; the other’s as different, unknown, and thus inferior” (according to Friedman 2013: 35).. Accordingly, Brett’s short hair indicates “usurpation” of women over men, reflecting the fact that the feminist struggle emerged in the beginning of the twentieth century. Hemingway’s depiction of Brett may be related to the context of the feminist struggle, which in the US climaxed in the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment of 1920, recognizing women’s right to vote. This puts women equal to men in political activities. Socially, Brett’s physical and personality traits are expressions of the “new type of woman” who dares to make her own moral principles and living standards. “Brett’s fashion and lifestyle put her in (a position that is an) “antithesis (to) her corseted, ruffled, and straitlaced Victorian foremother” (Donaldson 1996: 178). No longer “corseted” or “straitlaced,” Brett wears a slipover jersey sweater. Without long hair, Brett behaves more independently, as if like the men around her: drinking, smoking, and engaging in sex. James Nagel asserts that: “Brett is by no means the first representation of a sexually liberated, free-thinking woman in American literature but rather an embodiment of what became known as the “New Woman” in nineteenth-century fiction” (Nagel 1996: 92). To be “sexually liberated” or “free-thinking” may be regarded as an attempt to break free from conventional gender positioning.

Meanwhile, Phuong’s long hair encapsulates Vietnamese conception of a woman’s appropriate self-presentation, aside from industry, good communication skills, and virtue. Psychoanalytically, Phuong’s beauty may also be seen as responding to claims made by

Sigmund Freud who considers “the essential difference” between the moral development of the little girl and the little boy (Freud, 2001: 178). The female body here is completely independent of the symbols that signify male authority.

Moreover, the novel also appears to highlight Phương's outstanding female naturalism in her motherly qualities. The love between Phương and Kiên as schoolchildren may be described as the love between a mother and a son. A memory of a distant past characterizes this. Along the shores of Hồ Tây one night, Phương takes care of Kiên like a mother as “he placed his head inside her arm, as a little boy... She comforted him with soft words about his father... (and) he moved gently and began sucking her, softly at first, then with a strong passion, holding her breasts between both hands and tasting her, young and sweet” (Bảo Ninh 1998: 132). Phương is compared to a young mother who has “soft words about his father” and Kiên is described as “(placing) his head inside her arm... sucking her” like a newborn. Phương's story about Kiên's father in this memory assembles a new language, where the mother's law, the female's law is obeyed. In “holding her breasts” and sucking them like a newborn, Kiên seems to transmit the power of motherhood. At the front, Kiên is followed by this memory even “among the dead and surrounded by suffering, he often dreamed of and felt her warm flesh again and tasted her virgin milk, in his dreams, it was that which had given him the magical vitality to become the strongest, the luckiest, the greatest survivor of the war” (Bảo Ninh 1998: 133). The “virgin milk” strengthens Kiên, even while facing adversities. It evokes a return to the mother. Regarding this feminist mode Mikko points out: “The maternal voice which the baby listens to is a woman's voice but it has the overtone of the voice-in-general; it is the voice of a mentor, authority, master which only later is specified as that of a mistress” (2000: 7). In this situation, the maternal voice plays mentor, authority, and master.

For French critic and psychoanalyst Hélène Cixous: "Woman embodies the divine Mother and her primordial voice, just like an infant sucks milk from its mother's breast" (Mikko 2000: 9).

Unlike Hemingway who depicts Brett as strong and masculine, Bảo Ninh portrays Phương with a gentle, feminine charm. However, Phương is not positioned inside her traditional space and function of keeping house and raising a family. The story renders her in the middle of history where she experiences the vicissitudes of life. When the US is about to attack North Vietnam, she receives vague but powerful premonitions. She sings a song on Đồ Sơn beach in August 1964, signalling the coming situation: "From now on, what harsh wind will blow on the world..." (Bảo Ninh 2007: 206). The fierce wind, she adds, blows obscurity and loss, indicating terrifying devastation: "Fearing that we won't be able to live and love... It is not in time that it is all gone!" (Bảo Ninh 2007: 207). On the other hand, Brett's actions can be seen as typical of the 1920s woman in America. In *The New York Times*, Margaret O'Leary once commented: "the modern young girl is a delight. She dresses simply and sensibly, and she looks life right straight in the eye; she knows just what she wants and goes after it, whether it's a man, a career, a job, or a new hat!" (1922: 49). Brett reproduces the type of modern woman that O'Leary describes. Meanwhile, US aggression becomes the context and motivation for women to participate in family and society tasks. Though Phương does not go to the frontline, and to a certain extent chooses indifference, her experience shows how wars become great equalizers. Men and women alike made sacrifices in order to be free..

The personalities of Brett and Phương in the two novels are both beyond the traditions, although each girl differently lives a "modern" life. Brett lives actively, strong as a man. Phương lives deeply, understanding the nature of the times. Both express an establishment of voice and the affirmation of a woman's awareness

of beauty and feminine values. However, in a male-dominated culture, a woman's voice often finds itself opposed. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Pedro Romero engages in a relationship with Brett. He wants to possess Brett and turn her “more womanly” (Hemingway 2006: 242). He also insists that Brett grows back her hair long, a condition for marriage. Giving up her freedom means being a wife and mother to Romero's children, a very strong demand. Romero's proposal to Brett reflects what most women go through, as far as the feminist struggle is concerned: “The feminist challenge is vital to locating invisible and silenced women and restoring them and their voices to rhetorical history” (Glenn 1997: 2). Brett's decision to leave Romero affirms the establishment of a woman's voice which breaks the “invisible” and “silenced” position.

*The Sorrow of War*, on the other hand, shows an interesting contrast between Kiên and Phương responses to the latter's being raped at Thanh Hóa station. Phương's calmness surprises Kiên. He is perplexed, not seeing a hysterical or desperate Phương. As in the usual, she acts indifferently. The excerpt below fully captures Kiên's attempts to understand what Phương is going through:

He thinks, perhaps it is the surrender to the so-called new fate, Phương has now regained her consciousness, and balance, calmly wiping away the sufferings, ruthlessly burying what she used to praise as pureness and goodness. But that means an end!—Kiên thinks and understands he will abandon Phương and ignore her fate (Bảo Ninh 2007: 268).

The third person point of view shows Kiên's repeated speculations. From his limited perspective, Phương does not appear to suffer, and this typifies the easy assumptions of a masculine figure. Her demeanor is very complex. Most Vietnamese women are subjected to this kind of simplistic perspective, where they are only measure by way of virtues and anti-virtues. Obviously, Phương transcends simplification when she behaves differently from what

Kiên expects. With balance and calm, she chooses to suffer in silence, like many who have “historically internalized the social pressures to be chaste, obedient, and silent” (Glenn 1997: 179). These women may be chaste or obedient, but never silent. Their silence are always pregnant with meaning. “These women still have much to tell us—all we have to do is listen to their voices and their silences” (Glenn 1997: 179). Not being able to decipher Phương’s silence and leaving her after her tragic experience are his ultimate failures.

### III. Re-establishing Women’s Position

In the feminist struggle, the establishing of women's voices must always be set in contrast with men's voices. Myra Jehlen (1981) asserts that feminists need a fulcrum from men's position to reiterate the power of their voices. Mikko observes that in history, “the symmetry between the female and male voices is far from being perfect. Woman is doomed to lose the voice which she never really had, whereas man becomes the voice which he imitated all the time” (2000: 8). In the binary scheme, the male has always been in the privileged position, and the female in the marginalized, always prone to losing her voice. Man raises his voice and metaphorically imposes his privilege and being the first sex. He is downgraded to the second sex, the position ascribed to the woman, if he loses it. He becomes silent, and passive. The struggle for women's rights reverses dualistic views, eliminating “negative stereotypes (e.g. silence, passivity, deception, and confusion) as is often associated with women” (Duncan 2004: 2-3). In this section, I will analyze how two novels repeatedly push men into passivity and repositioned women as active and even dominant agents.

Firstly, the novels ascribe the male characters the role of observers. *The Sun Also Rises* is told in the first person point-of-view

of the main character, Jake Barnes. He connects the diverse relationships in the expatriate community living in Paris in the years after World War I. Meanwhile, *The Sorrow of War* is told in the third person point-of-view, but follows the character Kiên who throughout the story is in the process of “refighting of the war” and remembering people in light of the Vietnam War. Though different in points-of view, both novels elucidate the suffering and unhappiness caused by the traumas of love and war.

Barnes is a veteran of World War I. The war leaves him with wounds in the genitals, causing him to permanently lose the ability to have sex. He falls in love with Brett, once a nurse during the war. He does not satisfy Brett, and accepts her attachment to other men. He lives a stoic life on the sidelines, and becomes fond of Spanish bullfighting festivals. Brett meets Romero in one of the bullfights. Barnes gets entangled in a dilemma as he feels “(sending) a girl off with one man... (introducing) her to another to go off with him” (Hemingway 2006: 240). When Brett leaves Romero, it is Barnes who “(goes) and (bringing) her back. And (signing) the wire with love” (Hemingway 2006: 240). In the process, Barnes shows his enduring patience, most especially in bitter circumstances. Both the world war and bullfighting arena defeat him. He is rendered powerless.

On the other hand, Kiên's privilege is also tempered. He appears to be confused and passive in relation to women. He loses his wit and initiative when he a woman neighbor allows him to hide in the bomb shelter, when he witnesses Phương's rape, and when he walks into the mute woman's room. Gradually, after intense psychological pain, Kiên also closes his heart. After the war, he locks himself in a lonely room to live with the past, observing himself and seeing his life like a river where all are “disappearing and drifting far away” (Bảo Ninh 2007: 130). Kiên and Phương's post-war life only prove to be bitter, as the woman predicted: “Maybe until we die, we will still be virgins... but we love each other so much.” (Bảo

Ninh 2007: 210). Unable to open his heart to other women, Kiên “fights against his life alone, unrealistically, bitterly, full of difficulties and mistakes” (Bào Ninh 2007: 54). In that tragic battle, he finds “his new life which is his past youth lost in the sorrowful war” (Bào Ninh 2007: 93). From conventional male perspective, this passivity is deplorably feminine. While the women around him move on, and beyond the control of men, he stays in stasis. Redstockings supposes that when we “identify the agents of (women's) oppression as men... All power structures throughout history (become) male-dominated and male-oriented. All men receive economic, sexual, and psychological benefits from male supremacy. All men have oppressed women” (1969: 100). In Kiên, however, the male figure is disempowered, while woman's voices abound.

Looking more closely at the men's sex lives, an assumed indicator of male power, it may be observed that having experiences trauma, both male characters engage in masochism and sadomasochism. In Hemingway's novel may be found this:

Brett's face was white and the long line of her neck showed in the bright light of the flares. The street was dark again and I kissed her. Our lips were tight together and then she turned away and pressed against the corner of the seat, as far away as she could get. Her head was down.

“Don't touch me,” she said. “Please don't touch me.”

“What's the matter?”

“I can't stand it.” (2006: 23)

Meanwhile, in Bào Ninh: “He controls her violently, destroys her with his mysterious, thorough, and perilous loneliness” (2007: 127).

Hemingway's narration illustrates the unusual state of the relationship between Barnes and Brett. There is obvious misery in

the rapid change from powerful longing in the back seat of a taxi to motionless anguish as if they were strangers. Michael Reynolds notes that, "Jake (Barnes) has all the sexual drives of a normal man but has none of the physical equipment to satisfy those drives. From this information, we must assume that his testicles are intact, and his phallus is missing" (1998: 25). Considering Barnes's inability, sex means suffering and punishment, for both, and in the end somewhat an instance of masochism. For Richarch C. Robertiello, masochism "is the turning of destructive drives against the self," and "when we talk about a sexual masochist, we are referring to someone who cannot enjoy the sexual act unless it is accompanied by pain, humiliation, or submission" (1970: 56). In Barnes, we see the convergence of pain, humiliation, and submission, but not the pleasures of the sexual act. Quoting Freud, Robertiello thinks that "a masochistic attitude was an essential inborn part of the female sexual role and the female sexual response" (according to 1970: 56). In the case of Hemingway, this is inverted: masochism from the male causes great unhappiness for the female.

Meanwhile, Kiên's unmanly tryst with the mute woman quoted briefly shows his signs of sadomasochism. Marie France describes sadomasochism "as a consensual sexual practice (that) can rouse feelings very high on both sides, resulting in accusations that lesbian feminist sadomasochists are not contesting the structures of desire but merely aping the pattern of sexual relations under the patriarchy and counter-accusations of repression and censorship" (1984: 35). From this perspective, Kiên's sexual relation with the mute woman illustrates repression and censorship as he controls the woman violently, as if he is destroyer. There is no pleasure in this, as it is structured on patriarchal sex. Kiên may not be like Barnes but he is as mentally injured. He is also unable to love as sex with the mute woman is done out of revenge for his tragic fate.

There may be more to the loss of passion in these cases, as



Lê Lâm argues about suffering and sexual activity in Hemingway (2015: 85). There is also the death of love in World War I, "one of the most persistent themes of the twenties" (Spilka 1969: 73). This may also be extended to Kiên's inability to love. It is a form of illness, after the war distorts the spiritual life of people. Barnes and Kiên have been made miserable by the wars they went through, that they have consequently nothing to give. In effect, they have also lost their privileged position.

Meanwhile, the females go on to assert their agency and louden their voices. The liberated Brett subverts male domination and is surrounded by passive, weak, and dependent men. She gets engaged to a man she does not love (Mike Campbell), falls in love with a man she can't marry (Barnes), accidentally seduces a man who mistakes her caring attitude for love (Robert Cohn), and falls in love with a younger man (Romero). Mimi Reisel Gladstein describes Brett "destructive indestructible," and not to be faulted for being "devastatingly attractive to men" (1986: 59). On the other hand, Phương has always been conscious of her life choices since she was young and since Kiên left her. After she is raped and loses her virginity, she overcomes her terrible pain, calmly defy fate as she "raises her head and drinks long sips of water" and "breaks dry food and puts it in her mouth to chew casually" (Bảo Ninh 2007: 262). She sets straight the value system and expectations imposed on her lives an indifferent life. She doesn't allow pain to torment her, brushes aside the shame.

Brett embodies an era of growing female emancipation. James Nagel emphasizes that "by the 1920s there were some eighty feminist societies in Paris enrolling more than sixty thousand women in support of their cause; to some extent, their influence on sexual mores and social codes is given embodiment in the character of Brett Ashley" (1996: 92). Scott Donaldson supports this perspective by offering convention:

Brett resembles a traditional man in her sexual expectations, and Jake resembles a traditional woman in his sexual unavailability and his uncomplaining tolerance of others' inconsiderations. The reversal, both overt and implied, in their gender roles signals that something has gone awry between the sexes (1996: 179).

In the aforementioned reality, women are taught to think, perceive, and interpret like men (Fetterley, 1981: 20). It is only men that have the right to express themselves and speak for themselves, as "all men are immutably violent simply because they are men" (McCarry 2007: 405-406). This state is subverted by *The Sun Also Rises*, where the female does not only become the object but the agent of desire.

In contrast, while Phương is clearly severed from the highly politicized recognition of the place and contributions of women in the socialist movement (Hồ Khánh Vân 2020: 71-72), she clearly transgresses the traditional values of industry, appropriate self-presentation, good communication skills, and virtue. Her character asserts an individualistic voice that is active and adaptive to situations. She mainly shows strength and power through her absence. She haunts Kiên's memories and causes him constant suffering. After the war, Phương chooses to leave Kiên. In her silence, she "changes into the surprise of self-assertion" (Todd 1980: 17). Symbolically, Phương's absence reinforces the power of resistance.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In comparing *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Sorrow of War*, the article was able to show conversations about women's voices despite differences in cultural and geographic origins. Hemingway created a female character that possesses male characteristics reflecting the trend of the struggle for women's liberation in the context of

American history, culture, and society in the early decades of the twentieth century. Self-identifying as masculine and participating in men's supposed activities appear to establish gender equality. Bảo Ninh portrayed a woman that transgresses traditional values in the context of Vietnam War. Both written by male writers, the novels deploy reverse gender power where women resist male domination, and violate the dynamics. The novels even depicted the demise of their men.

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## Imagining the Countryside in Literatures of the Eastern Lands:

Juxtaposing “Dưới bóng hoàng lan” (“In the Ylang-Ylang  
Shade,” 1942) by Thạch Lam (Thach Lam, Vietnam) and  
“Антоновские яблоки” (“Antonov Apples”, 1900) by Иван  
Бунин (Ivan Bunin, Russia)



Do Thi Huong\*

### [ *Abstract* ]

Using Peter Barry’s conception of “outdoor environment” in discoursing nature and culture, this article analyzes images of the countryside in the short stories “Dưới bóng hoàng lan” (“In the Ylang-Ylang Shade”) by Thạch Lam (Thach Lam) and “Антоновские яблоки” (“Antonov Apples”) by Иван Бунин (Ivan Bunin). The two share portray the Eastern Lands, as may be seen in Vietnamese northern countryside and the East Slavic, Byzantine. The paper focuses on three aspects of the countryside—cultural values; traces of urban life and; the aspirations of people. The article aims to emphasize people’s desire to return to a type of nature that bears traces and harmonizes with human cultures.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Thạch Lam (Thach Lam), Иван Бунин (Ivan Bunin),  
Eastern Lands, countryside, nature, culture

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Vietnamese and Russian, unless indicated otherwise, are translations by the author.

## I . Introduction

Nowadays, it is undeniable that nature is becoming more and more important in human life. Nature leads people to “joy and laughter” (Schiller<sup>2</sup> in Dole 2010: 126). This value of nature is continually being recognized by recent researchers, especially ecocritics. While many ecocritics totally ignore culture as they appreciate the value of nature, many others look at how nature and culture strike a balance in ecological spaces. Peter Barry points four areas of the “outdoor environment” that articulate the dynamics of nature and culture: wilderness (e.g. deserts, oceans, uninhabited continents); scenic sublime (e.g. forests, lakes, mountains, cliffs, waterfalls); the countryside (e.g. hills, fields, woods); and domestic picturesque (e.g. parks, gardens, lanes) (Barry 2009: 246). Peter Barry affirms that the countryside and domestic picturesque often appear in literary works, often in the form of farms, fields, and gardens. I subscribe to Barry’s formulation, believing that farms, fields, and gardens are evocative in literary works because in them we see how nature embraces traces of human culture. Nature may be understood as the ecological or natural environment of man; culture, on the other hand, is an organic system of material and spiritual values created by man, accumulated in the process of practical interaction between people and nature and social environment. In the regard, the countryside is the house-garden space of Thanh’s grandmother in “Dưới bóng hoàng lan” (“In the Ylang-Ylang Shade”) by Thạch Lam (Thach Lam); and the entire estate in “Антоновские яблоки” (“Antonov Apples”) by Иван Бунин (Ivan Bunin) is a rural space where nature and culture converge. Nature and culture intertwine and harmonize in these narratives, and consequently preserve pleasant memories and virtues of people inhabiting them. This article uses the countryside to refer to both the countryside and the domestic picturesque.

This article examines images of the countryside in the literatures of the Eastern Lands, as articulated in Vietnam and

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<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) is a German poet, playwright, philosopher, and the most important representative of classical German Literature. He is dubbed the German Shakespeare.



Russia through the short stories mentioned. This article, which offers suggestive and recognitive perspectives on the Eastern Lands, emphasizes the importance of the countryside in the interaction between culture and nature, where the spiritual life of urban people are restored. Thạch Lam (Thach Lam) (1910-1942), a founding member of the writers' group Tự Lực Văn Đoàn<sup>3</sup>, wrote many short stories that capture the scenery and life in rural Cẩm Giàng, Hải Dương, Vietnam, his mother's hometown.<sup>4</sup> "In the Ylang-Ylang Shade," part of the collection *Sợi tóc* (*A Strand of Hair*, 1942), tells the story of Thanh's homecoming after two years of work in the province. The story narrates his impressions of idyllic Vietnam, as embodied by ylang-ylang flowers. Meanwhile, Иван Бунин (Ivan Bunin) (1870-1953), the first Russian writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, once belonged to an aristocratic family. He wrote deeply the idyllic countryside of the Russian estate<sup>5</sup>, owned by nobles, landowners, or peasants. In itself, the estate is "a continuation of the surrounding nature. The houses are closely linked with old orchards, fishponds with waterfalls, rows of wing houses, kitchens, barns, stables, and dog cages" (Радугин 2005: 262). The Russian estate then is also very much attached to nature: "The farm life is closely associated with nature, farming, hunting, family traditions, and peasants' life" (Радугин 2005: 262). In his memoir, Bunin remembers how he spent his childhood writing "original verses full of sadness" (Богомолов 2000: 542) in his family estate Buturky Village, Elesky District, Orlov Province. Nevertheless, life in the estate acquainted him with the land and culture, as well as the

<sup>3</sup> Tự Lực Văn Đoàn was founded in Hanoi, Vietnam. This literary school and movement renewed ferment and led the modernization of Vietnamese Literature in the early twentieth century. One of its most important principles is: "to glorify the beauties of the country, which has a quotidian mentality" (Phan Cự Đệ 2004: 529).

<sup>4</sup> On this issue there are articles: Đinh Quang Tồn. 1992. Thạch Lam và quê hương sáng tác. *Tạp chí Văn học* số 6(258): 20-22, Nguyễn Kim Hồng. 2001. Xu hướng hiện thực tâm lý qua các tác phẩm viết về làng quê của Thạch Lam. *Tạp chí Văn học* số 12 (358): 53-60.

<sup>5</sup> In the Award ceremony speech of the Swedish Academy read at the award ceremony of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Bunin on December 10, 1933, there is a passage: "But he had retained one thing from it: his love of the Russian land. He has hardly ever painted his marvelous countryside with such great artists as in some of these novellas". Hallström P.(1933), "Award ceremony speech". [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1933/press.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1933/press.html)

serene lives of peasants and small landowners. He also fell in love with their folk poems and songs. He faithfully replicates the scenery and daily activities of “harmonious” Russia<sup>6</sup> in “Antonov Apples” (1900), a four-part, first-person narrative of autumn reminiscences of a Vyselki village made more enthralling by the scent of Antonov Apples growing around.

Vietnam in Southeast Asia geographically belongs to the what has been categorized as the East, which usually include the rest of Asian and Africa (Trần Ngọc Thêm 1999: 14). From another perspective, the East is mainly composed of Asian civilizations: ancient China (which include Japan, Korea, and even Vietnam and the rest of the old Indochina); ancient India; and ancient Persia (Konrad 2007: 22). Ancient Egypt is later added to this group (Said 1977: 44). However, Russia is a special country, always perceived to be independent, and right in the middle of West and East. This perception originates from Russia’s geographical location of Russia stretching across Europe and Asia. Russians may view themselves the way they are viewed to be part of Europe. However, they are the most easternized in Europe—but not easternized like the rest of Asia. Making up most of Eastern Europe and North Asia, Russia historically associates itself with the Eastern Slavs, the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire, and the Eastern Orthodox Church, which broke away from Catholic Rome in 1054 during the Great Schism. That is the special point: “Russia cannot identify itself as the East, different from the West. Russia needs to be aware that it is also West, a West of the East to unite the two worlds” (Бердяев 2008: 30).

## II. Images of the Countryside

### 2.1. A Nourishing Countryside

Both Thach Lam and Bunin are inclined to be intuitively receptive of nature, past or present. “In the Ylang-Ylang Shade,” Thach Lam reconstructs the scenery of the old town as remembered by Thanh:

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<sup>6</sup> I allude to *Лад* (*Harmony*) by Vasily Belov, an ethnography of the ideal Russian countryside.

“The landscape still remained the same, the house was still quiet, and his grandma was still grey-haired and gentle.” (Thạch Lam 2015: 170). The entire compound form a tranquil garden space. The story begins with the house’s wooden door opening to a mossy Bát Tràng bricked path as a low flower-filled wall stretches to the eaves. Flanked by the floral walls is a verdant garden kissed by sunlight streaming through gaps in canopies “dancing with the wind.” (Thạch Lam 2015: 168). From Thanh’s perspective, the interior of the house darkens while the space outside remains vivid. Understanding that “the old house remained unchanged, exactly the same as the old days when he left” (Thạch Lam 2015: 168), Thanh returns gets out once again. He walks down the trellis of Tonkin jasmine where he sees his grandmother. It is as if “he had never left” (Thạch Lam 2015: 170). Upon entering the house later, he lies on a divan, looks out the window, and observes the garden: “Outside the window, the sky was blue, limpid and ever bright; the leaves fluttered in the gentle breeze. A tree trunk towered in front of him. At the same time, he muttered: “Ylang-ylang! Its subtle scent!” (Thạch Lam 2015:171). After which, “he quietly stood up, leaning on the window, crouching to look at the pond. The ylang-ylang shade stirred the whole area. Suddenly, he remembered and ran down to the wing of the house, cheerfully calling: “Nga...”” (Thạch Lam 2015: 171). Nga is “a next-door girl who still visited and played with him in the garden and every time he came back, he met her at home, just like someone dear” (Thạch Lam 2015: 172). Thanh and Nga break bread together and go for a walk in the garden, just as “they were little kids,” with “the ylang-ylang tree towering, with drooping branches welcoming them” (Thạch Lam 2015: 172). They may have grown up but the sentiments also remain unchanged. Surrounded by things of the olden days, as well as the ylang-ylang shade and its scent, Thanh inhabits eternity—eternal space, eternal landscape, eternal time full of actions, and eternal spiritual world. This story, placed alongside a string of other stories by Thạch Lam, reveals an ecological preference where old-time values restore anyone who spends time in the countryside. It may also be said that Thạch Lam’s life in the rural Cẩm Giàng was formative as far as this perspective is concerned.

The image of the garden also sprawls in “Antonov Apples.” The garden is serene and all around, the scent of Antonov apples wafting in the air: “I remember a fresh and quiet morning... The big garden, its dry and thinned-out leaves turning golden in the early light. I remember the avenue of maples, the delicate smell of the fallen leaves, and the scent of autumn apples—antonovkas, that mix of honey and fall freshness.” (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 408). The story details two estates: the first is owned by the narrator’s aunt Anna Gherasimovna of the storyteller; and the second by his brother-in-law Aksenii Semenuts. The first is famous for its trees bearing varieties of apples, such as antonovkas, belle barynyas, borovinkas, plodovitkas: “The estate is not large, but all of it is aged and solid, surrounded by willow trees and birches that are at least a century old... My aunt’s garden is well known for its neglected state, its nightingales, its turtledoves, and its apples” (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 412-413). Meanwhile, the other estate is known for having “a vast territory, a fifty-acre garden, with borzoi dogs or Kirghizia horses.” (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 413). The scenery refreshes and revitalizes the narrator. It even makes him indulge in sleep, as if time is standing still:

Occasional oversleeping to miss the hunt makes that rest particularly pleasant. I would wake up and stay in bed forever. The whole house is full of quietness... I would dress leisurely, then wander around the garden, pick an apple hidden in some wet leaves which has been accidentally forgotten, already wet and cold. I find this apple extraordinarily delicious somehow, completely different from other apples. (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 416).

The countryside in both stories sustain the material and spiritual needs of inhabitants. Both character return to the countryside because they find tranquility there. The narrator in “Antonov Apples,” for instance, has always found comfort in visiting the estates, even if it had fallen into disarray and decline years later. Memories of warmth and rejoicing never left, and the scent of home remained. Today, estates in Russia are considered as “emblems of the past...a very important element of modern culture” (Радугин 2005: 261). All in all, both estate and garden provide respite for the weary souls of the stories’ characters. The scent of apples and

ylang-ylang keep them coming home.

## 2.2. Countryside Fragrance and Moral Credence

The countryside also appear to share the common elements of scenery and experience. In “In the Ylang-Ylang Shade,” the countryside dark and damp with the “the smell of soil, the smell of moisture and the smell of burning garbage” (Thạch Lam 2015: 50). Upon his return, Thanh first experiences “the cool feeling of green bamboo leaves” (Thạch Lam 2015: 46). “The closed doors clattered, he gently came in. He felt pleasantly cool” (Thạch Lam 2015: 168). Among these naturally evocative experiences, the most powerful is the scent of the ylang-ylang, which signifies the pristine state of the locality. The scent always lures Thanh back because it brings back memories of love and a nostalgia for the place and its people. Also, the scent of ylang-ylang not only awakens memories of childhood in the wing of the house where Nga and his would cook. It also reminds of Thanh and Nga’s subtle affections, the unsaid between them. The scent has also always been gendered, feminine: “When they are close, Thanh could feel the subtle fragrance from Nga’s hair just like that of ylang-ylang. But ylang-ylang flowers have not fallen off; they are still fresh on the branches” (Thạch Lam 2015: 174). Both nature and femininity may be key in maintaining the idyllic and restorative order.

The exciting point of meeting between Thach Lam with Bunin also lies in the appearance of the feminine element in their compositions. It is no coincidence when researchers remark that Bunin’s poetry is “filled with colors and sounds and scents and monotonous paired rhymes,” especially “nature’s femininity extends back to Eve” (Reeve F.D. 2008: 655). The writer’s poetry and short stories all possess some strange compatibility and closeness: “the creative innovations in prose of Bunin were often prepared in his early poetry” (Двинятина Т. Bunin-lit.ru 16/6/2021. <http://bunin-lit.ru/bunin/kritika/dvinyatina-zametki-o-poezii-bunina.htm>). Bunin himself also admits: “If I want to, I could write any of my favorite stories into poetry” (Ло Сычэнь 2017: 421). Thus, nature in his poems and short stories is in the form of “feminine” appearance and essence. As seen in the quotes above, nature goes

hand in hand with fragrance. In “Antonov Apples,” it is the fragrance of Antonov apples. This fragrance relates to the past and preserves the eternal beauty of the past. This fragrance also has the *power* to recall the joys, emotions, and desires of man. In “Antonov Apples,” Antonov apples populate all four parts of the story. In the first three parts, Antonov apples are made concrete by way of image and aroma. In the end, Antonov apples remain only in the narrator's memory.

In Thach Lam's story, the ylang-ylang fragrance is associated with the female character Nga, the eternal fragrance and femininity. And in Bunin's short stories and poems, although nature has no association with any particular woman, it is still very charming to the storyteller. It is so overwhelming that the narrator must assert: “With not much land, life is still beautiful.” (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 418). Despite little land, there are still fields and hunting forests (despite the absence of borzoi dogs and Kirghizia horses), and sparsely leafy gardens (albeit not apple orchards). Russian philosophers always emphasize the harmony and oneness of femininity and nature, which is usually identified in various names including “Russian Mother Earth, Russian eternal femininity,” and “Russia is a dependent, negative land” (Бердяев 2008: 16). Perhaps, that could help explain why, despite the ups and downs, together with poverty, Russia with its nature, estates, and scenery are still all beautiful in the eye of the writer. As Бердяев (Berdiaev), a philosopher, once stated: “The exclusive domination of the Eastern qualities in Russia has always been a slave for the feminine nature” (Бердяев 2008: 30). Here, we could realize a significant difference in presenting nature and femininity in the two literary works. In “In the Ylang-Ylang Shade,” nature and femininity are two entities connected by fragrance, evoking feelings, and preserving memories of the characters. In “Antonov Apples,” nature and femininity have become a unity, so when the fragrance connecting the eternity and evoking sensations are gone, the memories of that natural-cultural landscape remain. This contention is an interesting perception of the nature of the two eastern elements in two stories of two writers, although two eastern lands are respectful of women and femininity. In *Cơ sở văn hóa Việt Nam (The cultural foundation of Vietnam)*, Trần

Ngọc Thêm affirms that respect for women is characteristic of the wet-rice agricultural culture of a Southeast country like Vietnam (Trần Ngọc Thêm 1999: 23). And the Russian philosopher Berdiaev considers Russian “becoming the Virgin Mary” (Бердяев 2008: 20). Simultaneously, this exciting perception also forces the readers to recognize and have a more careful view when examining and perceiving Eastern concepts in the culture and literature of Vietnam and the world.

Karen J. Warren (2000) highlights the relationship between women and ecology when it comes to various aspects, namely trees, forests, forestry, water and drought, food and agriculture, colored people, children, health, and climate justice. This data tends to be mechanical and quantitative. In this context, I would like to highlight a qualitative and abstract relationship, albeit on enduring philosophical and literary bases. In the romantic manifesto “On the sublime,” Schiller, more than once referred to nature by the pronoun *her* (the third-person pronoun, singular, female, often translated into Vietnamese: *Nàng*). Evidently, the fragrance here serves as a sensory connection: the originality, femininity, and eternity in each human being and scenery. *Từ điển biểu tượng văn hóa thế giới* (*The Dictionary of World Cultural Symbols*) not only asserts the role of fragrance as a factor to distinguish the immortality of goddesses from ordinary women but also affirms the symbolic values of fragrance for memories: “The lingering fragrance of a person after she has gone could kindle a conception of time and memories. Thus, the fragrance also symbolizes memories” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 2002: 461). Fragrance also “represents the awareness of conscience” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 2002: 461) as well, due to its purifying effect. This effect, together with the representation of conscience via the virtues of Thanh and Bunin’s narrator seems to be evident in “In the Ylang-Ylang Shade” and “Antonov Apples.” Still speaking of that return, Thanh and Bunin’s narrator show an attachment to the land and people in his homeland. Doctors and psychologists confirm that “fragrances and smells have the human psyche in power” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 2002: 462). Fragrance and the human senses link people and nature, and bring people closer to nature.

### III. Traces of the Urban in the Countryside

In “In the Ylang-Ylang Shade”, a city’s symbol, the product of urbanization and industrial civilization, is a train. However, Thanh refuses to use these once he set foot in his motherland. On the one hand, perhaps, he wants to be wholly immersed in the countryside. On the other hand, he also wants to preserve the silence and purity of this place. When his grandmother asks him why he has not taken the coach, Thanh replies: “Just a short dirt road, no need to drive. I can walk every day” (Thạch Lam 2015: 169). Also, the urban area with the train’s appearance in the story of Thạch Lam is nothing but the product of the colonial regime. When the French colonialists invaded Vietnam, France also rebuilt cities and combined with the railway transport system to meet socio-economic needs.<sup>7</sup> What came from the city at that time was considered bad for Vietnamese people, especially farmers.<sup>8</sup> Having rejected those products of civilization right at the entrance of his hometown, Thanh seemed to be seeking some ways of preserving the ecology and nature of the countryside from urbanization and colonization.

More interestingly, there are also some traces of civilization and industrialization in “Antonov Apples,” which is embodied the image of a train. That train appears at night in the first part of the story:

- Yes, it’s me. Aren’t you sleeping, Nikolay?
- Sleep’s not for us, sir. But it must be late already. Seems the night train’s coming now...

We listen for a long time, eventually discern a trembling in the ground. The trembling turns into noise, and soon it seems the train wheels are pounding out their rapid measure just beyond the garden:

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<sup>7</sup> As soon as they established dominance in Vietnam and Indochina, French colonialists prioritized the construction of projects with "strategic objectives: canals in Cochinchina, railways to the Vietnam-China border" (according to Lê Thành Khôi 2014: 507). The Vietnamese railway was built by the French in 1881, and in 1885 the first train departed (*Development history*, Vietnam railways corporation, <http://vr.com.vn/lich-su-phat-trien.html>).

<sup>8</sup> According to Trần Ngọc Thêm in *The Cultural Foundation of Vietnam*, the traditional Vietnamese people are inherently attached to village stability, especially “not value urban areas”, “the psychology of focusing on agriculture (rural), scorning commercial (urban) is everywhere” (Trần Ngọc Thêm 1999: 123).



rumbling and knocking, the engine flies toward us... closer, closer, ever louder and more furious... until its roaring suddenly subsides, dies off, as if the cars had sunk into the earth... (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 409-410).

It appears that the train, at that time, was not influential enough to affect or cause any harm to the peaceful, serene, and beautiful life of people in the country estates. However, in the fourth part of "Antonov Apples," although the narrator does not directly state the cause of deterioration and dilapidation of noble families - Russian country estates, the year of publication (1900) could potentially suggest some of the reality of Russian society at that time. At that time, Russian capitalism began to penetrate Russian social life, witnessing the feeble power of the monarchy, degeneration of the nobility, bourgeois-democratic revolutionary movements, and new development of proletariat revolutionary movements. Russian peasants and rural areas had to encounter major changes. In *Lịch sử văn học Nga (History of Russian Literature)*, Nguyễn Kim Đính wrote: "Entering the twentieth century, the center of the world revolutionary movement moved to Russia. The brutal tsarist regime is the 'jail of a hundred nations,' the oppression of the capitalist 'iron and steel bosses' is very heavy" (Đỗ Hồng Chung, Nguyễn Kim Đính et al. 2003: 466). However, the story by Bunin highlights that the Russian countryside at that time still shows a desirable life in harmony and closeness to nature. That life is encapsulated in just a single word "beautiful": "The aroma of antonovkas is disappearing from estates and country houses..." (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 418). Regardless of "the age of petty farms, owners on the verge of abject poverty. But even those impoverished lives are good!" (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 418). In the mind of the character *I*, the train and its terrible sound quickly had sunk into the earth. Obviously, like Thanh in "In the Ylang-Ylang Shade" who does not bring urban elements in the countryside, the character *I* do not want to ruin the peace of the Russian estate by the noisy sound of the train. Although the invasion of urban civilization is inevitable, beautiful memories may still be made of the estate of the pure countryside. Today, the Russian estates are deemed "a museum of living conditions for the real Russian society, not an abstract

representation of Russian culture” (Радугин 2005: 261). In early 1923 Russia, the *Society for the Studies of Russian Country Estates* with a new scientific discipline called “the study of estates” came into being. This existence of new scientific study highlights the role of the Russian country estates in the cultural and spiritual life of modern Russian people, especially the role of preserving cultural memories about the pure countryside.

#### IV. The Countryside and the Desire of Contemporary People

Narratives of the countryside and traces of urban in “In the Ylang-Ylang Shade” and in “Antonov Apples” suggest that it is humans who transform natural entities living and working spaces which then become the embodiments of the harmonious interaction between nature and humans. In these spaces, people can live in harmony with nature and in rural people's warmth and pure kindness. In “Antonov Apples,” more than once, the narrator confesses his desire to become a farmer: “There was a time when I found nothing more alluring than the life of a mouzhik” (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 411). Becoming a farmer, he “will be riding through the village on a sunny morning, taking a scythe into the fields, threshing the wheat, sleeping on sacks of straw on the threshing floor” (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 411-412). Especially the farmer will “get up with the sun on holidays as church bells ring” (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 411-412). And “that mouzhik” will have “lunch at the home of your bearded father-in-law-a lunch of hot mutton served on wooden plates with sifted-flour bread, with honey from the comb, and homemade beer-one could wish for nothing more” (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 411-412). That dream is apparently associated with a historical context. That is, in Russia, when Populism was thriving, many intellectuals and nobles were engrossed in forming an attachment to peasants and the countryside, typically some extreme wishes and actions of the Count - writer Лев Толстой (Lev Tolstoy)<sup>9</sup> towards whom Bunin always showed his admiration. Bunin also approached

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<sup>9</sup> Lev Tolstoy (1828-1910) is a great Russian writer and thinker of the nineteenth century, the author of classic work novels: *Война и мир* (*War and Peace*), *Анна Каренина* (*Anna Karenina*), *Воскресение* (*Resurrection*).

Populism quite a lot through his brother (See Богомолов 2000: 544-548). Populism is a movement of Utopian Socialism for peasants of the young Russian intelligentsia in the late 19th century. The founders are А.И.Герцен (A.I. Ghersen), and Н.Г.Чернышевский (N.G. Chernyshevsky). In the 1870s, the most prominent thinkers of Populism included П.Л.Лавров (P.L. Lavrov), М.А.Бакунин (M.A. Bakunin) and Н.К.Михайловский (N.K. Mikhailovsky). Populism represents the ideology of peasant democracy with a dream of advancing to socialism and bypassing capitalism in the form of rural communes. (Populists asserted that the peasantry (led by intellectuals) was a major driving force of the revolutions. In the 1870s and 1880s, Populism played an active role in fighting against the Tsar. However, Populism, later, became an obstacle to the propagation of Marxism in Russia) (Ильичев Л.Ф. 1983: 515). In both real-life and his compositions, Lev Tolstoy always showed his favor and good endings to characters in rural areas, particularly rural nobles (provincial nobles) like the old Duke Болконский (Bolkonsky)<sup>10</sup> in *Война и мир* (*War and Peace*) or Левин (Levin)<sup>11</sup> in *Анна Каренина* (*Anna Karenina*). Even Нехлюдов (Nekhliudov)<sup>12</sup> in “Утро помещика” (“The Landowner’s Morning”) is an ideal model for the noble landowner of Tolstoy. Bunin, in writing of “Antonov Apples,” appears to have implicitly engaged in a dialogue with the great writer about the rurality, together with the social status of the rurality and peasant. Tolstoy realized that the rurality and peasant were the roots of the Moscow nobility to feed that nobility, he called

<sup>10</sup> Old Duke Bolconsky in *War and Peace* by Lev Tolstoy is the father of Duke Andrei Bolconsky, a retired general-commander of the army; he lives in the countryside on his large estate. He loves his children and loves labor, especially hates the frivolous aristocracy in the capital.

<sup>11</sup> Levin is a provincial aristocratic landowner in Lev Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Levin has valuable property in the country, and he has many serfs. Levin wishes to live all his life in the peaceful countryside, surrounded by his serfs. Levin also cherishes plans and projects for rural reform to "pursue a peaceful life for the Russian countrymen." Levin loves Kitty, a noble lady in Moscow. However, only after Kitty failed in love with the pompous guy Vronsky, Kitty agrees to marry Levin. Kitty accepts to return to the countryside with Levin to live a quiet and noble life here.

<sup>12</sup> Nhekhludov is the main character in Lev Tolstoy's short story “Утро помещика” (“The Landowner’s Morning”). Nhekhludov gives up his career in the noisy and gaudy urban to stay on his family's estate in the countryside and take care of his peasants to re-educate them.

them as “people who make a living” (Trần Thị Phương Phương 2000: 13). However, it appears that the rurality (particularly rural nature) and peasant in his eyes are not beautiful, harmonious, pure, original, and eternal as in the literary works of Bunin. From the perspective of poor nobles living in a rural hamlet, Bunin emphasizes that the rurality is always beautiful when it belongs to itself and when it exists in harmony with people, albeit in urbanization.

Speaking of Vietnamese Literature, Hoàng Đạo - Thạch Lam's brother, was also pillar of Tự Lực Văn Đoàn. In his novel, *Con đường sáng* (*The Bright Road*)<sup>13</sup>, Hoàng Đạo depicted two characters Duy – Thơ, based on the model of Nhekhludov and Levin - Kitty of Lev Tolstoy. In *The Bright Road*, Duy and Thơ tried to integrate with the countryside life and farmers. They tried to build new-style cottages for farmers and guide them to lead a civilized life. In the eyes of intellectuals who advocated reformism like Duy and Thơ, apart from nature, the countryside is rustic, and the peasants are dirty and disheveled. However, in Thạch Lam's works, especially “In the Ylang-Ylang Shade,” Thạch Lam views the countryside through a more different eye, gentle, honest, harmonious, and beautiful. The reason for this is because Thạch Lam lived and maintained a strong attachment to the countryside and farmers (while his fourth brother, Hoàng Đạo, mainly studied in urban areas) (cited in Nguyễn Thị Thế 1974: 46-49). The true ecological life creates a sense of precious and pure ecology in his works, adding a voice in the dialogue, even re-adjusting the perception of urban readers about the rural areas in Vietnam at that time. His contribution plays a significant role in the contemporary literary and social context and even in this modern society.

Thus, the garden, the house, the water tank, the trellis of Tonkin jasmine, the bricked yard, and the flower-filled wall stretching to the house in “In the Ylang-Ylang Shade” (a cultural memory of the countryside in Vietnam for such a long time) and the

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<sup>13</sup> *Con đường sáng* (*The bright road*) is a novel about Duy, a petty-bourgeois intellectual young man who returns to the countryside because of hating a revelry and leisure life in the city. Duy and Thơ (his wife) teach the poor peasants to live in hygiene, live in harmony, and be equal with them.

Russian estate, are natural-man made products under the influence of culture and civilization to serve the needs of food, accommodation, labor, and rest, and today, have become a target that modern people aspire to own. However, undeniably, they are also the embodiment of people's search for harmony and balance between the satisfaction of humans' feelings and material needs on the one side and spiritual enjoyment on the other side. It is in these are natural man made products that help people get as close to nature as possible without destroying it, and then being "punished" by it.

Nowadays, the dream of living in nature is common among many people, including many Russians and contemporary Russian writers. In recent compositions, they have always been looking for "paradise." Their characters all find paradise in remote rural areas where people live close to and in harmony with nature. They are the narrators in the short story of Ключарёва Наталья (Natalya Klucharova) "Один год в раю" ("One Year in Paradise"), or in "Дом в деревне" ("The Country House") of Алексей Варламов (Aleksei Varlamov). The narrator in "One Year in Paradise" moves back to a wild rural area called Paradise after accidentally getting lost here, and it takes many years for the narrator in "The Country House" to seek and realize his dream of a house in a remote village with an old garden and sauna, surrounded by a river and a forest. That self-sufficient life is close to nature. Not only Eastern people who are supposed to have a mindset of living in harmony with nature, but also people from the Western world (regarding geographical location, half of Russia belongs to the West), who desire to conquest nature, all towards nature. They want to live in harmony with pristine, pure nature; especially when humans increasingly destroy nature through conquest. That ecology, in this context, is nature in harmony with human culture and has expressed its intrinsic values based on satisfying human feelings. That satisfaction just comes from a fragrance at times, like the scent of ylang-ylang in "In the Ylang-Ylang Shade," and the scent of Antonov apples in "Antonov Apples." In short, though distant when it comes to year and place of publication, both these literary works demonstrate the beauty and immutability of nature, in which nature has been transformed and

harmonized with human culture in the context of urbanization. Such interpretation is particularly potent in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when people seek ways to build farms and get back to nature (Pannell D.J. 2000: 70). Is that a way to honor ecology, albeit late and quite phony? An example to illustrate is that the Natural History Museum in the United Kingdom held an exhibition of the Urban Nature Project on June 22, 2021 to help people reconnect with the natural world and find practical solutions to preserve our planet's future. In this event, Duchess Kate Middleton from the British Royal family also brought honey from the Anmer Hall estate of her family for school children. (Perry, Simon. People.com 22/6/2021. See more at <https://people.com/royals/kate-middleton-natural-history-museum/>).

## **V . Conclusion**

Both Bunin and Thach Lam spent such a long time living and forming a strong attachment to the countryside. In adulthood, they started living and working in urban areas, leaving their homeland behind (Thach Lam living in Hanoi, Bunin living abroad), but most of their works are about their homeland with wild rural nature and people. To them, the pure rural natural world is really a paradise of the soul. Moreover, it is a memory store that preserves people and nations' cultural, moral, and religious values. By their writings, the two authors affirm the value of connecting ecology with human feeling and spirit. That value helps nourish people in this contemporary and modern society. It is the ideal world and the paradise that people of modern societies are looking for. By their writings, the two authors also suggest that fragrance (in relation to femininity) has the value of eternalizing nature and associating it with people instead of degenerating them. By juxtaposing the two works, examining images of the countryside in these two works, the readers could learn more about literature and people of the past. It turns out that people at the beginning of the industrial era desired an eternal world in harmony with nature. Besides criticizing the consequences of civilization (bourgeois habits, greed for money, disruption of urbanization to harmonious nature), humanity has always longed for a world in which people live peacefully and in

harmony with nature. It also turns out to be the most original and beautiful desire of humans.

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## **The Autonomization of French and Vietnamese Literature: Comparing Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) and Vũ Trọng Phụng (1912-1939)**



Phùng Ngọc Kiên\*

### **[ Abstract ]**

This paper compares the French Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) and the Vietnamese Vũ Trọng Phụng (1912-1939), and explores transformations of their aesthetic experiences that led to the autonomization of French literary field in the nineteenth century and Vietnamese in the early twentieth century. Inspired from the term “archive” coined by Michel Foucault, this article argues that Flaubert, in abandoning the bourgeois tastes, contested realism and built his own writing ideology and style, which is called subjective realism. On the other hand, it also argues that Vũ Trọng Phụng, through the popular report genre, he gained success and evolved his own novel writing style, aptly called the realism of speech. It is ostensible that the transformation in the two authors' writing style and aesthetic experience was derived from the way they distanced themselves from their contemporaries' common tastes while making use of free indirect speeches, all with the aim of granting readers the autonomy of reading.

**Keywords:** Gustave Flaubert, Vũ Trọng Phụng, literary field, autonomy

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## I . Introduction

In his essay "Fantasia of the Library" (1967), Michel Foucault suggests that a writer's writing is formed "in a fundamental relationship" of pre-existing records, especially books across times and spaces. He coined the term "archive" to refer to the world of texts and associated knowledge, in dynamic and complex arrangements that actualize the writing of the text and reading (Foucault: collective 1983: 107). Foucault's term of "archive" suggests the possibility of a comparison model that interweaves or parallels books and authors that are geographically, chronologically, and historically unrelated to each other in order to understand the formation and transformation of aesthetic subjectivity of a time. Thus, the article aims to go beyond the literary comparison of the influences which one can see elsewhere in Tôn-Thất Thanh-Vân (2011) or Lại Nguyên Ân (2014) on the original writing of Vũ Trọng Phụng. Inspired by Foucault's idea, this paper compares two authors, the French Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) and the Vietnamese Vũ Trọng Phụng (1912-1939), examining transformations of their aesthetic experiences that led to the autonomization of the French literary field in the nineteenth century and the Vietnamese literary field in the early twentieth century. By disengaging certain historical connections between these two authors, the metropolitan and the colonial, respectively of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this article narrates the social contexts out of which two authors' aesthetic styles and experiences transformed. This article argues that Flaubert, in abandoning the bourgeois tastes, contested realism pervasive during his time, with the aim of building his own writing ideology and style, subjective realism. It also argues that Vũ Trọng Phụng, through the popular report genre, he gained success and evolved his own novel writing style, aptly called the realism of speech. It is ostensible that the transformation in the two authors' writing style and aesthetic experience were derived from the way they distanced themselves from their contemporaries' common tastes while making use of free indirect speeches, all in the aim of granting readers the autonomy of reading.

The term "autonomy" is borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu

(1920-2001), referring to the state of the French literary field in the second half of the 19th century, where the writer took advantage of the freedom of creation at the basis of the liberation of markets and institutions. By “literary field,” Bourdieu means that French Literature was modernized due to its internal transformations, independent from external economic or political demands (Bourdieu 1984: 113-121). Accordingly, French writers were freed from the economic and political benefits associated with their works, in order to exclusively focus on creating literary values. In this pivotal moment turn towards modernity, Flaubert marked the presence of the French literary field through three elements. There is the emergence of the public, distantiation, and generic characteristics. A question then arises: how did this model of autonomy potentially exist in other societies' spaces, especially in the colonies, which did not have the material conditions? The comparison of Flaubert and Vu Trong Phung, two authors belonging to two different literary fields, potentially reveals the modernization of the Vietnamese literary field during the colonial period. Such modernizing process can be reconstructed through virtual crossings of literary experiences among the two authors who experienced different historical, political, and cultural contexts.

## **II . New Readership of Bourgeois Societies**

It is the emergence of the bourgeoisie that allowed the expansion of the culture industry. Newspapers and soap operas (*feuilletons*) were read by everyone, from the common people to the bourgeoisie, from ministerial offices to the court, and evidently “Industrialism has penetrated literature after transforming the press”<sup>1</sup> (Cassagne 1979: 115). This led to the fact that public taste was decided by industrialists and soap operas churned out narratives full of cliché to the point that “we have become accustomed to measuring the value according to the profit that 'they [popular works] have brought back” (Cassagne 1979: 95). According to Bourdieu, “development of the press is one indication among others of an unprecedented

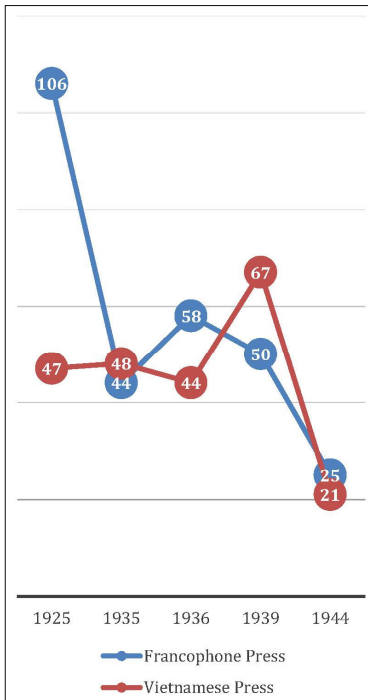
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<sup>1</sup> All quotes in this article are translated by the author from French or Vietnamese sources.

expansion of the market for cultural goods” (Bourdieu 1998: 95). This development took place owing to the arrival in Paris of a very large population of young people, with an education which is “until then more closely reserved for the nobility or the Parisian bourgeoisie” (Bourdieu 1998: 95). In fact, under the Second Empire, the enrollment in secondary education continued to grow from 90,000 in 1850 to 150,000 in 1875, which constituted a “proletarian intelligentsia.” Surrounded by romantic triumph, newcomers liked to write for press the most. For Bourdieu, this context played the main role in “the process of empowering the literary and artistic fields and of correlatively transforming the relationship between the world of art and literature and the world of politics” (Bourdieu 1998: 97).

Fifty years later, on the other side of the world, the emergence of the Vietnamese press contributed to the modernizing of Vietnamese society in general and literary field in particular. The French colonial authorities founded an educational system to legitimize their idea of colonization and to ward off Chinese influence on contemporary Vietnamese society and culture. Franco-indigenous education, considered to be roughly modeled on the French model, consisted of primary and secondary education. The language taught was Vietnamese. The number of schoolchildren was very low for the first decades. In 1906, there were only 3000 pupils in 19 establishments in Tonkin (Nguyễn Văn Ký 1995: 54). After the promulgation of the General Regulations of Public Education in 1917, the University of Hà Nội was founded, although it was only conceived as a vocational school rather than an institution of higher education. Despite all elements concerned, public education, in which *quốc ngữ* is taught, also developed strongly. At the same time, colonial Vietnam experienced the development of the publishing industry. In 1925, the Imprimerie d'Extrême Orient released 80,000 reading books for the Children's Course (Nguyễn Văn Ký 1995: 56). By 1929, the number of scholarly publications reached three million, and the following year it was nearly five million. After three educational reforms during the first two decades made by the colonial administration, 15 to 20% of children aged 6 to 12 were sent to school (Nguyễn Văn Ký 1995: 67). This figure is significant, given that during the 1920s the figure was

only 5% lower. “Franco-indigenous education was mainly provided in urban centers, whereas the countryside remained isolated: there were only 2,815 primary schools in Tonkin for around 10,000 villages” (Nguyễn Văn Ký 1995: 68). Although the official statistics for the 1938-1939 school year appeared to be unimpressive, it is undeniable that Franco-indigenous education had changed the face of urban society, causing the adoption of a certain modern way of life. That led to the fact that the modernization of Vietnamese life took place without clashes or conflicts, and in that process, reading the press played an important role.



The Press became an essential tool for the modernization of the country for intellectuals. The colonial authorities, aware of the role of the press, promulgated the Decree of 1899 to limit freedom of expression in Vietnamese. Thus, if the Vietnamese press did not benefit from the French Press Law of 1881, the French press in Indochina can be published easily "without prior authorization or deposit" (article 4). In addition, as added to article 6 of the Law, "the manager must be French," and the Vietnamese press must be severely censored. As a result, there was an imbalance in the readership of the Vietnamese press and French press. According to Huỳnh Văn Tòng in *Báo chí Việt Nam, từ khởi thủy đến*

*1945 (Vietnamese press, from the origin until 1945)* (Huỳnh Văn Tòng 2016: 378), there were 1300 press, in which 780 presses in French, 490 in Vietnamese and the rest in Chinese, Khmer and Laotian. During the first two decades, the press in French was always higher than that in Vietnamese. However, there was an important change in the 1930s. It was the collapse of the French-language press and

the rise, albeit slightly, of the Vietnamese press to such an extent that the French press was sometimes lower than Vietnamese, as depicted in the following graphic (Phan and Truong 2017: pp. 216-217).

There were different political, economic, or sociological reasons that explain these paradoxical movements, but we will limit ourselves to examining the press in Vietnamese. It is, first of all, the Movement of the Popular Front which favored the expansion of the press in Vietnamese in Indochina. Censorship of the press was significantly reduced. This political reason seemed to constitute a perspective of partially "normal life" in the colonial situation. In another paper, I have shown that the Vietnamese society at this time was francized to such an extent that Parisian bourgeois standards were part of colonial life (Phùng 2020b: 589-610). Bourgeois life made intellectuals forget, although temporarily, the colonized condition. Thus, life seems to be normalized despite the dominant presence of colonial authorities. In addition, as a result of French-Vietnamese school system, the number of young intellectuals increased, which led to the expansion of the public sphere in which journalism became a promising profession. Although the public sphere existed mostly in urban areas, its expansion prepared for the independent existence of the press in Vietnamese. It was increasingly received by various readers, creating more and more profits. Specifically, city dwellers' interest, including that of the bourgeoisie, tended towards the novel genre, especially roman feuilleton. *Tiểu thuyết thứ bảy* (Saturday Novel), *Phong Hóa* (Customs) and *Ngày Nay* (Modern Times) formed the important columns literary presses of this period, those having been able to act autonomously due to their vast readership. An important group, whose name explicitly showed the will of its participants: *Tự lực văn đoàn*, Autonomous Literary Group, held a dominant pole in the literary field (Phùng 2020a: 131-200). Another dominant organization is the Tân Dân (New People). It had its own publishing house managed by Vũ Đình Long. As it was strong in commercial publications, this house became a great force in the book market since 1925. Vũ Đình Long managed some important literary magazines and periodicals such as *Tiểu thuyết thứ bảy*, which



published the most popular works by the most important authors of the time including Nguyễn Công Hoan, Ngô Tất Tố, Lê Trảng Kiều, and especially Vũ Trọng Phụng. Here, we can speak about Tự lực văn đoàn and Tân Dân as dominant poles in the literary field. The partial normalization of life prepared the modernization of the literature in the colonial condition.

Despite the differences between Hanoi and Paris in terms of geography and history, these two cities shared common points in education and media. Specifically, the newspaper was the primary medium of communication between producers of culture and consumers as much in the Metropole as in the colony. It produced a new type of artists by providing them with new customers, who actively participated, little to their knowledge, in establishing the culture market.

### III. Distantiations

In Bonaparte's Second Empire, money increasingly played a role in the links between actants, writers, and readers, through the press. At the request of the emerging bourgeois public, literary production offered the ideal subjects, including morality literatures celebrating marriage, the good administration of the patrimony, and the honorable raising of children. Their presence was established with the emergence of the market. Pleasures and easy entertainment, especially in theater, "created the expansion of commercial art, which was directly subjected to the expectations of the public" (Bourdieu 1998: 123). In fact, during the last years of the July Monarchy, the literary field shifted towards social art and socialist ideas (Bourdieu 1998: 102). Writers such as François Ponsard (1814-1867) and Emile Augier (1820-1889) demonstrated bourgeois vices in their works, namely *Honor and Money* (*l'Honneur et l'Argent*), *The Golden Belt* (*La Ceinture dorée*) and *Maître Guérin*. They indisputably condemned art for art's sake. C. Baudelaire (1821-1867) was violently opposed to the bourgeois school of "knights of common sense" led by E. Augier, who coined the watchword: "Moralize!" Moralize!".

Meanwhile, advocates of art for the sake of art such as Baudelaire, Flaubert, Théodore Banville (1823-1891), Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907), Auguste Félix Villiers (1834-1900), and Leconte de Lisle (1818-1894) engaged in works opposing enslavement to power and the market. They led the establishment of *anomie*, which prepared the course towards the autonomy of the literary field constituted by the proponents of pure literature (Bourdieu 1998: 110). This collective enterprise named Baudelaire as the main character who then became the founding figure, *nomothète*. This poet defied the established literary order by implementing the provocative French Academy, questioning the existing structures (Bourdieu 1998: 108). This is an example of the break with the bourgeois society of the time exercised by the avant-garde poet. Baudelaire was a victim of what he himself named the symbolic revolution, where people “are face to face with a worn-out society—worse than worn out—stupid and greedy, having horror only for fiction and love only for the possession” (Bourdieu 1998: 112). Regarding Flaubert, despite the commercial success of the publication of *Madame Bovary* in 1857 in book form, he only gained 300 francs from Michel Lévy’s publishing house. Flaubert shouted about this affair: “We are *luxury workers*. Yet no one is rich enough to pay us. When you want to earn money with your pen, you have to do journalism, feuilleton, or theater...I don’t see the connection between a five-franc piece and an idea. You have to love Art for Art itself; otherwise, the least-paid job is better” (Bourdieu 1998: 83). By refusing the market, Flaubert marked the distance, like Baudelaire, from the bourgeoisie as well as from contemporary realist artists. If Baudelaire “established for the first time the break between commercial edition and avant-garde edition” (Bourdieu 1998: 117) to affirm the independence of the writer, Flaubert was defined in and by the whole series of double negations of both romanticism and realism. Art for art’s sake then was at par with the disenchanting view of the social and political world. However, we must recognize the commonalities between art for art’s sake and social art in the novel type, realism, a type of novel that also attacked the bourgeoisie and above all invoking the impersonal neutrality of science. This explains why the prosecutor in Flaubert trial, Ernest Pinard, denounced “realistic painting” in his novel

about provincial adultery. His lawyer had to admit it. The line was uncertain between the provocative one, like art for art as avant-garde, and its contestants like realism. The difference lay precisely in the fact that art for art's sake was a *position to be made* (position à faire) after the putsch in 1851. This position, in process of being autonomous, would be established in the literary field after the trials of Flaubert and Baudelaire. Against the useful art which included bourgeois art and even realist art, art for art's sake refused the positions established by their two arts. This is what Bourdieu calls "double breaks" (doubles ruptures). In a letter to Edma Roger des Genettes, Flaubert wrote: "They believe I am in love with reality, while I hate it. Because it is in hatred of realism that I undertook this novel. But I still hate the false ideality, which we are all fooled by these days" (cf. Bourdieu 1998: 135). Flaubert and Baudelaire wanted to keep the distance from all dominant artist tastes of the bourgeoisie of their time.

Take Flaubert as a typical case of how the French writers distanced themselves from the bourgeoisie. For Flaubert the bourgeoisie, in blouse or frock coat dress, could not produce literary works. Flaubert and his group thought that in order to master art and literature, they must free themselves from the demand of the market. For them, the work of art is invaluable, since it had no commercial value. Such a thought was totally foreign to economic logic that was dominating contemporary literary lives. Flaubert was aware of the freedom from the market when he wrote to his girlfriend, Louise Colet: "When you are not addressing the crowd, it is just that the crowd does not pay you. This is a political economy. However, I maintain that a work of art worthy of the name and made with a conscience is priceless, having no commercial value, and cannot be afforded. In Conclusion, if the artist has no income, he must starve! We find that the writer, who no longer receives a pension from the grown-ups, is much freer, and nobler. His whole social nobility now consists of being the equal of a grocer" (cf. Bourdieu 1998: 139). Flaubert explicitly indicated the condition of "luxury workers" of a writer is to such an extent that "no one is rich enough to pay".

Along with Baudelaire, his peer (pair) Flaubert participated in

what Bourdieu addressed as "the truly uneconomic economic universe," a world where artists are economically poor (and therefore dominated) but symbolically rich (and therefore dominant) in the literary field (Bourdieu 1998: 140). In this world, authors like Leconte de Lisle, a French poet of the Parnassian movement, considered immediate success to be even "intellectual inferiority", because that success came from the general public whose reading was only driven by the market. For Flaubert and his group, artists should lose in the economic realm in the short term in order to triumph in the symbolic realm in the long term. It's the idea about the upside-down business world (*l'économie à l'envers*). This is why, in the literary field of 19th century in France, heirs were more ready to leave the market logic, being absent in the bourgeois economy to be among the avant-garde. Likewise, money inherited from the big bourgeois, as in the case of Flaubert, freed him from market orders by giving him the freedom to follow his own choices in search of pure art. He "came into the world with some heritage, something which is absolutely essential for anyone who wants to make art" (Bourdieu 1998: 143).

In Vietnam, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Vũ Trọng Phụng was widely appreciated for his press reporting, but not for his literary works (Vũ Ngọc Phan 1943: 133). This is not a misclassification, but rather a contemporary view of the structure of the literary field at the time. In fact, Vũ Trọng Phụng was named by his companions "King of the Report Genre in Tonkin." This title acknowledged his meaningful contribution to the process of autonomizing the press with his publications of the report *Cạm bẫy người* (Man Trape, 1933) in Đời Nay Press, *Kỹ nghệ lấy tây* (Techniques to Marry Westerners, 1936) in Phương Đông Press, *Com thầy com cô* (Household Servants, 1937) and *Lục sì* (Look see, 1937) in Minh Phương Press. These reports were later printed in book format. The subjects of these reports were mostly about the lower class. *Cạm bẫy người* discovers the traps set to deceive gamblers who indulged in chance. *Kỹ nghệ lấy Tây* describes, humorously and satirically, what was called a "new profession" in the colony: the job of getting married to foreigners, legionaries or civilians. *Com thầy com cô* narrates an adventure of the narrator "I" in the milieu of

housekeepers, assistants, servants in bourgeois families in a town. Lastly, *Lục sì* depicts the world of prostitution of Hà Nội.

The flowering of the report genre in the Vietnamese colony was mainly inspired by the development of that genre in cosmopolitan France. In fact, in between the two World Wars, the press became dominant and popular with the unforeseen development of commercial presses like the *Petit Parisien* and *Le Soir*. In 1937, *Le Petit Parisien* devoted 66% of the budget to its reporting columns (Delporte 1999: 242). Vũ Trọng Phụng often cited French reporter Albert Londres, and Louis Roubaud, a reporter for *Le Quotidien* and *Le Petit Parisien*, who wrote on the revolt of Yên Bái (*Việt Nam*, Librairie Valois, 1931). Thanks to the report, contemporary presses survived in colonial Vietnam. Vũ Trọng Phụng earned a living from his writing when it was difficult for new entrants like him to penetrate literature, and colonial presses were short-lived. Tản Đà (1889-1939), the most beloved contemporary poet, could not maintain the journal *An nam tạp chí*, and he had to work as an astrologer before his death. Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh (1882-1936), one of the best-known Vietnamese journalists, had to go to Laos to make a fortune because when his French-language newspaper *Annam Nouveau* went bankrupt. Nguyễn Công Hoan (1903-1977), a prolific, contemporary writer, wrote a humorous but bitter short story, *Tôi chủ báo, anh chủ báo, nó chủ báo* (I am the founder of the magazine, you too, and so is he), emphasizing the very short fate of a magazine. It went from one owner to another because it was unsustainable.

It seems that Vũ Trọng Phụng's controversial association with Tự lực văn đoàn, an independent literary group, made it difficult for him to make a living as a reporter. *Cạm bẫy người*, the first report by Vũ Trọng Phụng, and *Nửa chĩnh xuân* (Half Spring), the second novel by Khái Hưng, founding member of Tự lực văn đoàn, were both reprinted by SADEP as books. They both benefited from the publicity of *Phong Hóa*, the weekly newspaper of Tự lực văn đoàn. However, Vũ Trọng Phụng's report was printed by SADEP earlier than Khái Hưng's novel. Financial resources limited dissemination (Đoàn Ánh Dương 2020: 42-53). What came out sooner had better commercial value. For Khái Hưng and Nhất Linh, who chaired

*Phong Hóa*, the report was only of documentary value. Therefore, they preferred the literary story they wrote over the report. Although Tự lực văn đoàn published a lot of reports about the lives of the lower class, its members never considered Vũ Trọng Phụng as belonging to their ranks. Tự lực văn đoàn included in the *Ngày Nay* (n° 15) review, a letter from the reader criticizing the “low subjects” of Vũ Trọng Phụng. Vũ Trọng Phụng responded, also criticizing Tự lực văn đoàn: “Let’s remind Tự lực văn đoàn of the fact that one should not insult the writing of *Lục si* (*Look see*) when one had written *Hà Nội ban đêm* (*Hà Nội by night*) and *Hà Nội lầm than* (*Miserable Hà Nội*)... Now, if you want to publicize any lesser known reporters, (members) of Tự lực văn đoàn, if *Cạm bẫy người* damaged the reputation of *Ngày Nay*, if you have to insult Vũ Trọng Phụng so that he disappears, you are free to do so”<sup>2</sup> (Cao and Nguyễn 2001: 1134).

What is more noticeable in this response is that it reveals Vũ Trọng Phụng’s choice of the report genre as a means of earning for a living, although reports at the start of the third decade of the 20th century was just a journalistic genre and was yet to be recognized as a serious literary genre in Vietnam. Vũ Trọng Phụng quickly conquered the readership of his time by his reports, soon establishing the genre as literary. Reports became made magazines sell, like what happened in France (Charles 2004: 319-320). Vũ Trọng Phụng’s report is not incorporated literary elements into facts, which distinguished him as a literary writer in the literary field of Vietnam even in the time of its autonomy. In other words, it is because of the report genre that Vũ Trọng Phụng’s reached maturity as he made radical changes in how his work is done and received by readers. As such, we can talk about the “double goals” that Vũ Trọng Phụng gained in the narrow and limited literary field in colonial Vietnam. The French “double ruptures” operated by *nomothetes* like Baudelaire and Flaubert kept their distance from the bourgeois

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<sup>2</sup> “Tiện đây, xin nhắc Tự lực văn đoàn rằng khi người ta đã viết *Hà Nội ban đêm* và *Hà Nội lầm than*, thì người ta đừng nên chửi *Lục si* [...] Bây giờ nếu cần quảng cáo cho một nhà phóng sự nào chưa nổi tiếng trong Tự lực văn đoàn, nếu cuốn *Cạm bẫy người* mà các ông xuất bản lại hại cho báo *Ngày Nay*, nếu cần phải chửi Vũ Trọng Phụng cho tiêu xin các ông cứ tự tiện” (translated by PNK).

moral standards embodied by realism. It enabled them to value art for art's sake and veer away from commercial value. The same was not the case in the Vietnamese literary field, which was subject to political and economic limitations. It was the goal of novelists and reporters to create social art. Vũ Trọng Phụng has imbued the genre of report with literary values while making it popular. The paths towards autonomy in the literary fields are not similar.

#### IV. Free, Indirect Speech

A well-known understanding about Flaubert is that he wanted "a book about nothing" (*un livre sur rien*). It is about writing about the absolute, understood both as a necessity and as an impossibility. However, this aesthetic of emptiness seems to have to deal with the trivialities of this world given in excess. By rejecting the standards of bourgeois life, Flaubert aimed at another aesthetic, revealed in his first novel, *Madame Bovary*. This alternative standard shocked the public, who got used to both the vision of soap operas and Balzac novels. Ernest Pinard, a reader of bourgeois society who did not tolerate the aesthetic distancing of this pioneering novelist of the time, violently accused the novel as an insult to morals, as it came with the "glorification of adultery" and "moral outrage" (Jauss 1978: 630). However, as Hans-Robert Jauss argues, the novel was embodying what is "rather the unsuspected effect produced by a new art form" (Jauss 1978: 86). The novel plunged the reader into a "strange and surprising uncertainty of judgment" (Jauss 1978: 86). Gérard Genette recalled Flaubert was seen as speaking "the language of the other" (Genette 1972: 19). The lawyer M<sup>e</sup> A. Sénard, a contemporary reader, clarified the freedom in the language of Flaubert's novel : "What did M. Flaubert do? [...] *He simply copied*"<sup>3</sup> what must be in the mind of priest about the Emma (Flaubert 1951: 674).

Here, the lawyer drew attention to a phenomenon peculiar to

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<sup>3</sup> « Que fait M. Flaubert ? Il a mis dans la bouche du prêtre, en réunissant les deux parties, ce qui doit être dans sa pensée du malade. *Il a copié purement et simplement*, etc.» Translated by us.

Flaubert: the borrowing of the word. This borrowing constitutes the ambivalence of discourse in his novel to such an extent that the "old" reader easily confuses this voice with the voices of the narration. Mikhail Bakhtine (1895-1975) called the borrowing words of actors for authors' speech as "discourse of others." By "discourse of others" (*discours d'autrui*), he means "the linguistic patterns (direct speech, indirect speech, free indirect speech), the modifications of these patterns and the variants of these modifications, which we meet in the language, serve to transmit the utterances of others and the integration of these enunciations, as emanating from others, in a coherent monologue context" (Bakhtine 1977: 160). It allows, if not fusion, at least a very strong interpenetration of the auctorial view and the actorial perspective. It leaves room for readers to make sense of. Leaving the reader the freedom to choose and decipher the "white gaps," free indirect discourse becomes "the lazy machine" (Eco, 1985: 29). Flaubert replaced direct speech with indirect speech in order to put the former in the latter, to "transport oneself into the characters" (Gothot-Mersch: 1983: 201). By reporting the characters' words, he apparently wanted to induce inertia, repetition and a vision of a stuck, frozen world in his novel. In addition, the free indirect speech offers the character the right to pronounce, constituting the *insular vision*. The first sight of Madame Arnoux by Frédéric in the boat to Paris (*Education sentimentale*) clearly manifests this technique. Represented by the mature staff in capital letters, *Elle* [She], for the first time for Madame Arnoux, this pronoun deeply marks the maturity of Flaubertian writing. This poetics of *insular vision*, described by Isabelle Daunais, is used to gradually describe the characters (Daunais: 1993: 104-112). They are no longer initially definitive characters, as given, like the Balzacian characters, in the total vision of auctorial discourse, but appear gradually. Their appearance is always progressive because of Flaubert's use of speech of others. This type of speech becomes a brake, slowing down the discovery of the character. Taking shape on the horizon of Balzacian realism, this vision constitutes what Michel Raimond calls "subjective realism" (Raimond: 1983: 93-102). It is in his memory that Flaubert subtitled the work *Mœurs de province*, referring to the nomenclature of *La Comédie humaine*. He "debalzaciated" the



contemporary novel, providing a completely partial, subjective vision of a character, no longer of the author. More precisely, the author's words, according to Victor Brombert, are situated between the character's perspective and the author's vision. The romantic vision is by him but no longer belongs to him.

If the Flaubertian narrator refuses responsibility by borrowing the other's word, Vũ Trọng Phụng's narrator enters the diegesis to discuss directly with the characters. In his novels, it is interesting that one can easily find the homogeneous speeches given by the different characters. This homogeneity is more impressive because it incorporates romantic dialogues, articles, and declarations, and controversies. We can relate Vũ Trọng Phụng's critical words to statements by his characters to such an extent that we find no hiatus:

(1) There are laughable things, coming solely from physiology, since the period of crisis, that is inevitable to no one! Oh, fortunately, this period is limited! (2) During this century, it is the science that counts, it is the truth that is important, although there are disgusting, filthy things which only the ignorant like the managers of prostitutes pretend to be puerile when speaking about. (3) One risk is being exterminated by being ignorant thus"<sup>4</sup>.

This paragraph, sounding like a scientific discourse, is quoted from different sources. It is not quite homogeneous, because it is a montage made up of different words about sex. The first enunciation is by doctor Trục Ngôn in *Số Đò* (*Dumb Luck*, Vũ Trọng Phụng 2014: 295); the second launched by Vũ Trọng Phụng himself, taken from his controversy with Tự lực văn đoàn (Cao and Nguyễn 2001: 1119); the third is by the narrator in the novel *Làm đĩ* (*Prostitute*, Vũ Trọng Phụng 1939: 94), another novel by Vũ Trọng Phụng, justifying the controversial subject of "dâm hay không dâm" (Is sex a perversion?).

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<sup>4</sup> "(1) Kể ra có nhiều sự đáng tức cười, song le chỉ tại một nguyên cơ sinh lý, vì rằng cái thời kỳ khủng hoảng kia, than ôi, không mấy ai tránh khỏi, và may sao chỉ có hạn. (2) Thế kỷ này phải trọng khoa học, trọng sự thật, mặc dầu có khi nó uế tạp, gớm ghiếc, chỉ có những đồ vô học thức thì mới bướng bỉnh bằng cái tính e thẹn của những quân bồi sấm. (3) Không biết rằng cứ ý ra cũng đã đủ dẫn đến một chỗ giết chúng". Translated by us.

This paragraph apparently provokes controversies, given that sex was classified as taboo in traditional and bourgeois societies as well as in literature in the colony. Vũ Trọng Phụng, pro-Science and a follower of Freud and psychoanalysis, uses science to talk about sex. As a result, some characters of Vũ Trọng Phụng, who pronounce psychoanalysis in the name of scientific discourse, would be considered as his spokesperson. Nonetheless, like Bouvard and Pécuchet, characters in a novel by Flaubert published posthumously in 1881 "who copies a kind of critical encyclopedia into a farce"; they become copiers of all the scientific ideas in vogue and deliver them to anyone at any time in a humorous way. In romantic circumstances, these words become grotesque buffoons. Hence, it is possible that these statements are also presented in the serious speeches by the writer himself. Behind this heterogeneity of the enunciators emerges the underlying movements of the renewed vision of the world, and therefore of the deferred romantic representation. "It is about the change of the enunciator in the novel by Vũ Trọng Phụng. " (Phùng 2013: 70).

In fact, before Vũ Trọng Phụng, the novel's enunciator usually coincided with the novelistic narrator, who is omnipresent and ready to present to the readership the vanishing lines of diegetic meaning, to justify choices, and to illuminate the implicit meanings. The novelists of that time followed this traditional line, which was acceptable to all readers. Their voice was dominant in all romantic speeches to such an extent that the omnipresent narrator holds supreme credit. It is due to the hierarchy of voices that between the enunciator and the listener—that is, between the narrator and the reader—there is no obstacle to interpretation. Each speaker has its own responsibility; each voice has its own credit. This habit changed with the novels by Vũ Trọng Phụng. There, while the narrator is always omnipresent in the novel, his voice does not completely coincide with that of the author. His position is clearly different from that of the novelist. Besides identifiable rhetorical techniques that tease or make people laugh, the words of the novelist Vũ Trọng Phụng do not dominate the others. They stand on an equal footing, one next to each other. Likewise, value of the novel's words does not lie in the relationship between the signifier and the signified,

but the reciprocal relationship between the context and the enunciator.

We can observe all these renovations in the path of Xuân Tóc Đỏ, the main character in *Số đỏ*. In the eyes of the other characters, he suddenly becomes a herald of social reformation after an unexpected intervention from the civilian, although he literally repeats as a parrot only what he has just learned from another character, named Mr. Văn Minh (Civilizer). In this way, Xuân Tóc Đỏ's speech, in turn, although insignificant, has contextualized its own value thanks to his new position taken in the society of the francized nouveau riche, against whom Vũ Trọng Phụng hates. There is no personality in the individual discourse of the characters. Anyone has the right to make such a speech. Therefore, interpretation of the speeches depends not on the internal structure, but a lot *on the external structure, the context*. Statements of the characters, full of the neologisms in vogue about "Frenchify" (Âu hóa), are nonsense. They are communicative, but so much worn out that participants do not actually understand each other. In the absence of context, all statements are meaningless. It is the context that completely determines the meaning of the statement, even unbeknownst to all participants. Hence the interpretation of the statement constitutes the surprising effects of the external situation, the context. Another example is the satirical poem improvised by Xuân Tóc Đỏ. Taking up a versified drug advertisement from the street vendor, his former profession, Xuân Tóc Đỏ literally recites it in front of his amorous opponent, who is quite struck by his extraordinary literary talent. Here, the situation contextualizes the drug advertisement unbeknownst to the protagonist so that it becomes a satirical poem by excellence, and thus makes the traveling merchant Xuân Tóc Đỏ a talented poet of humor. In his novel, when the advertisement becomes a satirical poem, reason turns to absurdity. The absurd is everywhere in Vũ Trọng Phụng's novel.

As the narrator's speech is not superior to or more important than the others, he could borrow the speech of others to tell the story, narrating the situations. Hence, the idea of discourse by others is introduced. We could quote by chance the example which

is the incipit of the chapter “Hạnh phúc của một tang gia” [Happiness of a grieving family]: “Ba hôm sau ông cụ già ấy chết **thật!**” [After three days, this old man died **truly** – literal translation] (Vũ Trọng Phụng 2014: 223). Although this sentence contains no rhetorical means, the reader of Vũ Trọng Phụng certainly does not resist thinking of black humor, which consists in the use of the objective “thật!” (truly) at the end of the speech. As this word does not refer to any reality, it rather works grammatically. However, its use implies rather a project of enunciation. The enunciator assumes an impact implicitly expected by the interlocutors (Hoàng Phê 1990: 959). If we remove this interjection, which is untranslatable, we do not change any real meaning, but we remove this nuance. On the other hand, by keeping this word, we have a speech of another delivered by the narrator. The latter could be a character in the mass of the humorous universe of Vũ Trọng Phụng, who awaits the death of the old man to share his legacy. Otherwise, the narrator has “taken over” another character, who is part of the grieving situation. The narrative then incites a virtuality, thanks to a double speaker, a narrator and character. In this context, the narrator only fulfills the function of speaking loudly the desire of the children of the grieving family that wants the death of the old man. A sentence loaded with a speaker, however, concerns two enunciators. The responsibility for the utterance, therefore, does not belong to anyone. The interjectory word then constitutes a free indirect discourse that is ambiguous. This discourse oscillates between indefinite spaces to such an extent that we fail to condemn the speaker of this utterance, which should contain the joy of all children in the face of the pending mourning. It is about their happiness in the face of the old man's death. The reader himself, while reading, is undoubtedly one of the diegetic voices and he is equal to the other characters. He also becomes a diegetic enunciator of Vũ Trọng Phụng. There are then multiple ways of reading a speech, depending on the diversity of readers’ of points of view.

This free indirect discourse can be found in Vũ Trọng Phụng's other novels. This type of speech makes him unique from other novelists of the time. In other words, it is Vũ Trọng Phụng who distanced himself from the aesthetic standards that had been

established for the bourgeoisie. Such refusal is explicit in his novels. "The enunciator of Vũ Trọng Phụng should disappear in favor of the presence of the speaker" (Phùng 2013: 75). His novels examine another reality of language in modern society. They demonstrate that the flowering of the report genre in the press contributed to modernizing Vietnamese novels. Given such development in the published report of his time, the success of Vũ Trọng Phụng apparently did not only come from his observations of reality, but also from his way of observing it. It is the representations of the reports that are of equal importance as in France (cf. Delporte 1999: 242). In his reports, the narrator does not directly observe the facts; instead, he narrates them faithfully. As an "information carrier" (Cao and Nguyễn 2001: 1117),<sup>5</sup> Vũ Trọng Phụng's narrator is responsible for accurately relating what is said by other characters. The absence of the dominant voice attaches to the partial writing in Vũ Trọng Phụng's report. This writing favors the multiplicity of interpretation. This reporter, following the lines of French reporters like Albert Londres, shows his awareness of the partial vision in the modern world, where "there is never any newspaper, says Vũ Trọng Phụng during the polemic on perversion, which can provide answers for everyone" (Cao and Nguyễn 2001: 1117). If the authors of *Tự lực văn đoàn*, from the 1933-36, abstained from publicly declaring the function of literature, their journals, *Phong Hóa* and then *Ngày Nay*, make visible voices of the public that tend to be in favor of morality in the "Opening Readers Letters" Section. The editors of the journals then borrowed voices of readers to develop moral values that they wanted to promote for their polemic against other groups. Noticeably, this way of borrowing from the readers voices suggests the mission of *Tự lực văn đoàn* in constructing moral and aesthetic standards for the whole Vietnamese society at that time. Given that main clientele of their journals came from the emerging bourgeoisie, *Tự lực văn đoàn* wanted to protect established aesthetic standards against the so-called suitors, of whom Vũ Trọng Phụng is a herald. These established norms consolidate the hierarchy of diegetic voices,

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<sup>5</sup> This comes from open letter of Vũ Trọng Phụng addressed to a reader of *Tương lai* magazine: "bốn phận của tôi chỉ là thông báo cho mọi người biết chứ không phải lo sợ rằng cái việc làm phận sự ấy lợi hại cho ai" [my mission is to inform only; I do not care if my information is good or bad for anyone].

associated with the social and aesthetic hierarchies. All were in the aim of attacking the way of promoting democratic voices or the freedom of speech in works of Vũ Trọng Phụng, whom they addressed as the suitor of the contemporary aesthetic and social orders. Vũ Trọng Phụng's realistic writing, both in report and in novel, refers to the words of others more than to facts. His realism of speech is attached to the speech of others. Vũ Trọng Phụng apparently wanted to insist on fidelity to the function of the conveyor of information that is far away from the social goal, which would be interesting but difficult to be verified, therefore indefinable. Voices in Vũ Trọng Phụng's novels distance themselves from others, such as those of Tự lực văn đoàn's, by creating new aesthetic criteria for the equality of words in the novel. The specialty of his writing, as seen in the case of Vũ Trọng Phụng, then lies in work, or, to borrow Foucault's terms, lies "within the archive" of records (books, journals, and many other genres) that might still or no longer exist in the society. This new aesthetic reinvention gained the favor of the literary market, bringing Vũ Trọng Phụng both economic and literary benefits.

## V. Conclusion

By borrowing the words of the other in their narration, Flaubert and Vũ Trọng Phụng created the discourse of others. This new writing disoriented the readers of their times. This is distantiation from the usual literary norms. However, the ways they distanced themselves from the dominating standards of their time are different. Flaubert's realism is subjective, whereas Vũ Trọng Phụng's realism is attached to the function of speech. Both realism is faithful, not to exterior reality, but to the reality seen or said by others in novel. They are independent of external demands in favor of the modernity of story representations. These independences are part of the autonomy of the literary field.

The parallel reading of these two French and Vietnamese authors, from two different eras and two different social situations, evokes unforeseen meanings and contexts. Vũ Trọng Phụng is both

a “genuine luxury worker” and a commercial writer. At the same time, he works to earn a living by writing and to gain a position in the literary field in a partially autonomized northern Vietnam. Thanks to his achievement, the modernization of the Vietnamese literary field was accelerated. The Vietnamese writer claimed the social goal of this art work by invoking the technique of the discourse of others, which make him unique and advanced from other contemporaries. Meanwhile, in the different context of the Empire a half a century before, Flaubert followed a path of conquering the autonomy of the literary field through its double ruptures. This “luxury [French] worker” showed an upside-down economy, rejecting the laws of the market and bourgeois morality. Being a bourgeois heir, he could afford to follow arts for the art's sake in order to take a high position in the symbolic pole of the literary field. He then distanced himself from the contemporary horizon of expectation by his free indirect discourse. The renovations of both authors are all original to such an extent that it is not certain to talk about the influences of the French writer exerting on Vietnamese, to decipher the links between the great bourgeois of the Empire and the small bourgeois in the colony. It is through the process of constructing their positions of their times that each writer contributed to the consolidation of the autonomy of the literary field of their respective societies.

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## The Shifts of Power in Gender Discourse: Approaching Bao Ninh's *Short Stories* and Svetlana Alexievich's *Unwomanly Face of War* from Feminist Narratology

Cao Kim Lan\*



### [ *Abstract* ]

This paper examines narratives of women's marginal position in Bao Ninh's *Short Stories* and Svetlana Alexievich's *Unwomanly Face of War* from a feminist narratological approach. In analyzing voices of marginalized women, direct and indirect descriptions of women's beauty and pain, and private-public narratives of women's love stories, this paper aims to identify presentations of women's real authority in the text written by a male author, Bao Ninh, and in the one by a female author. The paper argues that juxtaposing these texts reveals an overturn of the traditional conception of sexual and gender differences. Specifically, distinguishing between male/female discourse does not show powerful /nonpowerful language, but recognizes the real authority of each type of discourse based on sexual differences. The writing also illustrates that masculine language becomes powerless and deficient in the women's world; meanwhile, in writing about herself, woman establishes a type of a powerful feminine discourse, which blends both emotional, enthusiastic, and gossipy characteristics of female language and direct, rational, and strong ones of male language. Thus,

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the feminists' radical segregation on male/female discourses to overturn masculine authority and create a language for women at par with men has been clearly shifted when comparing the two writers' texts based on the juxtapositional model of the comparative literature.

**Keywords:** Shifts of power, gender discourse, marginalized women, powerful/nonpowerful discourse, Svetlana Alexievich, Bao Ninh

## I . Introduction

Many a time, women are relegated to the periphery of popular discourse, particularly during times of war. They are frequently depicted in ancient literature as suffering women waiting for their husbands. The outlook of women has gradually changed, and now, they have new functions and positions in contemporary literature and history. However, it appears to be exceedingly difficult to modify people's perceptions about marginalized women in war. Regardless of historical evidence to the contrary, the war without women's faces is a powerful bias. For example, in *From a Conversation with a Historian*, Svetlana Alexievich records that women first appeared in the army of Greek of Athens and Sparta in the fourth century B.C. During World War II, the world witnessed women serving in all branches of the military in many countries of the world: 225,000 in the British army, 450,000 to 500,000 in the American, 500,000 in the German, and about a million women fought in the Soviet army. They mastered all military specializations including the most "masculine" ones. (2017); or from another document, in the book *Women and War in the Twentieth Century*, Nicole Dombrowski shows the exact numbers: "By the end of 1943, over 800,000 women volunteers served in the armed forces and the partisans, constituting about 8 percent of military personnel. Most of these women fought at the front, about 200,000 of them in the air defense forces; thousands more fought the Germans as rank-and-file soldiers, as machine gunners, as snipers, as sappers, and as driver-mechanics in tank units. A few female officers led battalions

of men into battle." (2015: 103). Paradoxically, women have only won military awards for their bravery and distinguished service, often posthumously. After war, they must even hide the victory medals and never wear them in the ceremonies (Alexievich 2017). This unfair reality requires to be changed. Additionally, making those precise figures public is also a particular way to uncover another truth of war. Women images are emerged from a variety of perspectives, they can be portrayed as brave warriors or ordinary women, however, in the great victories, we cannot deny the significant contributions of those marginalized women.

From a feminist narratological approach, this paper examines narratives of women's marginal position in Bao Ninh's *Short Stories* and Alexievich's *Unwomanly Face of War*. By analyzing voices of marginalized women, direct and indirect descriptions of women's beauty and pain, and private-public narratives of women's love stories this paper seeks to identify presentations of women's real authority in the text written by a male author, Bao Ninh, and in the one by a female author. The paper argues that juxtaposing these texts reveals an overturn of the traditional conception of sexual and gender differences. Specifically, distinguishing between male/female discourse does not demonstrate low and high status, or powerful and nonpowerful language but rather recognizes the real authority of each form of discourse based on sexual differences. Additionally, the writing illustrates how masculine language becomes powerless and deficient in the women's world, while a woman establishes a type of powerful feminine discourse throughout her writing about her self, which blends both emotional, enthusiastic, and gossipy characteristics of female language with direct, rational and strong ones of male language. Thus, when comparing the two writers' texts using the comparative literature's juxtapositional paradigm, the feminists' extreme segregation of male/female discourses to undermine the masculine authority and build women's powerful language on an equal footing with men's has been clearly moved.

This choice of two texts is not arbitrary. Both narrate themes of war and humanitarian attitude. Both writers wish to write about war from a unique perspective, which results in a different truth about war. This feature is quite familiar in the Comparative

Literature method in general, and it is also a prerequisite for surveying in this writing. Meanwhile, even if the two are of different genres, both are strikingly similar in representing the lives of women in war. While each short story of Bao Ninh follows a protagonist and some events that affect the character's fate, the chapters in Alexievich's novel follow a flexible structure, with each chapter focusing on topics rather than character. Alexievich's novel is essentially an oral document of the war experiences of women who fought in Russia's great Patriotic War. There is no central heroine or main character; all are protagonists. Its narrative framework is established by fragments of individual lives associated with their jobs and fates. That is a specific structure in which every chapter is comparable to one of Bao Ninh's short stories.

Finally, based on similarities and dissimilarities of women's fates during the war, this study will focus on the survey of several issues pertaining to gender discourse. Bao Ninh's and Alexievich's texts will be compared not based on their shared history, geography, or culture, but based on their seemingly similar portrayals of women's destinies and their marginal status in the war, with a particular emphasis on the gender discourse generated by the two writers' sexual differences. This gender contradiction forms two kinds of distinct discourses. Alexievich places women at the center of war - in the frontline and tells about them from an internal point of view with a deep understanding of how to show women's war/history in their own language. In contrast, Bao Ninh is a male writer strongly associated with peripheral "prejudices" about women. He would never "dare" to place women in the path of bombs and bullets in the manner of warriors. Their position and roles are just at the fringes of fierce struggles, and he portrays women via the lens of male discourse. However, both their works share a humane thoughts and anti-war sentiments.

Bao Ninh's *Short stories*, is believed to be "his own war" (1994) that allowed him and his comrades to share "a common sorrow," an "immense sorrow of war" (1994: 217). As a renowned Vietnamese writer whose novel *The Sorrow of War* has been translated into 18 different languages around the world, Bao Ninh's work was honored by *The Independent!* as a novel that "vaults over all the American

fiction that came out of the Vietnam war to take its place alongside the greatest war novel of the century" (Bao Ninh 1994). However, this study does not concentrate on his novel, but his short stories, collection that exists as fragments of a central narrative, marginal stories when compared to *The Sorrow of War*. Bao Ninh's short stories do not sing of a winner's triumph, nor form of collective memory, but rather layer private sufferings. With a desire to find understanding in different fragments of the nature of war, Bao Ninh's short stories depict displaced, marginalized women, full of pain and uncertainty. History and the victories during the Vietnam War were not very crucial to the stories but only the stack of "small things" and quotidian events. Bao Ninh reproduces other truths about the war many Vietnamese are unfamiliar with.

On the other hand, Alexievich, "writes not about war, but human beings in war... writes not the history of a war, but the history of feelings." (2017: xxi) She aspires to be "a historian of the soul." (Alexievich 2017: xxi) She was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature 2015 for her body of works described by the Nobel committee as "polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time." (Theocharis 2019: 185) This includes the novel *Unwomanly Face of War* (first published in Russian in 1985), a set of novelistic accounts or monologues recounting the unbearable sufferings of women who served in the war. Their memories can be distant or vivid, private, or public, terrible, or joyful, but the war has left an indelible mark on them. Their stories aren't "dry and bare history of facts and events, but a history of feelings and emotions; history that has been overlooked or has slipped past unnoticed." (Jaireth 2017: 3) In Alexievich's narrative, hearing and listening combine to create a style that is more direct and effective. Hence, this study focuses on the interpretation of the shifts of power in gender discourse by examining women's marginal position in the war in the works of these two authors.

To observe the shifts in gender discourse based on/through

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<sup>1</sup> *The Independent* is a British online newspaper. It was established in 1986 as a national morning printed paper. The *Independent* Foreign Fiction Prize (1990–2015) was a British literary award. It was inaugurated by British newspaper *The Independent* to honor contemporary fiction in translation in the United Kingdom.

the juxtapositional comparison of the two authors' works, this paper employs a feminist narratological approach. While feminist narratologists assert that there is a need for gender to be inserted in the intersection of feminism and narratology, even "postclassical" narratology has yet to formulate a method to describe this. There are various approaches available, depending on narratologists' perspectives and interests. However, combining the gender and narratives, according to Susan Lanser, is to share the "belief that sex, gender, and sexuality are significant not only to textual interpretation and reader reception but to textual poetics itself and thus to the shapes, structures, representational practices, and communicative contexts of narrative texts." (2014. This paper combines the political eye of the feminist and the penchant for recurring patterns of narratologist to examine discursive distinctions between male and female. This will assist us in identifying changes in gender discourse that feminists previously claimed in their statements. Feminists' radical viewpoints that male language is strong and powerful while female language is powerless and meaningless are no longer appropriate. Comparison will clarify that our usual gender categories no longer apply.

## **II . Voices of Marginalized Women in War**

Recognizing the bias faced by marginalized women, feminists have sought to develop a unique means by which women can have their own voice. They argue that the striving of male authors to "identify men's experience with women's" is paradoxical because the voices of women are still made by men (Cavallaro 2003: 94-101). And, in opposition to the traditional view that "male as the dominant group (that) created language, thought, and reality" (Spender 1980), Hélène Cixous proposes the concept *L'écriture féminine* which calls for a gradual change in viewpoints on the relationship between gender and language, while simultaneously attempting to overturn men's prerogative of *L'écriture masculine* based on the phallogocentric language system. In Cixous,; (1) "Woman must write her self: she must write about women and bring women to writing... Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by



her own movement" (Cixous 1976: 875); and (2) the linguistic structure itself will change when women write/speak of women, of their body, as subjects. *L'écriture féminine* is regarded as a manifesto of Cixous's feminist thought. Women write about women, which means, they must transcend the phallogentric symbolic order, and her writing is inextricably linked to her inevitable conflict with conventional men. Although Cixous is careful to emphasize that she is "not trying to create a feminine writing but to let into writing what has always been forbidden up until now, knowing the effects of femininity" (Cixous 2008: 52), the metaphor of breast milk as "white ink" and views on women's language and voice have shattered the assertion of male-dominated language.<sup>2</sup> Thus, if war is considered a fact, for Alexievich, fact is skewed by the absence of women's voices.

I am aware that each kind of discourse has its own characteristics, as well as distinct structures and functions. Ideology shapes discourse, which, in turn, shapes reality, which is associated with power and oppression. Bao Ninh and Alexievich's war discourse is primarily composed by their thoughts and voices. For Bao Ninh, war not only ruined the dreams of youth but was also left indelible marks on the memories of the returnees. The aftershock of the catastrophic war appears to have shaped Bao Ninh's being a writer of sorrow. Even while writing about war from the position of the victor, Bao Ninh's writings are not all glorious. It is a thoughtful journey that seeks for the universal values of human beings. Regardless of whether it is a novel or a collection of short stories, human beings are still presented deeply and painfully. As for Alexievich, when carrying out thousands of interviews with many female veterans who return from the war, she aspires to write war from the perspective of women, to show their version, their history of the great Patriotic War of Russia. "It is not the history of a war or a state and not the lives of heroes, but the history of small human beings, thrown out of ordinary life into the epic depths of an enormous event. Into great History." (Alexievich 2017: 18). She

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<sup>2</sup> See more, Hélène Cixous "When I do not write, it is as if I had died" (pp. 51-57), in *White Ink: Interviews on Sex, Text and Politics*, and "Writing and the Body" in Dani Cavallaro. *French Feminist Theory: An Introduction* (2003).

desires to seek "something else," to gather all "knowledge of the spirit," and write a "history of feelings...a history of the soul" (Alexievich 2017: xxi). She pursues the traces of inner life and creates the records of the soul to understand the war that we do not grasp, of life and death as well as its meanings in the never-ending darkness of the battle. Those goals define a novel's voice as completely dynamic, active, powerful, and convincing. While the language and experiences of female ex-soldiers may have been distorted (more or less) by the times in which they are living in, or faded, or infused with romance in some way in women's memories, it is apparent that their tremendous desire resulted in active and authentic voices. Women's perception of war is shaped by their language: "how vile it was, this war ... When you look at it with our eyes. Simple women's eyes ... As frightful as can be" (Alexievich 2017: 117).

In addition, to compose a women's war that "has its colors, its own smells, its own lighting, and its own range of feelings" (Alexievich 2017: xvi), Alexievich faithfully keeps distinct female voices, following their authentic voices. In her journeys that she seeks people willing to talk to her and share with her their stories, she listens to women's stories with utmost care and empathy. Even though her recollection of those women's faces has faded, she never forgets their voice, she "hears them like a chorus" on hundreds of recorded cassettes with thousands of meters of tape recording. Alexievich must be intensely aware of how we use language and how it affects our lives while writing in direct languages, as Lakoff puts it: "Language uses us as much as we use language. As much as our choice of forms of expression is guided by the thoughts we want to express, to the same extent the way we feel about the things in the real world governs the way we express ourselves about these things" (1975: 3). Thus, while creating her narratives based on testimonies, she looks at the world through the eyes and feelings of a humanist, as opposed to ignoring emotions and focusing exclusively on facts and great events. From fragments of women's lives and livings and from "thousands of voices," Alexievich composes women's history in order to comprehend human beings' inner selves. Lakoff emphasizes that women experience inequality in terms

of language in two ways: the way they are educated and the way language is used to evaluate them. Alexievich's enchantment with her subjects created a unique women's language, both creative and honest. It strongly illustrates the ability to overcome men's prejudice, as articulated by Lakoff: "Our use of language embodies attitudes as well as referential meanings. Woman's language has as its foundation the attitude that women are marginal to the serious concerns of life which are preempted by men" (1975: 1).

Hence, by juxtaposing Bao Ninh and Alexievich's works, we will be able to distinguish the masculine voice (*L'écriture masculine*) in Bao Ninh's short stories and the feminine voice (*L'écriture feminine*) in Alexievich's *Unwomanly Face of War*. However, does language function in this manner in these two works?

The short story *Gió đại* (*The Wild Wind*) by Bao Ninh serves as the narrative for *L'écriture masculine*. The story narrates the situation of peripheral characters. Dieu Nuong, a beautiful woman, and Tuan, a wounded soldier who volunteered to remain on the battlefield as an army cook. Narrated from a male perspective, the story does not deal with bloody battles but on the impact of war on ordinary people. If the narrator in *The Sorrows of War* is self-conscious and empathizes with characters, the narrator in *The Wild Wind* is completely bewildered, and does not understand at all. Female characters are only explored externally through indirect discourse through rumors or repetition of others' utterances, making the story unreal. The narrative is peppered with phrases such as "it is heard that," "the legend of Dieu Nuong," "people said that," "people stated that," "possibly, " "people guess that," and "I heard from many people. Until that ambiguity is partially uncovered, people painfully realize that the ravages of war do not only take place in the front line but are present everywhere. All impressions of Dieu Nuong who embodies the loose, informal, free, and wandering lifestyle and "separated from the community" (Bao Ninh 2013: 60)<sup>3</sup> are confirmed by men's observation, and we only know that this woman turns out to be a product of war, and her body and mind are beyond men's "understanding." However, not only Dieu

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<sup>3</sup> All quotations from Bao Ninh's *Short Stories* in this article are my translations.

Nuong but also all female characters in *The Wild Wind* including soldiers' wives who have lost their husbands, ragged widows, and "a group of hungry, naked and emaciated children" drag out their miserable existence in the quagmire of war, where makes them beauty more vulnerable. Dieu Nuong harbors mental trauma caused by witnessing scenes of bloody death and smelling "the breath of corpses." (Bao Ninh 2013: 67) Her insanity, sleepwalking, and freedom, together with her vibrant and mysterious beauty contribute to her out-of-placeness in the violent war. Her magnificent voice described as "quiet like a wild wind" (Bao Ninh 2013: 62), just adds to the melancholy of the war colors. Thus, in this story, Bao Ninh does not conceal his "lack of understanding" of women. He must rely on rumors to compensate for his deficiency. Nonetheless, his honest and realistic descriptions open a new path and provide a significant signal for the reconciliation of powerful and non-powerful voices in modern texts.

Meanwhile, Alexievich's narrative establishes distinct values for women's history through the narrator's profound understanding of women during the war. It is not another war where she purposefully makes "victory terrible" and "shows the filth of the war" (Alexievich 2017: xxxv), but one that is composed by women's language. Then, through a feminine respectability discourse, the real authority is formed. This view reminds us of Chéris Kramarae's assertion that women's language is non-powerful, "gossipy, talkative, uncertain" language (1980: 58) that has been refuted in Susan Lanser's study of feminist narratology (1986: 341-63). However, in Alexievich's novel *Unwomanly Face of War*, we realize that women's language is built differently. She does not attempt to construct a kind of discourse that is equal to men's, but rather "shows" women's experiences in their own language: simple, direct, and emotional. Female characters in Alexievich's novel do not try to "clean" the feminine quality in both their speech and thoughts as pointed out by Lakoff and Lanser. Surviving in dire circumstances of war, these women make no efforts to obliterate the distinction between men and women. On the contrary, females wish to claim that they are different entities with their concerns and worries that men could dismiss as "silly." With those distinctions, however, women have

entire control of their strength and voice.

Concretely, women live and fight in facing the reality that men consider women as children, fainting flowers, or young girls who are loved, not as soldiers/fighters on the front lines. Men, for example, do not hide their disappointment in accepting the female soldiers and have completely negative thoughts about women: "They were so different—bashful, timorous, mincing, or resolute, fired up. Not all of them knew how to submit to military discipline; women's nature resists army rules" (Alexievich 2017: 115-116). The girls who volunteered to go to the front, however, accept this inequality as an unavoidable thing and show their abilities and differences in a natural way. Recognizing that the war is not a dancing night, they learn and work without cease. Even though "men... reluctantly let women into their world, onto their territory" (2015: 20), women continue to show their naturalism in a proactive manner. The active voice, for example, is used to begin all of their words: "I wasn't the only one ... All our girls expressed the wish to go to the front" (Alexievich 2017: 5). "We began to study", "We studied the regulations" "we had already mastered all that. Only so as to get to the front the sooner" (Alexievich 2017: 7). It has been seen that because of that initiative, women have come to recognize another truth about war based on their personal experiences. "Women's war is more terrible than men's. Men hide behind history, behind facts; war fascinates them as action and a conflict of ideas, of interests, whereas women are caught up with feelings." (Alexievich 2017: xxiii) Women's language takes on a more active voice as they become more aware of their own difference. All of their stories are told from the first-person point of view with honest feelings of pent-up emotional pains: "We've been silent so long. Forty years ..." (Alexievich 2017: xxiv) Despite being rejected, forced to "tell" about great victories and show a war without tears and "women's trifles," without being scared and worried, in Alexievich's novel, women's war appears to be full of those trivialities such as "how you wanted to be beautiful, how you wept when they cut off your braid", or "I didn't want to die. Shooting was scary, I never thought I'd shoot. Oh, lord! I was afraid of the dark, of the dense forest. Of wild animals, of course ... Oh ... I couldn't imagine how someone could

meet a wolf or a wild boar. I was even afraid of dogs in my childhood" (2017: 47-8). Women's direct words about their feelings cannot completely be accepted by censors. They criticize those trivial stories and refuse to embrace this truth. Because primitive naturalism humiliates and dethrones women by characterizing them as females, making them into ordinary women. Without physiology or biology, men's heroism is sterile. Thus, when women are encouraged to tell the truth, a machine gunner's wife - a radio operator confesses, "He studied *The History of the Great Patriotic War* with me all last night. He was afraid for me. And now he's worried I won't remember right. Not the way I should." (Alexievich 2017: xxiv) What are "right memories"? Female ex-soldiers must break free from male dominance if they wish to retain a "different truth" of war that they have experienced with many irrevocable differences between women's and men's bodies and minds.

It is remarkable that, despite intentionally writing about women's history, the voices Alexievich recorded did not attempt to create a powerful language that is equally masculine voice. On the contrary, they experienced and perceived war entirely through the characteristics of powerlessness, emotion, and enthusiasm. If we go back to Lanser's textual analysis of the young wife's letter, we can see that "beneath the "feminine" voice of self-effacement and emotionality, then, lies the "masculine" voice of authority that the writer cannot inscribe openly." (1986: 349), as she points out in her study, However, this claim seems to be changed here. Obviously, women are not necessary to hide their voice "like a cheating game" in Alexievich's novel. Their undeniable roles in war give them opportunities to expose themselves honestly, and their own femininity, thus, was truthfully exposed in blending many prerogatives of masculine discourse. They become truth-telling narrators, demonstrating that "women's language" is not powerless. On the other hand, "the subversiveness" that Lanser identified in her study is also not necessary to be hidden under masks, so Alexievich's women discourse has shifted to the new status: seeking sexual differences and gender power, and exposing men's prejudices. Then, a new linguistic structure is established here, which constitutes a "truth" that is dissimilar from that of men In

Alexievich's war, for men, the truth "is what we dream about. It's how we want to be!" (Alexievich 2017: xxxv) while for women, the truth is their true feelings and experiences in war.

Many feminists continue to maintain that the statement that the masculine voice is associated with the discourse of power and that the "women's language" is, in contrast, the discourse of the powerless must be disproved.<sup>4</sup> The proposition that women's language is "polite, emotional, enthusiastic, gossipy, talkative, uncertain, dull, and chatty," for example, is merely a "cover" for a speech that is "capable, direct, rational, rational, illustrating a sense of humor, unfeeling, strong (in tone and choice word) and blunt" (Kramarae 1980: 58) of masculine discourse. And Lanser's essay eloquently demonstrated this argument (Lanser1986: 341-63). When examining the works of two writers based on the juxtapositional model of comparative literature, however, it has been realized that a new gender discourse is gradually forming. The discourse concerning women is, of course, men's speech for Bao Ninh. However, that masculine voice, rather than being a voice of authority, contains his distinct perspective of women's marginal position in war. His narrative strategy of "lack of understanding" about women established by using indirect discourse and external point of view has been acknowledged as a deficiency by the "language field" of women in the system of masculine symbols. Meanwhile, in Alexievich's novel, women's war is reconstructed using feminine language that does not imply equating with male domination. Women simply show their difference. And those differences become their strength and authority. Interestingly, this gender-identified nature becomes strikingly compatible with the "faint" authority of masculine domination in Bao Ninh's works. The vague knowledge about women, exactly the area/gap that Bao Ninh "couldn't understand", is filled in Alexievich's novel.

Thus, Alexievich does not establish women's language as breaking with tradition and inducing a radical shift of the linguistic style, as many feminists argued in their study.<sup>5</sup> The writer is also not

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<sup>4</sup> See more: Lakoff, S. Lanser, Kramarae.

<sup>5</sup> See more Cixous. 2008. *White Ink: Interviews on Sex, Text and Politics* (Edited by

trying to compose powerful language by imitating the qualities and characteristics of men's language; rather, "woman must write woman" (Cixous 1976: 877), because "by writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display" (Cixous 1976: 880). As a result, the structure of language will be changed. Women will build a new symbolic system that is richer and more flexible when they become subjects of the speech rather than passive recipients, and when they reject the phallic-centered conceptual system. Being herself in the war with her own emotions and thoughts, happiness and pain, it has been realized that women's language can gradually fill the gap between men's and women's powerful status. Women were employed in varied jobs and different positions during the war due to their physical and mental differences. Their mind and body are different from men, but not inferior. Women are not to be dominated.

### **III. Direct and Indirect Discourse: Women's Beauty and Pain in War**

To "overthrow" men's prejudices about marginalized women, Alexievich uses direct discourse in her writing, however, this bias is vague and hidden in the narrator's indirect discourse in Bao Ninh's *Short Stories*. The two types of discourse unveil the writer's different perspectives as well as the shift of power in their language, which are highlighted in Lanser's book *Narrative Act* (1982) and her essay *Towards Feminist Narratology* (1986). Here, the recognition of this specificity, according to Lanser, "has led not only to the rereading of individual texts but to the rewriting of literary history" (1986: 343); even she also suggests that "it leads to a rewriting of narratology that takes into account the contribution of women as both producers and interpreters of texts" (Lanser 1986: 343)

In Bao Ninh's works, war is neither win-lose struggles nor washing away hatred, rather, it mostly contains in deep humane

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Susan Sellers), Acumen Publishing Limited; Dani Cavallaro. *French Feminist Theory: An Introduction*, London & New York: Continuum, 2003. p. 123



contemplation on human beings. Even though women's faces are being increasingly out of place, Bao Ninh keeps following those marginal signs to make a difference. In his narratives, the grimmer and bare the men's word is, the more magical the women's world becomes. If male characters are usually observed from an internal point of view with profound understanding, on the contrary, women are a fully mysterious world depicted by indirect discourse.

Dieu Nuong describes *The Wild Wind* in this manner: "In the mixing of the dawn, illusion and reality, sounds and images are integrated. There is a slim body, a graceful gait. A stream of her hair fell on.... Maybe a ghost. A seductive ghostly in full of soft and alive, but can suddenly dissolve into the mystery" (Bao Ninh 2013: 55). Nga in the short story *Trại "Bảy chú lùn"* (*A Camp of "the Seven Dwarves"*) also appears as an illusion from the soldier's look: "I was stunned, I couldn't believe my eyes anymore" (Bao Ninh 2013: 127), "Her voice is so beautiful, it can soar to the height and suddenly fall" (Bao Ninh 2013: 128). Ngà in the story *Hữu khuynh* (*The Rightist Deviationism*) are another strange and painful image of women. That girl appeared in the dreams of Tư (Ngà's lover), "in the long nights and the deepest corners of his heart" (Bao Ninh 2013: 224). He often saw Ngà's beautiful figure: "Her oval face appeared out in the darkness, both faint and clear. The thick hair fell to her shoulders. Tư reached out his hand and touched that hair. He stroked it gently. Her bare arms and soft shoulders although had disappeared, still trembled in his hands..." (Bao Ninh 2013: 225). Just like that, the soldier's many flesh and blood experiences have vanished in the face of the girl's true love.

Not only are women portrayed from an external point of view, but their images are mostly coated with an illusional color, sometimes of art. Giang, in the story *Hà Nội lúc không giờ* (*Hanoi At No Time*) is seen from the painter Nam's perspective, as being "vivid and illusory":

"Giang in the picture is just seventeen years old. Under the shimmering reflection of a lamp, her young and pink oval face is so pretty. The plump lips were slightly pursed, the high neck was white. Her head was bowed, her arms crossed on her knees. I

couldn't see her eyes since she didn't raise her face, but I could see her delicate eyebrows, thick and slightly wet eyelashes" (Bao Ninh 2013: 564).

All women in Bao Ninh's narratives are observed from the external point of view, they are beautiful, but strange and hard to understand. Also, they aren't depicted with specific psychological descriptions, nor direct dialogues between the characters. In his narratives, mainly the narrator's speeches (including narration and indirect dialogue) and telling from the third person point of view with indirect discourse. The narrator is a far distance from female characters. This technique leads to the reality that his authority is very small. His knowledge is limited, and the narrator doesn't understand women, only observes and describes some feelings from the outside. The limitations of understanding of this narrator, on the other hand, make him more believable. Making no secret of that deficiency, Bao Ninh's narrator creates a blurred world full of emotions that is so different from men's fierce world in war.

In addition, in Bao Ninh's short stories, no matter what these women are, a mother worships her son on an airplane because he was a military pilot who died in an air battle (*Thousand Years of White Clouds*), a high school girl (*Giang, A Forbidden Book, A Competition*), a young girl who encountered in the battle (*Carving the side of the boat*), a "prostitute" of the war (Dieu Nuong in *The Wild Wind*), a female courier (Nga in *The Camp of "the Seven Dwarves"*), a girl from the enemy side (Ngà in *Rightist Deviationism*), or a gentle and holy French girl with illusory violin sounds (Sophie in *The Violin of the Invaders*), and Giang - the hope's source in war (*Hanoi At No Time*) - all of them have the magical or illusory beauty. They are presented as a living source - a great song during the furious sound of weapons and bombs.

This seems completely different from Alexievich's image of women in the front line. Women don't write about themselves in the same way that Bao Ninh does. Women's beauty is observed and depicted with many differences depending on their own experiences. And women's authority and status are shaped by this distinction.

The girls appear as subjects in any situation in *Unwomanly*

*Face of War*, irrespective of ravages and brutalities, or even paradoxes of war. They do not, however, have fragile beauty like angels. In the strange situations of war, most of them portray both their outer appearance and inner nature by their own direct speech. On the front line, beautiful young girls must very quickly cut their long hair and dress military uniforms. War does not inherently accept women's presence with many complicated costumes. To survive, they must become men. The girls' familiar image is "in old boots and a man's padded jacket" (Alexievich 2017: 77). Not only that, but their bodies are also destroyed in the cruelest and barbaric way. Shura Kiseleva, for example, "was the prettiest of us. Like an actress. She got burned up" (Alexievich 2017: 86); or in another case, "one of our nurses was captured... A day later we took back that village... We found her: eyes put out, breasts cut off. They had impaled her on a stake ... It was freezing cold, and she was white as could be, and her hair was all gray... She was nineteen years old (Alexievich 2017: 123).

Alexievich's female beauty is only revealed in such a way. Women understand that war is not for human beings, there is only "beat," "stab with a bayonet," and "strangling each other." (Alexievich 2017: 135) "They break each other's bones. There's howling, shouting. Moaning." (Alexievich 2017: 135). And, in such nightmares, women's differences can cause troublesome problems, so they purposefully exclude them. Women's fashion items are not allowed. It's not a good idea to be a woman. In war, there are no women. Girls even realize that they are being "masculinized," because of not bathing, not dressing well, and not being flirted with. It's all just a matter of death preparation. However, a woman's natural identity seems to be stronger in essence. They still want to be attractive. Their desire is only to look beautiful. "I was very afraid that if I was killed, I'd lie there looking unattractive. I saw many girls killed... In mud, in water ... Well... How shall I... I didn't want to die like that." (Alexievich 2017: 152). They expressed their fears. Thus, from women's perspective, female beauty becomes their obsession and desire, not life or death but beauty. Even they are very much concerned about their appearance after death: "In the end, only one fear remains - of being ugly after death. A woman's

fear... Not to be torn to pieces by a shell... I saw it happen... I picked up those pieces" (Alexievich 2017: 193). And it is what men seem to think is so stupid that makes the difference.

Not only is women's beauty described differently depending on male/female perspectives, but their pain is also distinguished in indirect and direct discourse from men and women's looks. In both Bao Ninh's and Alexievich's narrative forms, gender identity is established as an inevitable thing.

In Bao Ninh's narratives, indirect discourse is one of the main techniques, and remarkably, it is employed extensively. For example, in *The Wild Wind*, the narrator admits: "The illusory elements are enhanced by each person's imagination." (Bao Ninh 2013: 55) Dieu Nuong's life, as the story's heroine, is filled with ambiguous details, "rumors" and "fabrications." This external observation is so radical that when Dieu Nuong even is rescued from a pile of corpses, traumatized, and described as a "prostitute" willing to hang out with anyone, the physical intimacy of the character "I" who already had sex with her, also becomes a very common "self," "I" of all men. Take into account Bao Ninh's rapid transition in discourse: from a seemingly very personal "I," such as "I was enjoying never-before-seen minutes there, beyond my hometown", "I took a step forward and touched something wonderful...", "I was sunk in a sweet hell" (Bao Ninh 2013: 76). But, despite all the passion, magic power, and even guilt, the narrator still understands nothing about Dieu Nuong. His entire range of emotions is an illusion. Furthermore, the use of non-exactly demonstrative pronouns such as *nobody*, *people* (e.g., "not many people linger with her," "nobody dares to make her hopeless," "people keep promising" (Bao Ninh 2013: 77), has revealed that the character "I" turns also out very common and vague, just as man's ego. Thus, this one-of-a-kind intimacy has been "faded", becoming faint. It keeps the story narrated from an outside outlook. It's precisely the physical relationship that cannot be the body-mind one after moments of infatuation. The women's image in Bao Ninh's works is beautiful and fantasy, thanks to this narrative technique.

This technique of telling is also pursued in Bao Ninh's other

narratives. Concretely, in *A Camp of "the Seven Dwarves,"* whatever the narrator knows about Nga is observed from the external point of view, regardless of how tumultuous the circumstances are (even in a long time, the soldier-narrator lives in the same forest with her). Nobody knows what she is thinking. In her suffering and living, the soldier is completely powerless. He just quietly witnesses her changes, seeing "her grief diminished", or "her sadness and longing were getting more and more intense. She got older" (2013: 135). Therefore, when she abandons everything, including her son to the front in the hope of finding her lover, she and the soldier both sink into throbbing pain. Obviously, although they are not in the front lines of the war, the brutality of war has a heavy impact on their fortunes.

Thus, unlike in *Unwomanly Face of War*, there are no images of female soldiers who sacrifice themselves in the front line, "center of hell" in Bao Ninh. In the darkness of war, women are considered an eternal source of life with passionate happiness, but endless pain by war. They, however, are on the "periphery" of the war. Women are mostly victims, entirely involved in the war by "feminine" reasons and "womanly" logic and faced with the barbarism of war in their way: Dieu Nuong falls tragically in love with a soldier and uses her wonderful singing to down the sound of bombs and bullets; Nga leaves her son to go to the front line in seeking her son's father; Ngà suffers in silence and abandons her man in despair. Their painful and fragile fates expose many tragedies of war. All the women in Bao Ninh are passionate and naïve. From his perspective, they are "gentle and benevolent women" (Bao Ninh 2013: 556), as though angels soothing the pain in moments of despair and misery. Although Bao Ninh's narrator rarely reveals women's psychological dimensions through indirect discourse, women's beauty and mental torments are there as the tough and repeated mental trauma, which is filled by the reader's co-creation day after day.

However, it seems that only women are capable of accurately perceiving and describing the most "weird" and craziest experiences that God gave their bodies during the war. In *Unwomanly Face of War*, by using direct language, Alexievich exposes a different truth. Only in women's discourse could it be possible to be killed by being embarrassed. An example is the story of a woman's menstrual

period, that makes her become the target of enemies. Listen to her voice: "I'm alone... among men. I was wearing trousers, but now I march in a summer dress. Suddenly I begin to have my... woman's thing... It started early, probably from the agitation. From being nervous, upset. There was nowhere to find what I needed. I was embarrassed! So embarrassed!" (Alexievich 2017: xxxi). And that girl, when seeing the river, she jumps into it. The need to clean her body due to embarrassment gives the Germans that are across the river with an opportunity aimed precisely and shoot her; Alternatively, we can remember another reality. To save a squad of 30 people, a female radio operator must manually drown her newborn baby. Only because somebody betrayed her comrades and the Germans found out where the camp of their partisan unit. The swamp hides everything, including machines and people in its wild thickets, but it doesn't silence the hungry newborn baby's cries. "The baby was hungry... It had to be nursed... But the mother herself was hungry and had no milk. The baby cried. The punitive forces were close... With dogs... If the dogs heard it, we'd all be killed" (Alexievich 2017: xxxiv). And although nobody can bring the commander's order to the mother, she figures it out on herself. "She lowers the swaddled baby into the water and holds it there for a long time... The baby doesn't cry anymore... Not a sound... And we can't raise our eyes. Neither to the mother nor each other" (Alexievich 2017: xxxiv). She saved her comrades. Is it, however, a victory or a crime? Just keep in mind that it will torment the mother till she dies.

These realities force us to rethink about hidden corners of war. War has painfully destroyed both outer appearance and the inner soul of women, as according to Alexievich's writing, and only women profoundly understand it: "Even if you come home alive, your soul will hurt" (Alexievich 2017: 17) Witnessing the brutality and "living through it" (Alexievich 2017: 136), the girls realize that they will never be normal people. The war can end, but "nothing human left of her anyway, it's all over" says a female ex-soldier (2015: 136). Women's direct discourse, irrespective of who they are, is tormented by memories of war all the time. From a female sniper who is traumatized by the loud sounds to a female partisan who is haunted by smells of a burning human body, all of them suffered

a mental disorder. The female sipper even "wakes up at night, run and fetch her cologne", and "it seems that in the cologne, too, there's that smell. Everywhere..." (Alexievich 2017: 255). The brutality of war is exposed in such dry, bare, and direct stories, deepening women's grief in the absence of figures. Although they can see everything is rebuilt after war and "everything drowns in flowers" (Alexievich 2017: 34), all their senses are still immersed in memory: "I'm worn out with pain, I still don't have a woman's face. I cry often, I moan all day. It's my memories" (Alexievich 2017: 34). Thus, telling trivial stories by using direct discourse, on the one hand, truthfully exposes women's war through their own feelings and experiences, on the other hand, it is no longer a way of seeking sympathy, but rather a means of uncovering adversities and a deep smoldering pain that requires liberation.

This artistic technique is completely absent in Bao Ninh's narratives. By unmasking women's pain in the war, Bao Ninh sympathizes with and is grateful to them. Narrated from the male perspective, women's sufferings have been refracted, and it differently impacts on readers. Women are likewise stunning, but it's the kind of beauty that is "nailed" in men's perception of desire and authority. Although their own feelings of inadequacy and meaningless in the world without women, males continue to regard women as unreal values. Women are on the periphery. They have no voice in war. They are shown as saints by Bao Ninh to strengthen the will of the soldiers fighting on the front lines.

Even though both Bao Ninh and Alexievich's writings do not share the vision of making a great history with heroic characters, gender identity has had a significant influence on their works. The narrative strategy of "lack of understanding" and indirect discourse employed by Bao Ninh sharply contrasts with that of Alexievich who utilizes deep knowledge and direct discourse on women. Interestingly, when comparing these two writers' works based on the juxtapositional model, it becomes clear that their telling does not disprove each other, but rather exalt, respond to, and fill our understanding of people and war.

#### IV. Private and Public Narratives: Love Stories

Besides the difference of voices and direct/indirect discourse, private/public narratives are also used to illustrate the shift of the power in gender discourse in the narrative texts. Theoretically, private or public narrating becomes a debated issue in narratology because it reveals the power of discourse as well as the content of narratives. When we examine this phenomenon, we can look back at Spender's arguments: "The dichotomy of male/female, public/private is maintained by permitting women to write for private audience (which can be extended to encompass other women) but discouraging them from writing for public audience, that is, men. In the "private" sphere, women have been permitted to write for themselves... There is no contradiction in patriarchal order while women write for women" (Spender 1980: 192). However, this only remains within the limits of the private sphere, conflicts will arise "when women write for men" (1980: 192). Thus, Alexievich's writing in *Unwomanly Face of War* inevitably creates issues, because that private sphere is for men, to publish a different war. Making conflicts is a huge obstacle that is not easy to overcome for women. On another side of it, when women speak up, they will be granted "authority". This authority is also discussed more by Lanser when she proposes public/private narrative levels as an important additional category that concerned the study of women's texts (1986: 352). Her point is that the public/private notions apply not only to what women write, but also to how readers interpret what they read. Women's language will shape a new "field" of discourse based on "the subversion" of the masculine domination if private stories are published. Thus, in Alexievich's novel, telling women's private stories is to openly oppose the male supremacy that firmly dominates the public consciousness and has prevailed not only during the war but also throughout the post-war years. It is about dismantling masculine power and privilege, creating new perceptions, and forming a new language that the patriarchal system has deliberately erased or distorted.

This type of private discourse is densely used in Alexievich's novel. In war, because everyone is surrounded by evil and hatred,



private stories like love are also different. Women recognize that "a human being is most visible and open in war, and maybe also in love. To the depths, to the subcutaneous layers"(Alexievich 2017: xxv). Hence, Alexievich's women, although seeing "love would perish instantly" (Alexievich 2017: 240), they still confirm that "Love is the only personal event in wartime. All the rest is common-even death" (Alexievich 2017: 225). Because of realizing love's difference and fragility in deadly circumstances, women's love is almost romantic and tragic stories. Nina L. Mikhail, a sergeant major and nurse, expressed her heartfelt gratitude "Our love was not divided into today and tomorrow, there was only today. Each of us knew that you love now, and the next moment either you or this man would be no more" (Alexievich 2017: 234). Also, in the hundreds of broken stories recorded in the novel, although it does not last a lifetime, love leaves the deepest traces of separation and loss. They assert directly: "We were separated by the war" (Alexievich 2017: 230), and women who are pure girls, wives, and mothers as well as peoples who are called as "a field campaign wife. A war wife... A second one" (Alexievich 2017: 235), even when they are at their happiest, they experience suffering. They know that "the war ended, and love ended. Like a song." Even if they are alive, their lives will only be nourished by the past, because no matter how painful and bad the ending, for them, love is still the most meaningful thing, remaining the beauty between the darkness of bombs and blood. "The war as the best time of my life, I was happy then ..." a girl says (Alexievich 2017: 237), or "I think that if I hadn't fallen in love at the war, I wouldn't have survived. Love saved us. It saved me ..." (Alexievich 2017: 235). Thus, all such direct words of insiders show war's another face, deeply imprinting the women's unnamed pains, and on the other hand, confirming women's voices.

In Alexievich's novel, although the blood stains on the snow and the brutality of war cannot be hidden by women's faces, their direct, honest, and determined voices remain the glimmer of light in the dark shadows of the violent war. They can be a sniper, an anti-aircraft gunner, underground fighter, a tank driver, a senior pilot, a sapper, a foot soldier, telephone operator, doctor, surgical nurse, medical assistant, a baker, or an art singer, medical volunteer, or a

partisan, for instance. All those people live, fight, do everything in each their various position, and have their love in the front. Despite pain and despair, their love is the most humane aspect of human beings in the war, and only those private narratives, we can imagine about women's history and hear their own voices

In contrast, Bao Ninh's narrative strategy shows that women's happiness and pain in love are observed and narrated by indirect discourse from men's perspectives. It leads to many differences between the two writers in presenting private narratives. If women's private world in Alexievich's novel is a vivid and truthful picture and full of colors between happiness and sufferings narrated directly, so instead women's love stories in Bao Ninh's works are an illusion, beauty, and pain in a different way. Regardless matter whether women are on the periphery or not, they are swept into the war's inhumane and barbaric reality.

It is illustrated by the silent and strong love affair between Dieu Nuong and Tuan in *The Wild Wind*, which ends painfully with the image of two people dead wrapped around each other; and Ngà's painful and torturous love with a communist from the opposing side in Bao Ninh's *Rightist Deviationism*. If the bullets drills through Dieu Nuong and Tuan and tighten the two bodies together as a symbol of the darkest period, the humiliation of the word "betrayer" not only kills the pure and passionate soul of Ngà, but it also makes her love forever "nourished with open wounds, the pain of dying again and again, and the constant horrors" (Bao Ninh 2013: 221). In both these stories, love has been turned into tragedy as an unavoidable consequence of war. Nobody can be immune to the pain of loss. Narrated from the third-person point of view and observed from a lack of understanding narrator, their love still sinks in sharp pain.

Thus, although the private/public narratives of Bao Ninh and Alexievich are completely different due to sexual differences, both techniques allow readers to feel the paradox, fierceness, and disaster women in war. When a woman, however, writes about herself, shares her secrets, and exposes her private stories, which means, her awareness and status are established.

## V. Conclusion

Alexievich wrote "a book about war that would make war sickening, and the very thought of it repulsive. Insane. So that even the generals would be sickened ..." (Alexievich 2017: xxii). The anti-war voices in Alexievich and Bao Ninh are profoundly heard on each of their pages. When they're put side by side using the juxtapositional model of Comparative Literature, it can uncover other dimensions that could be missed if they are analyzed separately.

Based on examining the two writers' works from the feminist narratological approach, the paper distinguishes between the two types of narratives of women. More importantly, if feminist narrative studies have separated the poles of authoritative and non-authoritative voices associated with male/female discourse, distinguishing features between Bao Ninh's and Alexievich's discourse do not create contradictions, but tend to overlap, blurring sharp demarcation. The image of women indirectly narrated from Bao Ninh's masculine discourse, on the one hand, makes the author's masculine authority faded, on the other hand, it serves as indirect support for the argument that women need to have their own voice and language. The history of women must be built through their own experiences. Bao Ninh's women are beautiful, yet their beauty is referenced by a patriarchal system and filled up by men's aspirations. However, the narrator's "lack of understanding" in Bao Ninh's works, interestingly, shows the truthfulness in his narrative strategy, bringing profound changes in the humanistic spirit; simultaneously, it acknowledges that men's authority language has not been sufficient for expressing women's world. When describing a world that it does not belong, the masculine language unveils its weaknesses. Alexievich, in contrast, applies a completely different narrative strategy. She remains all women's voices with their feelings and experiences to compose women's war/history. Therefore, women's language in Alexievich's novels is the active, direct, and determined discourse. With no need to hide or disguise, women "accidentally" fully reveal their natural characteristics: emotions and differences. They are not looking for equality to men, all they desire is to be asserted their voice and position. Even though women's

language in Alexievich's novel is an active and powerful voice, they do not try to look for the physical and emotional similarities with men. They are two separate entities. Women, once again, gain power by being different. Thus, juxtaposing Bao Ninh and Alexievich's works, we can recognize many different features, but contextually, these differences will not exist at the two poles, but rather appear to respond to and toward overlap each other. The sexual difference forms the two types of different discourses and transforms the narrative structure; however, it also reveals as well as enriches our knowledge of the so-called authority and non-authority of women's language, contributing to better understanding women's real position and roles in war, and human beings in general. Regardless of the active or passive voices, telling from a male/female point of view, women's fates (and people's future in general) are only as the worms and ants' fates (Bao Ninh 2015: 52-87) in the war. They are small and weak, and they'll all perish because of the catastrophic destruction of bombs and bullets. Loss and suffering are constant companions throughout their lives. War, no matter how they look at, it is always opposite to women, putting them together, only increasing the paradoxes, pain, and brutality.

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## **The Phenomenon of Interference in Popular and Artistic Literature: Comparing *Red Summer* by Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and *Goodbye Tsugumi* by Yoshimoto Banana From the Perspective of Japanese Shoujo Manga**



Nguyen Thi Mai Lien\* · Thanh Duc Hong Ha\*\*

### **[ Abstract ]**

Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto Banana are authors from two different literary movements, cultures, and countries. Their works are all best-sellers and have received many prestigious awards. Comparing their works from the perspective of shoujo manga, we can see that there are many similarities between them. Regarding the concept of composition, they all want to create works that are accessible to the majority of the public. Therefore, they choose topics which are close and attractive to mass readers as well as simple style, characters, literary devices, artistic space and time that are famous in shoujo - a popular art form of Japan. However, the ideological content in the works of both is not explicit and simple, but expresses the eternal feelings and values of humanity such as love for people, love for the homeland, country, reflecting the depths of both the conscious and the subconscious as well as profound aesthetic and philosophical values, profound aesthetic and philosophical values. Their works present the trend of interference between popular culture and elite literature. We

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can draw lessons for young writers, cultural managers and a wide audience from the success of these two writers.

**Keywords:** Nguyễn Nhật Ánh, Yoshimoto Banana, popular literature, shoujo manga

Nguyễn Nhật Ánh is a Vietnamese author specializing in writing for adolescents. He has published nearly 100 works and has long become a well-known author among young readers in Vietnam. In 1995, he was voted as the most beloved writer in 20 years (from 1975 to 1995) through a readers' poll for outstanding young faces in all fields, held by Ho Chi Minh Youth Union and Tuổi Trẻ News. Additionally, he was selected by the Ho Chi Minh City Writers' Association as one of 20 outstanding young authors in 20 years (from 1975 to 1995). In 1998, he was awarded the best-selling writer by Kim Dong Publishing House. In 2019, he received the ASEAN Literature Award. Meanwhile, Banana Yoshimoto (よしもと ばな) is also an author who dedicates most of her writings to young adults. Concerning Japanese literature in the past 20 years, Yoshimoto is one of the most outstanding. Banana's works are famous and influential not only in her home country, but also around the world. She is phenomenal, with her popularity regarded as "Bananamia." Her most remarkable works, namely *Kitchen* キッチン (1988), *Goodbye Tsugumi* つぐみ (1989), *Amrita* アムリタ (1994), etc. have won numerous prestigious awards. Her debut novel, *Kitchen*, sold 2.5 million copies upon its first publication; the book also won 16 prestigious national and international awards. *Goodbye Tsugumi* was adapted into a film, as well as winning the Yamamoto Shugoro Literary Award in 1989.

What is the reason that allows writers like Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto to win prestigious awards while also retaining their "best-seller" status? By viewing *Red Summer* by Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and *Goodbye Tsugumi* by Yoshimoto using the shoujo manga perspective, a unique art form of Japanese popular literature, this article establishes that the evident and persuasive cause of this



phenomenon is the intersection of the values of popular literature and elite/artistic literature in the two authors' works. Both Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto have absorbed the techniques of popular literature, then sublimate the value of popular literature by entrusting the noble themes of humanity, the depth of Eastern aesthetic and philosophical ideas in their interpretations of human being and human life, which raises their works closer to artistic/elite literature.

There are significant differences between Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto in terms of geographical distance, history, language, the cultural sphere in which they grew up and immerse themselves, or their statuses in world literature. With regard to these aspects, it can be said that *Red Summer* by Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and *Goodbye Tsugumi* by Yoshimoto are two “strange” works. In fact, because of this “strangeness,” there have been no studies comparing the works. By juxtaposing these two novels, we have recognized that *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* have interesting similarities, namely the elements of shoujo manga - a form of Japanese popular literature. Therefore, our article would focus on comparing the similarities between two aforementioned works from the perspective of shoujo manga concerning various aspects: themes, situations, structures; characterizations; portrayals of nature, etc. with a view to explaining their ability to become widely popular among mass readers; on the other hand, we also research the artistic/elite literary merits that the authors attempt to crystallize in their works, such as the value of moral education, aesthetic training; of profound humane philosophical ideals in order to create sustainable values for their compositions. As a result, this article affirms that the intersection of mass and artistic/elite literature is a critical cause of the widespread appeal and long-lasting impacts of great authors who have established their places on the map of regional and world literature, and this intersection is also an important orientation for

the works of contemporary young writers, as well as proposing new domains for readers and cultural managers.

## **I . Popular literature and artistic/elite literature, manga and shoujo manga**

### **1.1. Popular literature and elite literature**

Popular literature (French: *littérature populaire*), also known as colloquial literature, is “the part of literature that has been printed for entertainment and teaching in large quantities, becoming popular since the nineteenth and especially the twentieth century. *Mass* (from Latin: *massa*) has two meanings: mass production (as in a cultural “product”) and intended for extensive consumption. Therefore, the mass media plays an important role in the consumption of popular literature. In many cases, popular literature could be used as a method of ideological work to fascinate the mass consciousness and entice the masses” (Lê Bá Hán et al. 2004: 407). Mass culture and popular culture are often used interchangeably, but the two terms are actually not synonymous with one another. “Their meanings lie at the intersection of cultural production and consumption in today’s society. The two can be argued to constitute ‘The Culture Industry’ as described by Adorno and Horkheimer in their book, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In general terms, the difference between the two lies in the fact that popular culture is preoccupied with production while mass culture deals with consumption” (Shivanka Gautama 2021: 01). In this article, we use the term “popular culture” because the article discusses issues related to the process of creating literary works of two the authors Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto.

### **1.2. Manga and Shoujo Manga**

Manga (kanji: 漫画; hiragana: まんが; katakana: マンガ; English:

*/'mæŋgə/* or */'ma:ŋgə/*) is a term referring to Japanese comics, a popular art form that has a large readership and whose main characteristics are humorous or sarcastic. Manga plays a significant role in Japanese culture. This art form appeared in Japan during the 12th century. Nowadays, manga has become a popular form of entertainment not only in Japan but also in most countries around the world. Manga comes in various genres, for example: shounen (for boys and young adults); shoujo (for girls); mahou shounen (similar to mahou shoujo but for men); kodomo (for children); seinen (adult, youth); josei or redikomi (for adults, mostly women); seijin (similar to redikomi but for men); yaoi (gay comics featuring physical intimacy); shoneen-ai (gay comics that do not focus to physical intimacy but only feelings and emotions); yuri (lesbian comics that features physical relationships); shoujo-ai (lesbian comics about feelings and emotions); doujinshi (comics created by fans based on the original works); gekiga (visual novel); horror; martial arts; school life; comedy; ecchi (usually with revealing scenes for amusement, but contains no sex scenes); hentai (story about physical intimacy between people of the opposite sex); fantasy; adventure. Within the aforementioned genres, shoujo manga is one of the four important genres along with shounen, seinen and josei.

Shoujo manga was initially a genre oriented to girls under the age of eighteen; afterwards, the range of readers expanded to all ages and the genre was preferred by male audiences. Shoujo manga is often mentioned in comparison to shounen. While shounen explores aspects such as action, adventure, sports, science and technology, self-improvement, harsh discipline, shoujo manga attracts readers by focusing on the depiction of the female characters, who come across as being gentle, romantic, but also possess a very rich and complex inner lives. The appearance of the female protagonists is often sketched with common features: long legs, a slim body, hair smooth straight or floating in the wind, big

glittering eyes occupying one third of the face, delicate V-shaped chin, etc. All of which are similar to the idealistic *kawaii* beauty of modern Japan. Characters in shoujo manga are often portrayed within their personal development as well as their relationships with others. The plot and dialogue of shoujo manga are usually simple and predictable. Most of the endings are happy, which brings satisfaction to the readers. But shoujo manga are not always sweet dreams; some stories are often termed 'the price of tears' by Japanese. Love stories that feature three or four people, interwoven with tragedy, are always explored by female authors. Overall, shoujo manga is rich with fantasy, romance, and adventure elements, giving readers a sense of suspense.

### **1.3 Popular Literature and National Literature**

In Vietnam, elite and popular literature have long interfered with each other. Nguyễn Du's *The Tale of Kieu* is the most quintessential work of Vietnamese poetry; yet it also crystallizes the values that the great poet has absorbed and transformed from folklore. *The Tale of Kieu* is loved and respected by the common people as well as by leading intellectuals since both groups can attain the values they perceive from this work. By the 1940s, revolutionary popular literature appeared, originating from the *Outline of Vietnamese Culture 1943*. This outline, up to now, remains valid, and has become the foundation for the Communist Party's directions and policies throughout the course of revolution. The outline listed three principles of Vietnamese culture: nation, science and mass. "Nationalization means resisting all enslaving and colonial influences and set Vietnamese culture on the course of developing independently; massification means resisting all undertakings and actions that cause the culture to go against or away from the masses; scientification means opposing everything that makes the culture unscientific or anti-progressive" (Nguyễn Minh Hằng 2015: 02). In the context of revolution and resistance, the Party needed to

mobilize a large number of mass forces to participate in the revolutionary work, hence literature was oriented towards massification, towards revolutionary forces, mainly workers, farmers, soldiers. This is a meaningful point of view, completely appropriate and necessary given the special circumstances of the period.

In the context of the nation's historical confrontation with the invading enemy, literature must join forces with arrows and bullets to attack the enemy with a strong belief in the victory of justice. The value of life and happiness of each individual lies in the great happiness of the nation. The value of literature, the value of life, and the value of people at that time were directed to be the revolutionary ideal, and to be the spirit of contributing, fighting and sacrificing for the Fatherland. Revolutionary leaders on the one hand called for massification; yet on the other hand, they also recognized the limitations of popular literature. Therefore, they called for elevating the value of popular literature and thus raising the level of popular reception. As a result, Vietnamese Literature during the two resistance wars against the French and the American also produced significant contemporary works that resonated with the people. Since 1986, the country has undergone renovation, the specific conditions of history—society of the times created important premises for the surge of popular literature. First, the values of contemporary people changed. Perceptions of the world and of other people were broadened and diversified. Literature paid attention to the fate of individuals: "Modern society emphasizes the role of the individual and promotes the awakening of individual consciousness. The rising ego demands proper attention. Fiction returns to man, alters the artistic concept of man, and preserves the value of man against the oblivion of society" (Bích Thu 2013: 01). The advent of the Internet, computers and other technological accomplishments have brought humanity into the flat world, creating diverse, simple and accessible forms of literary publication.

The dramatic increase of short stories, novels, essays posted on blogs, Facebook, etc. has garnered the attention of a large number of readers, especially the young generation. Popular literature is now read by hundreds, if not thousands or even millions. This prompts us to reconsider the concept of values, the concept of literature and aesthetics in modern society.

In Japan, popular literature arose and progressed since 1920 with the popularity of mass media and mainly aimed at the middle class, which constituted the majority of Japanese society in the age of industrialization. Since popular literature bears the characteristics of being popular and entertaining, the genre itself is very diverse. The most famous works are detective novels by top authors such as Seicho Matsumoto, Ranpo Edogawa, and Keigo Higashino, followed by samurai novels by names like Ryotaro Shiba, and Eiji Yoshikawa; the genre also consists of family novels, humorous novels, science fiction novels, legends. (Hoàng Long 2019: 01)

Within the flow of national and worldwide literature, Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto are inevitably influenced by popular literature. In Nguyễn Nhật Ánh's works, we can observe a harmonious blend between artistry and popularity.

## **II. Features of Popular Literature in *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* from the Perspective of Shoujo Manga**

### **2.1. Themes, Situations, and Structures**

Regarding themes, shoujo manga often reflects the everyday stories, depicts the ordinary people, in addition to presenting issues in the lifestyle typically observed among adolescents and young adults, namely love, friendship, family, death, hurt, healing, etc. These are also common themes in the works of Yoshimoto and Nguyễn Nhật Ánh. Reading Yoshimoto's works, the audience could recognize that

the characters are severely traumatized. Her characters, especially young women, often appear alone in the midst of a tragic life, and are constantly suffering from emotional wounds. *Kitchen* is about a young girl who suddenly lost her only family member, and she is left without her loved ones. *NP* is the story of a young girl who accidentally becomes the lover of her father, then of her brother... Yoshimoto's works are genuinely concerned with expressing the pain and loneliness that the characters face in order to carry on, to find new ways to live. In that way, the character realizes that women are strong. Often the character is hurt, lonely and stuck, which often results from either the death of a family member or a lover, or cracks in marriage and family life. Hurts lead to loss and disorientation.

Similar to the general theme of shoujo manga, both *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* are stories of teenage girls told from the insightful perspective of other characters: Chương (*Red Summer*) and Maria (*Goodbye Tsugumi*). These are the main characters, who are also the narrators of the two novels. Through the narration of the two characters, the daily life as well as emotional life of adolescent girls and boys are vividly recreated.

The situations of the stories also bear resemblance to the constant rivalry motif, a stereotypical characteristic of romance novels. Chương (*Red Summer*) is a 9th grader who grows up in the city. After passing the difficult secondary school graduation exam, Chương is sent to his hometown by his parents to spend the summer at the rural house of his aunt, Sau. In that house live his cousins: Nhạ, 2 years younger and Dế, 4 years younger than Chương. Nhạ and Dế both have their own distinctive personalities. While Nhạ is gentle and docile, Dế is clever and mischievous. Through Nhạ and Dế, Chương gets to know the lovely little friends in Ha Xuyen village such as Thom, Thế, Mr. Thoảng of the Outer hamlet, Út Thềm, Dữ and Dữ's group of friends in Miếu hamlet.

After Dữ is shot in the neck by a shotgun shell, Út Thê, Dữ's sister, takes him to aunt Sau's house for treatment. Thanks to that, Chương gets acquainted with Út Thê. Chương is enamored by Út Thê's sweet, gentle beauty, hence he tries his best to befriend her. He also goes to Út Thê's house to teach her and Dữ how to read and write. The story ends with Chương returning to the city for a new academic year in a sad mood, knowing that Út Thê is about to get married. Summer days pass, only leaving sadness and regret in the hearts of the characters. *Goodbye Tsugumi* also begins with a similar situation. Little Maria, after finishing her 11th grade school year, spends the summer in her mother's hometown - an idyllic seaside area with a distinctively Japanese landscape. She also stays with her mother's sister, aunt Masako. Aunt Masako has two daughters, Yoko and Tsugumi. Maria is one year younger than Yoko and one year older than Tsugumi. The two girls are both daughters of aunt Masako, but have wildly different personalities. While Yoko is sweet, gentle and generous, Tsugumi is surly and mischievous, always coming up with all sorts of tricks to torment others. When Tsugumi's dog is caught up in a fight with the dog of a new boy living in town, Kyoichi, Tsugumi and Kyoichi get to know each other. Between the two of them blossoms a friendship that later transforms into romantic love. When summer is over, Maria returns to Tokyo for a new school year, her heart filled with unforgettable memories.

In terms of structure, similar to shoujo manga, *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* are both divided into small parts and chapters, yet the two novels in general retain their seamless flow. *Goodbye Tsugumi* is divided into small stories that enable readers to understand and follow them easily as in slow-motion movies while also allowing the audience to go in-depth into the inner world of the character. The 12 chapters are all titled (similar to manga volumes, of which every book has a title). *Red Summer*, on the other



hand, is divided into parts. Though these parts are not assigned with titles as in *Goodbye Tsugumi*, each of them is also a lovely little story in the character's daily life. From our point of view the division of such works (which follow the gentle inner flow of the dreamy protagonist and depict the trivial details of everyday life) into chapters or parts is fairly suitable. This structure would create a highlight for each section, making it easy for readers to follow.

## **2.2. Beauty in *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi***

In terms of physical appearance, female characters in shoujo manga are usually described as having supermodel bodies, smooth or straight hair, big glittering eyes, long eyelashes, V-shaped faces, etc., the ideal beauty of women in modern Japan. Male characters are often strong and firm - for them being the princes of girls' dreams.

The characters from *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi*, likewise, share similar traits with the characters of the shoujo manga genre. Tsugumi, the protagonist of *Goodbye Tsugumi*, possesses an unruly personality and has to live with her ailments from a very young age, yet upon looking closely at Tsugumi, Maria notes: "The smirk she wore looked oddly like the savior Maitreya's smile... Tsugumi was beautiful. Long black hair, translucent white skin, and large, very large eyes. Eyelids with thick lines of long eyelashes that cast pale shadows whenever she let her gaze fall. Her arms and legs were long and slim, her veins seemed to lie just beneath the surface of her skin, and her body was small and tight—her physical appearance was so trim and gorgeous you could almost believe she was a doll fashioned that way by some god" (Yoshimoto 2003: 6). Meanwhile, regarding Tsugumi's older sister, it is stated that "whenever you saw Yoko she was smiling brightly. To be, she really seemed like an angel." (Yoshimoto 2003: 18). It is through such descriptions of Buddha-like beauty that we could discover the inner worlds of the characters, since these worlds are often hidden behind their attitudes and courses of action, or their unruly, stubborn

personalities, or their states of weakness or fatigue. This beauty is both a very personal, intangible aura and a very specific fairness, most concentrated in two “signals”: eyes and smile. The character Kyoichi has a slim but strong physique, possesses mental strength, and is capable of protecting the girl he loves: “Kyōichi certainly did make a strange impression on me. He appeared to be about the same age as us. He was tall and slender, but his shoulders and neck were thick and sturdy—a combination that made him look strong in a really cool sort of way... His gaze was strangely deep, and there was a light in them that made it seem as if he knew something huge, something extremely important. Perhaps you could say that, unlike the rest of him, his eyes were old” (Yoshimoto 2003: 63).

Út Thêm in *Red Summer* is also a very beautiful girl. Her physical appearance is similar to that of the girls in shoujo manga, but still speaks of the beauty of Southern Vietnam’s women. She has black eyes, a cute smile with crooked teeth, slender figure wearing a dress of the yellow shade of sponge gourd flowers, long hair tied into two braids that swayed over her shoulders. The boy named Chương, with his sensitive, dreamy soul and kind heart, is also much adored by the girls.

The characters in *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* possess a beauty that the Japanese label as *kawaii*, or endearing – a significant aesthetic that governs contemporary Japanese society and culture. The *kawaii* aesthetic emphasizes the lovely and fragile beauty of adolescence.

### III. Artistic/elite literary values in *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi*

Even though Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto have borrowed the elements, methods, and means of popular literature to support their works, the underlying values of their compositions are those of

artistic/elite literature, such as the value of moral education, aesthetic training, as well as the profound ideals of Eastern philosophy. Therefore, these works contribute to fostering the soul and personality of children towards truthfulness, compassion, and beauty.

In an article, Trần Thị Trâm argued that Nguyễn Nhật Ánh's story "is a very smooth confluence between the two currents of folk culture and scholarly culture intertwined with high entertainment values... With his own voice, his own style, Nguyễn Nhật Ánh not only creates but also renovates his youthful, delightful and fascinating cultural platform... Thanks to this, his works are rich in benevolence, simple yet wise, gentle yet profound, romantic and realistic, pure yet humorous, artistic and educational, suitable for the young's likings" (Trần Thị Trâm 2021: 09).

### **3.1 Moral lessons**

In an interview, poet Le Minh Quoc, emphasizes the educational value in Nguyễn Nhật. Nguyễn Nhật Ánh is fully consciousness of the significance of literature in the development of the soul and personality for children. "There should be an ideal educator in the writer's soul. Regarding other people, who are self-aware and responsible with their behavior, the writer can provide the original plot for readers to enjoy and choose. But it is not intended for children and teenagers" (Thanh Kiều 2012: 01). According to Nguyễn Nhật Ánh, the role of educator as a writer is adjusting, choosing appropriate content for that group of age to achieve the last accomplishment which is inclining to the good. "If the writer gets bitter about life and throw that pessimistic thought and dreadful plot to his papers, his child will be the first one to incur it and then the readers. This is the main reason why his works receive love from that group of age as well as the parents because they find in them two-in-one aspect: entertainment and education" (Thanh Kiều 2012: 01). That is a rational combination throughout all of his works.

In another interview, Nguyễn Nhật Ánh also mentioned the educational role of literature and children's writers that writers writing for children are inborn educators. "Inborn" means that he did not intentionally preach morality in his work but the process of composing, naturally, he knew what would help the reader to love the Right, the Good, and fear the Wrong, Evil. "Writers are the spiritual support of children", I believe, just as I believe that "silently and persistently building up the soul and personality, which is the root function of literature, especially is literature written for teenagers" (Ngọc Bi 2015: 01).

*Red Summer* by Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and *Goodbye Tsugumi* by Y. Banana deploy a gentle, delicate, romantic writing style about friendship, love, and deep family relationship of young characters who have just gone through the threshold of fragile but fierce teenagers. The emotional world of the characters in the two very works is told through the confidence and narration of Chương and Maria. Through the first narration, through the thought and dream of Chương and Maria, the rich emotional world of girls and boys in their youth is vividly expressed. It is love with friends, with dear family. Those are also common feelings in shoujo mangas. Hence, the works have nurtured human emotions.

First of all, it can be stated that shoujo mangas are songs about sincere and pure friendship. Just like the girls in shoujo mangas, Maria in *Tsugumi* also cherishes friendship. That sentiment has many different shades and levels, just like the sea has thousands of states. Maria doesn't like *Tsugumi's* unpleasant personality, but she admires *Tsugumi's* ability to study. Maria is worried and heartbroken when she sees *Tsugumi* lingering out of her life, the thin border between life and death. When she sees *Tsugumi* walking on the beach with the boys, Maria feels: "Even for me, who ought to have known her true character well enough, those scenes on the beach had an aura of sadness about Thêm that struck chords

somewhere deep within me, filling my chest with pain" (Yoshimoto 2003: 7). As she and Yoko walk along the night path woven with white flowers, Maria says to herself: "I didn't say anything to Yoko. She had been crying a lot lately, and I didn't want to make her lonely"(Yoshimoto 2003: 26). Maria's pure heart always beats with the rhythm of love, in which there is always a rhythm of friendship. Appreciating and cherishing her friends, being ready with friends to overcome all difficulties and challenges is a permanent feeling in Maria's heart.

Characters in shoujo mangas not only have sincere friendships but are also rich in familial love. In their mind, family is life, as their family can overcome difficulties to have a more meaningful life. The little Maria in *Goodbye Tsugumi* is that person. She loves her late grandfather. Although he passed away, she always remembers him, remembers the feelings he has for her. He often sends her love letters with a special opening: "Your treasure." Maria is a girl who always desires for complete love of family. Maria's parents love each other very much, but they are not real husband and wife, so they have not been reunited. Her father works in Tokyo, so he still has to go back and forth between Tokyo and the sea - where she and her mother are put up. No one knows how many times does Maria sit on the hot concrete stairs looking forward to meeting her father on the train from Tokyo, then being sad when his father suddenly disappears on early Monday morning every week. To Maria, the happiest feeling is when walking with her parents on a magnificent beach. Maria loves her mother, understands her mother's feelings, so she grows up without going through rebellious puberty. She is happy to see her mother's face brighter and rounder after the day the whole family move to Tokyo with her father. During the days when she is not reunited with her father, Maria and her mother stay at aunt Masako's house, Maria lives in the love and care of her aunt and two cousins. Mother Maria and Aunt Masako love each other

very much. When first reading the shoujo mangas, she thinks they are just dreamy and frivolous stories of young people, but in fact, they contain many messages of life, including the concern of dignifying the importance of friendship and family.

Nguyễn Nhật Ánh's *Red Summer* also leads young readers to experience touching stories about friendship, intimacy between family members, and neighborly love in a tranquil orchard. In just a short summer, Chương makes friends with lovely people in Hà Xuyên village. They all give Chương simple and sincere sentiment. Chương also reciprocates their affection with a sincere heart. Mr. Thoảng teaches Chương martial arts every afternoon. Nhạn and Dế quickly help Chương integrate into rural life. They always take care of Chương from peeling fruit to stand him, inviting him to participate in fascinating games and listening to his thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Chương is surprised to know that Út Thềm and Dữ are illiterate. This secret fact helps Chương understand why the children of Miếu hamlet and the children of other neighborhoods often fight. That is because the children of Miếu hamlet envy the children of other neighborhoods for being able to go to school. So Chương goes to the market to buy two notebooks and a pen and then went across the field to Út Thềm's house to teach her and her sister every day. After knowing the story, Dế also gave the Út Thềm sisters two more half-written notebooks and a pencil. The children of Miếu hamlet are very touched by Chương's kind gesture, so since then, they have stopped fighting with children in the other neighborhood. Hatred is reconciled by sincere love.

At home in the city, Chương lives in the love and care of his parents. Mom takes care of Chương in every meal with nutritious food so that he can be healthy to pass the challenging exam. Noticing his mother's sadness because of his slim body, Chương also feels sad and tries his best to get good results in the exam to make his mother happy. In Chương's small family, the joy and sorrow is

shared among the three members. Returning to his hometown, Chương is once again living in the tender love of Aunt Sáu, Nhạ, and Dế. In Chương's mind, Chương's mother and Aunt Sáu love each other very much. Aunt Sáu often supports the Chương family with rice when they are in poverty. To everyone in the village, Aunt Sáu is a kind and good woman. She cures everyone in the village but never takes any money. In response, everyone expresses their appreciation with a bunch of bananas and chickens in the orchard. Chương is touched by that simple concern: "From the day I returned to my aunt's house until now, I have witnessed many strange and touching scenes, the relationships full of affection in the unicorn village have long been absent from the daily life of urban people" (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2011: 81).

Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto have illustrated profound themes such as praising family affection, love for the homeland, the country's nature, and the appreciation for life. In particular, the works are songs about pure friendship. That is the sincere friendship of four young characters: Maria - Tsugumi - Yoko - Kyoichi in *Goodbye Tsugumi* or Chương - Nhạ - Dế - Út Thềm in *Red Summer*. Together, they experience sweet, peaceful days in a rural, peaceful, rustic but poetic area before entering adulthood. During that summer, the group of friends in *Goodbye Tsugumi* has much once-in-a-lifetime experience. They walked together on the windy and sandy shore with waves which is either gentle or fierce. They enjoy together the exciting festival season, watch the fireworks, dress up in special folk costumes, eat watermelon which is as cool as ice cream in the small garden, and worry about finding Kengoro, the dog. The group of friends in the *Red Summer* also go through beautiful times in the peaceful orchard with much mischief such as stealing fruit in the orchard then being chased by dogs, enjoying the sweet taste of hành ca mango, papaya, sweet xa li guavas in the orchard, fighting, waiting for each other to walk together on the

road to the market, teaching his friends. Subsequently, feelings of joy, sadness, and confusion still linger in their heart when summer ends. It is during those days that groups of friends experience beautiful, profound emotions about life, giving and receiving, the strength of the spirit, and the boundary of ambiguous feeling. From those daily stories, writers have praised the power of pure friendship, first heart flutter, close family affection, passionate love for the homeland. All these precious feelings not only have the power to help people overcome challenges, reconcile hatreds, give people a good heart and lofty soul, but they also are essential preparation for the future.

### **3.2 Cultivating an Adorable Aesthetic for Young Readers**

Kawaii (かわいい or 可愛い), which means adorable, cute, lovely in English, has origin from Japanese. The word “kawai:” describes something as “cute,” “adorable,” or “pretty” and usually carries a connotation of smallness, shyness, and innocence. For instance, it can be a lovely quote, a manga’s speech, or characters such as Hello Kitty, Pikachu. Kawaii also influences some other cultures. A large number of kawaii products have been exported to some East Asia countries such as China, Taiwan, and South East Asia countries like the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, and Vietnam (Wikipedia 2021: 01). Kawaii culture or kawaii aesthetic has become an outstanding aspect of Japanese pop culture in entertainment, fashion, cuisine, toys, style, or appearance of an individual.

The kawaii aesthetic is remarkably imprinted in the works of Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto in general, as well as *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* in particular. The characters in the two novels have cute looks and personalities like the characters in shoujo mangas. In terms of appearance, the female characters in *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* are usually girls with long legs, slim bodies, thick wavy or silky straight hair, big glittering eyes, long eyelashes, V-line faces, etc. The boys are usually healthy, strong,



dreamy big eyes, pointed chin, cool hairstyle, etc. The world of souls, rich emotions of girls and boys in their prime in shoujo mangas as well as *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* are very sensitive, rich, and very pure with many levels: love, hate, resentment, with a fragile premonition of life. Sometimes, they are down-hearted when their favorite TV show ended: “That night, having wriggled down into my futon all alone, I found myself in the grips of a wrenching sadness. I was only a child, but I knew the feeling that came when you parted with something, and I felt that pain. I lay gazing up at the ceiling, feeling the sleek stiffness of the well-starched sheets against my skin. My distress was a seed that would grow into an understanding of what it means to say goodbye. In contrast to the heavy ache I would come to know later on in life, this was tiny and fresh—a green bud of pain” (Yoshimoto 2003: 67).

This is also a trait of the *kawaii* beauty in the style, appearance as well as inner world of modern Japanese teenagers as well as in the pages of shoujo comics.

*Kawaii* has become popular as an ideal beauty covering modern and contemporary Japanese society. However, the origin of *kawaii* stems from a category that is considered to be the center of Japanese aesthetics: impermanence (*mujo* 無常). Impermanence means “transience,” “evanescence,” “inconstancy.” Impermanence is the common aspect of all conditioned existence, which consists of birth, old age, sickness, and death. From the category of impermanence, the Japanese have created many derivative categories such as illusion (*gensou* 幻想), elegance (*miyabi* みやび), lingering charm (*yojo* 余情), and empathy (*aware* もののあわれ) in ancient times; simple (*wabi* 侘び), quietness (*sabi* 寂び), melancholy (*yugen* 湯源), and the floating world (*ukiyo* 浮世) in Middle Ages; and lovely (*kawaii* 可愛(かわい)い) in the period of pre-modern. Although the categories have different nuances, they all have the

original meaning of fragile, easily faded beauty. Therefore, there should be an attitude of cherishing the beauty and appreciating the present moment of life. In conclusion, by creating an atmosphere which is imbued with kawaii, the writers have contributed to fostering an aesthetic with profound philosophical significance for readers, especially young readers.

### **3.3 Harmonizing with Nature**

The stories about friendship, family love, couple love, patriotism in *Goodbye Tsugumi* or *Red Summer* take place softly in a romantic and poetic site. It is the landscape of the sea, the peaceful countryside, the space of beautiful roads. Each nature picture in the two works has its nuances of each country, but they both have the role of healing and fostering noble emotions for the human soul.

In *Goodbye Tsugumi*, Yoshimoto describes vividly an area near the sea in Japan. There is a strong link between the sea and the people living here. When reading the book, it is easy to imagine the sea appearing as many aspects of life and love with all levels. The sea is sometimes gentle, dropping small waves to kiss the sandy shore, but it is also violent, creating huge waves crashing onto the shore at times. In addition, the seascape in the novel not only serves as a romantic scene to display friendship and love, but it is also a close friend, eternally attached to the people in the town, helping people's souls to become balanced: "I simply couldn't believe that I was about to move to a place where there was no ocean. Somehow it didn't register; it was so strange that just thinking about it made me uneasy. Because the ocean had always been there, in the good times as well as the bad times of my life, when it was sweltering out and the beach was filled with people, and in the dead of winter when the sky was heavy with stars, and when we were heading to the local shrine on New Year's Day ... all I had to do was turn my head and it would be there, the same as always. It didn't

matter if I was a kid or a grown-up. The old woman next door might have just died, the local doctor might have just had a baby, or I might be on my first date or have fallen out of love—none of this made any difference at all to the ocean; it remained just as it was, fanning out around the edge of our town and zooming quietly off into the distance, the tide rising and falling just as it always did, no matter what. On days when the visibility was particularly good, you could easily make out the shore on the far side of the bay. And it seemed to me that even if you weren't actively letting your emotions ride its surface, the ocean still went on giving you something, teaching you some sort of lesson. Perhaps that was why I had never actually considered its existence before—never really thought about the thundering of the waves as they sweep in endlessly toward the shore. But since I was thinking about it, what on earth did people in the city turn to when they felt the need to reckon with "balance"? Maybe the moon? That seemed like the obvious choice. But then the moon was so small and far away, and something about it felt sort of lonely, and it didn't seem like it would really help" (Yoshimoto 2003: 22).

The images of the roads are also particularly noticed by Yoshimoto and the manga artists because it is the place, the catalyst of deep emotion in every meeting and farewell... In *Goodbye Tsugumi*, the roads have become a site of intimate friendship and love. Those roads are often woven by pure white flowers, with the image of the bright moon and gentle night breeze that is as beautiful as the souls of people in their youth. The poetic picture of nature is seen through the eyes of a soul-loving life, contributing to create beautiful emotions and connect people: "The gravel path that led to the Yamamoto Inn followed the bank of a river and eventually ran into this big bridge. The sea opened into view on the other side of the bridge, and the river flowed quietly into it. The light of the moon and the street lamps shone brightly on the water and the

railings of the bridge” (Yoshimoto 2003: 26). The pleasant atmosphere makes people open their hearts to the other. “Without even noticing what you're doing, you open up your heart and just start talking to the person next to you—you talk as if you have no audience but the glittering stars, far overhead” (Yoshimoto 2003: 76). The smell of the breeze, the breath of the mountains, and the breath of the calm sea slowly float over the town in a fine evening, giving us hope for the future.

In *Red Summer*, Nguyễn Nhật Ánh leads us back to the village path of a lovely orchard: “Leading to the village is a winding, endless, picturesque bamboo lane. Standing in the shade at noon or passing through the bamboo lane is still cool. The sunlight was blocked on the curved top of bamboo, only falling spottily some yellow drops on the village road which is full of dry leaves and cow dung. There is no sun but the bamboo alley is filled with birdsong. From morning to afternoon, sparrows, flowerpeckers, stripe-throated bulbul and red-whiskered always sit on the branches swung by the wind and twitter jointly” (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2011: 10). The road leading to the Mieu hamlet is “full of durians, durians fall on the ground” (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2011: 126). And this is the path leading to Út Thêm's house: “The small road leads me to an immense green meadow. Fully covered by chrysopogon. Just walking a short distance, my leg trousers were thickly pinned with tiny purple petals. I didn't bother to remove it, I just walked across the path, towards the flickering phoenix tree in front of my eyes. On the way, from time to time, I came across a mimosa bush that was full of thorns lying next to the sleeping rose” (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2011: 126). The scene is also filled with the characters' moods. The chrysopogon sticks to the bottom of his pants like a lingering soul, and the mimosa bush is as embarrassed as the mood of Chương when he first visited his girlfriend's house. Nature in Nguyễn Nhật Ánh's *Red Summer* and Yoshimoto Banana's *Goodbye Tsugumi* has

the role of a dearest mother to ease the pain in the characters' souls as well as nurture, foster, and develop warm feelings and emotions in each person's heart like friendship, love, family affection and patriotism. The intimate relationship between nature and people in the works of the two writers presents a philosophical thought of Hinduism in particular and the Eastern people in general since ancient times. Man is not an independent entity. Man is an Atman Individual Soul, small fragment of the Universal Soul Brahman, a microcosm in the great cosmos, a microcosm in the macrocosm, born of the Cosmic Soul, which is protected, preserved by the Universal Soul, and when the body decays, the Individual Soul returns to merge with the Cosmic Soul. Since then, Eastern philosophy has promoted a sense of respect and conservation of the global environment - the home of all species.

### **3.4. Enhancing the Art of Popular Literature**

Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto use the literary devices of pure literature to enrich the art of writing. As to Yoshimoto Banana, in *Goodbye Tsugumi*, she uses artistic techniques such as inner monologue, dream motif, death motif, etc., to reveal the deep and mysterious aspects of people and the world. By using the anxiety and uncertainty on the surface of the tone, the novelist directs readers to the uncertainty and anxiety at the bottom of real life, causing them to think more about what is written (Bich Thu 2013: 01). Little Tsugumi has weak health and is often ill, so she always has a feeling of impending death. That premonition was so strong that it makes everyone enter the vaguely mysterious world of life and death: "Even now the quiet sigh of the rainfall was echoing through the dark. I sensed reality slipping away from me as I was sucked deep into Tsugumi's night. Everything that had happened up to then, death and life, it all seemed to be sliding down into a whirlpool of mystery, a place where a different kind of truth held sway—that was the feeling, the softly uneasy stillness in the room"

(Yoshimoto 2003: 12). She also usually lives in the dream. In particular, she often dreams about her deceased grandfather, which expresses the affection, the bond between her and grandfather as well as the wish to be loved and cared for by him again: "Listen, kid, I'm a hell of a lot closer to death than the rest of you assholes, so I can feel these things. I was in bed earlier, right, and the old guy showed up in my dream. Even after I woke up things felt kind of weird, you know? Sort of like there was something he had wanted to say. When I was a kid he used to buy all sorts of stuff for me too, so you might say I'm kind of indebted to him. The thing is, kiddo, that you were there in the dream too, and the old guy kind of seemed like he wanted to talk with you" (Yoshimoto 2003: 11).

*Red Summer* also includes monologues, a dream motif. Chương, the main character in *Red Summer* enjoys happy summer days with childish games and pranks such as shooting birds, stealing mangoes, swimming in rivers, fishing, learning martial arts, fighting until the head bleeding, lying in a hammock, and looking at the green arches of trees in the orchard... He also experiences the confusion of having no one to confide in, so he can only keep for himself: "When I first met her, my heart was not as complicated as now. Since the day I met Út Thê, my mind suddenly became so wandering. If I confide my feelings to Thơm, she will understand why I change. But I dare not. I'm afraid she will be sad. I like Thơm, so I want her to be happy all the time. As long as she assured me that "fighting and visiting house are two different things", that's fine. Then she will be happy and so am I. None of us have to be sad" (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2011: 125). The writer describes Chương's endless thoughts when his love is not requited by Út Thê at many stages: blaming her for being cold-hearted, being sad, and being tired of her silliness. "I don't understand why Út Thê is so heartless. I sat under the bridge and waited for her

to come back from the market. I secretly put the "love letter" in the basket she was holding. Then I had to wade across the vast grassland to teach her at her house every day. Did Út Thễm not understand? The more I think about it, the more I get tired (...). How silly she is. She does not know anything about my intention. She must have had the same thought with Mr Thoả̃ng. She thinks it is just a good person and good deeds. And once I became a teacher, I must not have the feeling for my student. Oh, definitely not, Út! For a long time, I kept struggling in the torments of nothing." (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2011: 154).

Also because Út Thễm does not requite to Chương's love, the image of her enters Chương's dream: "Út Thễm's shiny black eyes, crooked smile, and two naughty braids dangling on her shoulders enter my dream like some familiar images which make me hard to leave" (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2011: 143). Dreams can represent hidden memories and desires that can not be achieved in reality.

*Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* can be said to bring many features of shoujo mangas in terms of themes, story situations, themes, layouts, characters, and nature paintings. Writers have used the forms of popular literature to convey messages that imply moral lessons as well as develop feelings, beautiful aesthetic values, and profound philosophical reflections about humans and life. Living in this world is a blessing and everyone should appreciate life because it is extremely precious. Living in this world "needs a heart," which means giving as receiving in return; respecting people around us who are always with us in difficult times; appreciating precious emotions such as love for family, friends, neighbors, homeland, country. That is the great motivation for helping people face and overcome every sadness or challenge in life. The fact that there are many elements similar to shoujo comics is also one of the reasons for the attractiveness and globalization of the works. Adolescents in any country in the world have the same mentality, interests, and

passions. If the author puts himself in children's shoes to write, his works will be enjoyed immensely by them. On the other hand, in today's "flat world," to spread the works to children in other countries, the works also need to show the unique nuances of each ethnic group and country, just like Nguyễn Nhật Ánh once said at the ASEAN Literature Awards 2019: "Every nation has a bell hanging in front of its door of the soul, writers have a mission to ring those bells with literature" (Huỳnh Kim 2013: 01). It is an effective way of literature to satisfy the strong desire to explore and understand the world of the dreamy ages.

The phenomenon of interference between popular literature and pure/elite literature in *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* has shown an appropriate path for composing in the contemporary period. It is necessary to harmonize the elements of both literary genres so that the writings can reach a large number of readers as well as preserve the value and vitality in the spiritual life of the nation and the world. Hence, each writer needs to be aware of their responsibility with his career and his readers to self-develop, cultivate and improve his capacity to be able to create literary works that meet the needs of his readers as well as the requirements of the times.

Popular readers need to consciously improve their qualifications, tastes, abilities, aesthetics, and knowledge about culture to be able to approach and absorb the values of pure/elite literature.

Regarding cultural managers and those who are interested in literature and culture, aiming for a society of reading, experiencing, and creating culture, elite art, and those who are making efforts, sometimes in silence, to maintain the true values, need to consider vital aspects of strategy such as cultural policy, art management, consciousness, abilities of writers, necessary qualifications as well as the tastes and capacities of the public. In an open globalized society,



a rigid, one-sided prohibition or management will make it difficult to do so. Thus, accepting the simultaneous existence of two literary genres is an inevitable situation. The more feasible solution is to develop the aesthetic taste, train the creative capacity, absorb, appraise and enjoy the art of popular readers. Readers' perceptions of value and their acquisition have a close causal relationship. Consequently, improving the acceptability of the recipients as well as the interest and value can be improved. The concept of contemporary human values is an interwoven story of the transience and the permanence, the present and the future, the individual and the community, the nation - the local and the global, the general and the particular, the particular and the universal... "We respect the temporary needs of secular people. We understand which is the immediate value to the contemporary man. Nevertheless, from the visionary point of view of literature and national culture, it is necessary to name the quintessential value which is well-orientated towards eternity" (Nguyễn Thanh Tâm 2017). Hence, from the movements in the concept of the value of the popular literature public, we can imagine literature and culture that is not necessarily free from mass but creates a mass community that has a higher, more qualitative level for literature, culture, and society.

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# Articles





## The Perception and Production of Vietnamese Tones by Japanese, Lao and Taiwanese Second Language Speakers



Đào Mục Đích\* · Anh Thu T. Nguyễn\*\*

### [ *Abstract* ]

This study investigates the production and perception of Vietnamese tones by Japanese, Lao, and Taiwanese second language (L2) learners [n=30], comparing their performance in an Imitation task to that of Identification and Read-Aloud tasks. The results show that the Imitation task is generally easier for L2 speakers than the Identification and Read-Aloud tasks, suggesting that imitation is performed without some of the skills required by the other two tasks. It is also found that Lao and Taiwanese speakers outperform Japanese speakers, suggesting that prior experience with one tone language facilitates the acquisition of tone in another language. The result on speakers' tonal range show that L2 learners have significantly narrower tonal F0 range than control Vietnamese speakers [n=11]. The results of error pattern analysis and tonal transcription also suggest that non-modal voice (glottal stop and creakiness) and contour tones (bidirectional fall-rise) are more difficult for L2 learners than modal voice tones (e.g., unidirectional contours: rising, falling, and level).

**Keywords:** Second language imitation, perception, production, Vietnamese tones, Japanese, Lao, Taiwanese Mandarin

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## **I . Introduction**

Research indicates that the acquisition of nonnative lexical tones is difficult for adult second language learners (So 2005; Wang, Spence, Jongman and Sereno 1999; Wayland and Guion 2004). Studies on the effect of speakers' L1 prosodic experience on the acquisition of nonnative tonal systems yield conflicting results. On the one hand, it has been shown that prior experience with one tone language may facilitate the acquisition of tone in another language. For example, in a perceptual training study on Thai tones, Wayland and Guion (2004) discover that native Chinese speakers (Taiwanese and Mandarin) significantly outperformed native English speakers in the discrimination and identification of Thai mid-level and low-level tone contrasts after a brief period of perceptual training. This is because the ability to track the change of F0 values, movement, and the direction of the movement at word level with one tone language, may be transferable to the discrimination of tones in an unfamiliar tonal system. On the other hand, conflicting results have also been reported, showing that direct experience with a lexical tone system failed to facilitate learning. For example, in a study of native Cantonese and Japanese speakers' perception of Mandarin tones, So (2005) reveals that native Cantonese speakers consistently demonstrated greater difficulties in distinguishing Mandarin tone 1 (high level) - tone 4 (falling) and tone 2 (rising) - Tone 3 (falling-rising) contrasts than native Japanese speakers before and after a brief period of training. Given the fact that Cantonese speakers have prior experience with lexical tone contrasts in their first language, while Japanese speakers only have prosodic experience with pitch and accent at the phrasal level in their L1, native Cantonese speakers' direct experience with a lexical tone system failed to facilitate learning, at least at the initial stage. In a recent study, Tsukada and Kondo (2018) examine the perception of Mandarin lexical tones by native speakers of Burmese who use lexical tones in their first language but are naïve to Mandarin. Unlike Mandarin tones, which are primarily cued by pitch, Burmese tones are cued by phonation type as well as pitch. Burmese listeners' discrimination accuracy was compared with that of Mandarin listeners and Australian English listeners to investigate



whether Burmese listeners can utilize their L1 experience in processing unfamiliar Mandarin tones. Their main findings were: 1) Mandarin listeners were more accurate in discriminating all tone pairs than non-native listeners; 2) Australian English listeners naïve to Mandarin were more accurate than similarly naïve Burmese listeners in discriminating all tone pairs except for T2-T4; and 3) Burmese listeners had the greatest trouble discriminating T2-T3 and T1-T2. Taken together, their results suggest that merely possessing lexical tones in L1 may not necessarily facilitate the perception of non-native tones, and that the active use of phonation type in encoding L1 tones may have played a role in Burmese listeners' less than optimal perception of Mandarin tones.

These inconsistent findings suggest that the relationship between learners' sensitivity to lexical tones or pitch accent, because of first language experience and its effect on learning a new tonal system, is not straightforward, at least at initial stages of learning. This study extends these findings by aiming to understand how different L1 experiences with prosodic features (pitch accent: Japanese and lexical tones: Lao and Taiwanese) affects L2 prosodic speech production and perception by examining the Vietnamese tone patterns of Japanese, Lao and, Taiwanese learners. The findings of this study will have an original and significant contribution. Firstly, it presents a novel comparison: the acquisition of Vietnamese as an L2, particularly by Japanese, Lao, and Taiwanese speakers, is still understudied. Secondly, it contributes to the understanding of the process and nature of second language acquisition and has implications to the teaching of Vietnamese as a second or foreign language.

### **1.1. L2 production models**

Theories that account for the production of L2 speech, particularly L2 intonation, have been proposed. According to the *Markedness Differential Hypothesis* (MDH) (Eckman 1977), a language learner's areas of difficulty can be predicted, such that (1) those areas of the target language (TL) which differ from the native language (NL) and are more marked than the native language will be difficult; (2) the relative degree of difficulty of the areas of difference of the target

language which are more marked than the native language will correspond to the relative degree of markedness; and (3) those areas of the target language which are different from the native language, but are not more marked than the native language, will not be difficult. The MDH claims that NL-TL differences were necessary for explaining L2 learning difficulty only on the basis of differences between the native language and target language, but they were not sufficient; rather, one needed to incorporate typological markedness into the explanation. The hypothesis asserts that within the areas of difference between the NL and TL, marked structures are more difficult than corresponding unmarked structures. What follows immediately from this hypothesis is that not all NL-TL differences will cause equal difficulty. TL structures that are different from the NL but are not related by markedness principles to any other structures are predicted to cause no difficulty, while TL constructions which are related to other representations by markedness principles are predicted to cause learning problems. The degree of difficulty involved is predicted to correspond directly to the relative degree of markedness. It is predicted that in Vietnamese, non-modal voice (glottal stop and creakiness) and contour tones (bidirectional fall-rise) are more marked and thus are more difficult for L2 learners than modal voice tones (e.g., unidirectional contours: rising, falling, and level).

## **1.2. L2 perception of tones**

Cross-linguistic studies were conducted to examine how speakers of tonal and nontonal languages differ in the perceptual processing of tones. With respect to F0 height and contour, research shows that the perceptual weights of these two dimensions are related to the linguistic experience of the listeners. Gandour (1983), using multidimensional scaling, examined the perception of tones by listeners of four tonal languages, including Mandarin, Cantonese, Taiwanese, and Thai, as well as by those of a non-tonal language, English. He observed that English listeners attached more importance to the height, and less to the contour dimension of F0 than did listeners of most tonal languages. Gandour reiterates that since English has no contrastive tones, English listeners directed their attention almost exclusively to F0 height. Lee, Vakock and

Wurm (1996) extend this research using a tone discrimination task. Both Cantonese and Mandarin tones were presented to Cantonese, Mandarin, and English listeners. They found that tone language speakers were better at discrimination of tones, in terms of speed and accuracy of their responses, than were non-tone language speakers. Tone language speakers seemed to acquire general tone discrimination abilities. Thus, it appears that listeners' strategy for tone perception depends to some extent on the linguistic function of pitch in their native language.

### **1.3. L2 imitation**

In addition to studies on production and perception of L2 tones, there were also explorations on the link between these two domains. Many studies employ a speech imitation task, where performers listened to an audio stimulus and reproduced it (Flege and Eefting 1988; Fowler, Brown, Sabadini and Weihing 2003; Mitterer and Ernestus 2008; Mitterer and Müsseler 2013; Shockley, Sabadini and Fowler 2004). By comparing the target stimulus and the performers' reproductions, these studies conceive of a processing route from speech perception to production and establish the relations between them. L2 imitation merits thorough investigation not only because it permits an examination of both L2 perception and production, but also illustrates how these two modalities are coordinated in a single act. Additionally, since L2 perception and production have often been found to diverge from each other (e.g. Baker and Trofimovich 2006; Bohn and Flege 1997; Bradlow, Pisoni, Akahane-Yamada and Tohkura 1997), a comparison of second language learners' imitation with their perception and production patterns would more clearly reveal the relative contribution of perception, production, and other processing mechanisms in speech imitation. In a recent study, Hao and de Jong (2016) observed English speakers' learning of Mandarin tones, comparing their performance in an imitation task to that of identification and read-aloud tasks. The results show that the imitation task was generally easier for English speakers than the identification and read-aloud tasks, suggesting that imitation was performed without some of the skills required by the other two tasks. In an extension of these findings, in this study, we examine

Japanese, Lao and Taiwanese speakers' performance in identification, read-aloud, and imitation of the six Vietnamese tones.

**1.4. Prosodic aspects in Vietnamese, Japanese, Lao and Taiwanese**

Vietnamese is a tonal language which uses pitch to distinguish lexical meaning. Its standard Northern dialect has six lexical tones (Table 1 below describes the F0 contour and phonation types of the six Northern tones). Vietnamese tone is superimposed on monosyllables. Central and Southern Vietnamese each have one tone less because the fifth and the sixth tones (Curve and Broken tones respectively) have merged (Brunelle 2009a, 2009b; Emeneau 1951; Kirby 2010). The six Northern Vietnamese tones combine complex pitch contours with voice quality distinctions (Brunelle 2009b; Kirby 2010; Michaud 2004; Michaud, Vu, Amelot and Roubleau 2006; Nguyen and Edmondson 1997). Voice quality, particularly the laryngeal features of glottal stop, creakiness, and breathiness are distinctive tonal features characterizing Vietnamese tones at the phonetic level across dialects. Glottal stop/glottalization and creakiness, in addition to occurring as a regular feature on the Broken and Drop tones of the Northern dialect and the Curve tone of the Central dialect, also occur on some local variants of the Southern Drop tone (Brunelle 2009a; Kirby 2010; Vu 1981). Checked syllables, syllables closed by voiceless stops, bear one of two additional tones, which are sometimes considered allotones of tones Rising and Dropping (they will not be addressed here). In perception, glottalization and direction of contour are the dominant cues in Northern Vietnamese (Brunelle and Jannedy 2013).

<Table 1> Tones of Northern Vietnamese

Tones	Diacritics	F0 Contours and phonation
Ngang Level	a (unmarked)	Level F0 contour, slight declination toward the end.
Sắc Rising	á (acute accent)	Rising F0 contour, starts lower than the level tone, fairly level in the first third and rising to the upper end of the pitch range.
Huyền Falling	à (grave accent)	Falling F0 contour, begins on a low pitch and falls gradually, sometimes with breathy voice.
Nặng Drop	a (subscript dot)	A low-falling tone with strong final laryngealization.

Tones	Diacritics	F0 Contours and phonation
Hỏi	à	Concave F0 contour, sharp fall and short rise
Curve	(question mark)	and/or creakiness
Ngã Broken	ã (the tilde)	Concave F0 contour, a falling-rising tone with laryngealization/glottal stop in the middle.

Japanese (Tokyo dialect) exhibits lexical contrasts based on pitch accent; that is, there are minimal pairs of words that are identical segment-wise, but can be distinguished in terms of their pitch contours. While what kind of pitch contour a particular word shows is often unpredictable for many lexical words, there are many phonological and morphological environments where the distribution of lexical accent is predictable, at least to some extent. In other words, there are some regularities regarding the phonological distributions of Japanese pitch accent (Kawahara 2015). Pitch accent in Japanese is fundamentally a word-level property, not a phrasal or sentence-level property, although they interact non-trivially with sentence-level intonational patterns. Japanese makes lexical contrasts in terms of pitch accent in two ways: (1) presence versus absence of pitch accent; and (2) if present, accent location. Unlike in many other tonal languages (Yip 2002), Japanese lexically uses only two levels of tonal heights (High and Low). Phonetically speaking, an accented vowel is assigned a High tone followed by a Low tone on the following vowel, resulting in an abrupt H(igh)-L(ow) fall in f0, whereas unaccented words do not show such a fall. Japanese also distinguishes words in terms of where pitch falls; i.e., in terms of accent location.

The tonal descriptions of Vientiane Lao range from five to seven tones. Most often the tones are described separately for live syllables, short dead syllables, and long dead syllables (for different analyses see e.g., Gedney 1972; Brown 1976; Strecker 1979). In the tone-count, the tones of the live syllables are listed first (e.g. 1-6), and the dead-syllable tones are simply added (e.g. 7- 10). It is generally agreed that there are two falling contour tones, one low-rising tone, and at least two level tones (the mid and low tones). Most authors also agree that Vientiane Lao has six tones: (1) rise, (2) mid rise, (3) high-fall, (4) mid-lower level contour, (5) low-level w/ glottalization, and (6) low-fall (Morev et al. 1979). By

comparing stressed tones in different prosodic contexts, Gårding and Svantesson (1994) emphasize the phonological analysis which indicates that live syllables have six contrastive tones and regard the tones of dead syllables as contextual variants of the live ones. Morev et al. (1979) reveal that tone 5 (low-level) involved glottalization and by Osatananda (1997) that syllables ending with -j and -w, end up with either a creaky voice or a glottal stop, regardless of tone height and shape.

There are four lexical tones in Taiwanese Mandarin: Tone 1, 2, 3, and 4 — high-level, rising, dipping, and high-falling respectively. There is also a neutral tone, and its pitch contour is decided by the preceding lexical tone. In Standard Mandarin, a syllable with any of the four lexical tones can have a neutral tone when it is unstressed. These unstressed syllables can be found in the second syllables of some disyllabic compounds. However, some syllables, mostly suffixes and particles, always have a neutral tone. Unlike Standard Mandarin, the neutral-tone syllables of Taiwanese Mandarin do not undergo tone loss. The neutral tone in Taiwanese Mandarin has a mid-low pitch target in disyllabic words, neutral-tone sequences, and novel formations (Huang 2012). Data show that Dipping Tone 3 (T3) is often accompanied by creaky phonation, which may at least in part be due to the already low F0 in the middle of the tone (Belotel-Grenié and Grenié 1994, 2004; Davison 1991; Kuang 2013). In fact, it has also been discovered that the Falling Tone 4 (T4) may exhibit some creaky phonation (Belotel-Grenié and Grenié 1994; Kuang 2013), again likely related to the low F0, and in this case, at the end of the tone. Moreover, with regard to T3, findings suggest that creaky phonation may, in fact, serve to enhance the perception of this tone (Yang 2011, 2015; Kuang 2013).

In a recent study, Đào and Nguyễn (2019) investigated the production and perception of Vietnamese tones by Korean second language learners [n=11], comparing their performance in an Imitation task to that of Identification and Read-Aloud tasks. The results show that the Imitation task was generally easier for Korean speakers than the Identification and Read-Aloud tasks, suggesting that imitation was performed without some of the skills required by

the other two tasks. The results on tonal F0 range and speakers' tonal range show that Korean learners have significantly narrower tonal F0 range than control Vietnamese speakers. The results of error pattern analysis and tonal transcription in this study also suggest the effects of phonetic realizations of lexical tones in Vietnamese that are in interaction with language transfer from Korean phonology.

In brief, studies show that in addition to pitch height and pitch contours, voice quality, particularly the laryngeal features of glottal stop and creakiness, is a distinctive tonal feature characterizing tones at the phonetic level across three lexical tone languages, Vietnamese, Lao, and Mandarin. By contrast, phonation as a distinctive feature has not been reported for Japanese as a pitch accent language. Therefore, it is predicted that Japanese would have more difficulties acquiring the “marked” non-modal voice (glottal stop and creakiness) and contour tones (bidirectional fall-rise) such as Broken and Curve than Lao and Taiwanese speakers.

### **1.5. Study aims**

The goal of this study is to understand how different L1 experiences with prosodic features (pitch accent: Japanese; and lexical tones: Lao and Taiwanese) affects L2 prosodic speech production and perception by examining the Vietnamese tone patterns of Japanese, Lao, and Taiwanese learners. The study addresses four research questions:

1. Does perception or production exert a stronger influence on imitation of tones?
2. What are the general error patterns of Vietnamese tones by Japanese, Lao, and Taiwanese learners?
3. How are tonal features (i.e., tonal range, tonal contours, and voice quality) produced by Japanese, Lao, and Taiwanese learners different from those produced by Vietnamese control speakers?
4. How do speakers' different L1 experiences with prosodic features (pitch accent versus lexical tones) affect L2 prosodic speech production and perception of Vietnamese tones? More specifically,

do Lao and Taiwanese speakers outperform Japanese speakers in perception and production of Vietnamese tones?

We hypothesize that if imitation employs phonological encoding [i.e., the process of retrieval of segmental and prosodic information, the generation of a syllabified phonological word, and the computation of the phonetic form of the intended utterance (Levelt, Roelofs and Meyer 1999)], in addition to perception and production, it would require the acquisition of more skills than those used in either Identification or Read-Aloud. Table 2 below shows how the three tasks match up with phonological encoding, perception, and production. Consequently, the participants' performance in the Imitation task should be constrained by their accuracy in the other two tasks. On the other hand, if imitation bypasses some aspects of phonological encoding, the learners' accuracy in imitation would not necessarily fall behind the other two tasks, but might actually be better. In addition to examining the learners' relative accuracy, their error distributions in the three tasks were compared to identify the sources of difficulty in their imitation of L2 sounds. To the extent that Identification and Read-Aloud tasks create different error patterns, the similarity between the learners' error patterns in the Imitation task and those in Identification and Read-Aloud tasks would reveal whether their performance in imitation has a predominantly perceptual or articulatory basis, or whether it is a joint effect of perceptual errors compounded by production inaccuracy (Hao and de Jong 2016).

<Table 2> How the three tasks match up with phonological encoding, perception, and production. \* means “can be bypassed”

Identification	Imitation	Read-Aloud
Auditory perception	Auditory perception (Phonological encoding) * Motor production	Phonological encoding Motor production



## II . Method

### 2.1. Participants

A control group of 11 Northern Vietnamese (Hanoi) speakers (7 female, 4 male) was included. They were international students at Macquarie University and had lived in Australia from 6 months to 1 year. Their average age is 35.3 (SD=7.2). The reasons why Northern Vietnamese (Hanoi) speakers were chosen is because the L2 learners learned Vietnamese with instructors of Northern (Hanoi) dialect. They all spoke Vietnamese with a Northern accent. The Northern Vietnamese tone system has a voice quality, a “marked” feature predicted to be difficult for L2 learners to acquire.

The L2 learners of Vietnamese consist of three groups: Japanese, Lao, and Taiwanese. Ten native Japanese speakers (6 females, 4 males), ten native Lao speakers (5 females, 5 males), and ten native Taiwanese Mandarin speakers (5 males, 5 females) were recruited from students/learners of the Department of Vietnamese Studies, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City. They have lived in Vietnam for 6 months to 1 year. The Japanese speakers all came from Tokyo. Their average age is 23 years old (SD=1.7) and their average length of learning Vietnamese is more than one year (mean=14.3 months). The Lao speakers all came from the Vientiane Capital of Lao. Their average age is 22 years old (SD=1.5) and their average length of learning Vietnamese is more than one year (mean=15.6 months). The Taiwanese speakers’ average age is 25 years old (SD=1.8) and their average length of learning Vietnamese is more than one year (mean=14.6 months). In the intermediate Vietnamese language courses, Japanese, Lao, and Taiwanese or other foreign learners basically learn subjects such as Vietnamese vocabulary, Vietnamese grammar, Vietnamese culture, communication skills [listening comprehension (in daily situation, radio and television)], conversations, reading (newspapers and formal documents), and writing (informal and formal). Because the L2 learners started learning Vietnamese at the average age of 18.5 years, they can be considered late learners of L2. Also, since they were studying intermediate Vietnamese language courses, their level of Vietnamese can be considered as intermediate level.

2.2. Stimuli

The experiment used open syllables with the initial stop consonant /t-/ and the nine Vietnamese vowels /i/, /e/, /ɛ/, /ɯ/, /ɤ/, /a/, /u/, /o/, /ɔ/. These vowels were then embedded in /t\_/\_ carrier words. Each word independently carried one of the six Northern Vietnamese tones (see Table 3). The total number of items included 9 simple vowels x 6 tones, totalling 54 items. The syllables used in the study are all legal syllables, most of which are high frequency words and thus were familiar to the participants because they appear in lesson materials and are used in everyday classroom speech of the learners.

Since the L2 learners learned Vietnamese with instructors of Northern (Hanoi) dialect, one male native speaker of Hanoi Vietnamese produced all the stimuli for the Identification and Imitation tasks, which were recorded at 44.1kHz using the built-in microphone of a laptop and Praat (Boersma and Weenink 2009). The stimuli were randomized in one block with an inter-stimulus interval of 6 seconds. The total duration of the block was 13 minutes. The same stimuli were presented in written form plus tone marks via Power point slides for the Read-Aloud task.

<Table 3> Vietnamese stimuli - Tones of Vietnamese

<i>Words</i>	<i>Tones</i>	<i>Level tone</i>	<i>Falling tone</i>	<i>Curve tone</i>	<i>Broken tone</i>	<i>Rising tone</i>	<i>Droppin g tone</i>
tí /ti/		tì	ì	tí	tĩ	tí	tị
tê /te/		tê	ề	tế	tẽ	tế	tệ
te /tɛ/		te	è	té	tê	té	tẹ
tư /tuɯ/		tư	ử	tử	tữ	tử	tự
tơ /tɤ/		tơ	ờ	tở	tõ	tở	tợ
ta /ta/		ta	à	tả	tã	tá	tạ
tu /tu/		tu	ù	tù	tũ	tú	tự
tô /to/		tô	ồ	tổ	tỗ	tố	tộ
to /tɔ/		to	ò	tó	tõ	tó	tọ
tia/ tie/		tia	ìa	tia	tĩa	tía	tịa
tũa /tuɤ/		tũa	ũa	tũa	tũa	tũa	tựũa
tua /tuo/		tua	ùa	tũa	tũa	túa	tụa

2.3. Procedures

2.3.1. Identification task

The participants sat individually in a quiet room and listened to the

stimuli through a laptop. They were provided an answer sheet for all the stimuli without tone marks and were instructed to mark the tone of every syllable of the stimuli.

### **2.3.2. Imitation**

The same audio stimuli used in the Identification task were randomized in a different order. The participants listened to each stimulus once through head phones and were asked to repeat it without any visual aid. Their responses were recorded using Praat on a laptop.

### **2.3.3. Read-Aloud task**

The participants were asked to read aloud 54 stimuli presented on Powerpoint slides (one word for each slide) at their own pace. The order of the stimuli was randomized in a different order from the other tasks. Their responses were recorded using Praat on a laptop.

All the participants completed the Read-Aloud task last, while the order of the Identification and Imitation tasks was counterbalanced to avoid order and learning effects. There was a delay (a short break of 10 minutes) before the Imitation task started. The conditions of the experiments for control group and the L2 learners' groups were identical/ compatible.

### **2.3.4. Assessing accuracy in the Read-Aloud and Imitation tasks**

The recordings were judged blindly by two phonetically trained native speakers of Vietnamese. They identified the tonal errors made by the participants. The two native speakers labelled the tone of each syllable/word with a choice among six lexical tones. When there was any disagreement between them, acoustic analysis was carried out using Praat with visual pitch contour to decide the label of the tone. The two native judges agreed on most of the tokens (the mean inter-rater agreement across three L1 languages was 95% for the Imitation task and 88% for the Read-Aloud task), and their divergence appeared to reflect ambiguity in the productions.

### **2.3.5. Analysis**

To answer the first research question, L2 learners' performance in

Identification, Read-Aloud, and Imitation of the six Vietnamese tones were compared to examine whether perception or production exerts a stronger influence on the imitation of tones. The accuracy rates for each participant were calculated for each task (Identification, Read-Aloud, and Imitation) and tone (Level, Rising, Falling, Dropping, Curve, and Broken). The individual learners' accuracy rates were first transformed into Rationalized Arcsine Units (RAU) to make them more suitable for statistical analysis (Hao and de Jong 2016; Studebaker 1985). The rationalized arcsine transform was used to transform data obtained from speech related studies in order to make them suitable for parametric statistical analyses. The arcsine transformation expresses scores in radians and the rationalized arcsine transform adjusts these scores into units resembling percentages, making them easier to interpret. Formula (1) was used in most speech test cases, then the number of trials (N) was taken into account. In the following, S is the number of correct responses and N is the number of trials performed. Equation (2) converts radians into RAU.

$$(1) \quad AU = \frac{\arcsin \sqrt{\frac{S}{N+1}}}{\sqrt{\frac{S}{N+1}}} + \frac{\arcsin \sqrt{\frac{S+1}{N+1}}}{\sqrt{\frac{S+1}{N+1}}}$$

$$(2) \quad RAU = \left(\frac{146}{\pi}\right) * AU - 23$$

The resulting RAU values were compared in a three-way mixed-effects model to determine the relative accuracy of the three tasks. The dependent variable was RAU. The fixed effects were L1 Languages (Japanese, Lao and Taiwanese), Tasks (Identification, Read-Aloud, and Imitation) and Tones (Level, Rising, Falling, Dropping, Curve, and Broken). The random factors were Items (54 words x 3 tasks= 162 monosyllabic words) and Speakers (10 Japanese, 10 Lao, and 10 Taiwanese speakers). A Tukey post-hoc test was then conducted to determine the significant differences among the levels of the main fixed effects. The results were reported in section 3.1.

Then, accuracy rates in the Imitation task were compared with those of Identification and Read-aloud tasks via Pearson correlation analyses on the RAU scores to examine whether the difficulty of the Imitation task was a result of perceptual imprecision, production

inaccuracy, or a combination. If perception was a more dominant factor in determining the imitation performance, the learners' accuracy patterns in the Imitation task should be most similar to those in Identification. Alternatively, if production exerted a stronger influence on imitation, the Read-Aloud and Imitation tasks should share a more correlated pattern. Results are reported in table 6.

In order to answer the second research question, the learners' mean percentage accuracy and error rates for the six Vietnamese tones in the three different tasks were calculated and summarized in confusion matrices. Results were reported in tables 7, 8 and 9.

In order to answer the third research question, acoustic analysis was performed on the Imitation and Read-Aloud data of four groups of speakers (three groups of L2 learners and control Vietnamese). The key acoustic parameters included F0 (Fundamental frequency) maximum and F0 minimum for each tone, the Fundamental frequency (F0 in Hz) at five equidistant points on the tone contour of each syllable rime, and a qualitative transcription of the F0 contours and voice quality. The F0 was measured because it is one of the key acoustic correlates that represent the tonal contour. The tones of the target words were segmented and a script was used to extract the F0 min, F0 max and F0 values at five equidistant points of the tonal contours of the target words (Boersma and Weenink 2017). Results were visually inspected for f0 doubling and halving: suspicious values were simply excluded.

Then the speakers' tonal range at five equidistant points on the tone contour was calculated by subtracting the F0 value of the highest tone from the lowest tone in the tonal contours for each speaker. In addition, the tone contours and voice quality (i.e., glottal stop and creakiness) of the target words were transcribed qualitatively with help from spectrographic and F0 display using the symbols shown in Table 4. The glottal stop is caused by a complete closure of the vocal folds, acoustically represented by irregular widely spaced pulses and gap in the spectrogram (such as at the end of Dropping tone and in the middle of Broken tone), while an incomplete closure of the vocal folds results in creakiness or mild laryngealization with fewer irregular pulses, such as at the end of Curve tone (Michaud 2004; Pham 2003). Results are reported in

section 3.4 and figures 3.4 and 5. Due to limited space, only results of the three most problematic tones (Broken, Curve, and Dropping) are reported since L2 speakers across three L1 languages generally performed well (with more native-like contours) on the three other tones (Level, Falling, and Rising: a mean of 85% and above).

<Table 4> Symbols and descriptions of tone contours and voice quality of the target words as shown on the spectrographic and F0 display

Symbols	Contour descriptions	Symbols	Contour descriptions
R	sharp rise	FRc	sharp fall sharp rise and creaky
r	slight rise	Fg	sharp fall end with a glottal stop
F	sharp fall	Fc	sharp fall with creakiness at the end
f	slight fall	L	level
FR	sharp fall sharp rise	LR	level sharp rise
fR	slight fall sharp rise	Lr	level slight rise
fr	slight fall slight rise	LcR	level creaky sharp rise
Fr	sharp fall slight rise	cF	creaky sharp fall
FgR	sharp fall glottal stop and sharp rise	cRc	creaky sharp rise creaky
FcF	sharp fall creaky sharp fall	c	creaky

A mixed-effects model was performed on the speakers’ tonal F0 range as a dependent variable. The fixed effects included 7 groups (Vietnamese, Japanese Imitation, Japanese Read-Aloud, Lao Imitation, Lao Read-Aloud, Taiwanese Imitation, and Taiwanese Read-aloud) and genders (male vs. female). Since female pitch (F0) is normally higher than that of male speakers, we included gender as a factor and plotted F0 values of female and male speakers separately (Figure 6). The random factors included speakers (11 control Vietnamese and 30 L2 learners in the Imitation task and the Read-Aloud task) and items (54 words x 41 speakers =2214 words).

III. Results

3.1. L2 learners’ accuracy rates in Identification, Read-Aloud, and Imitation tasks

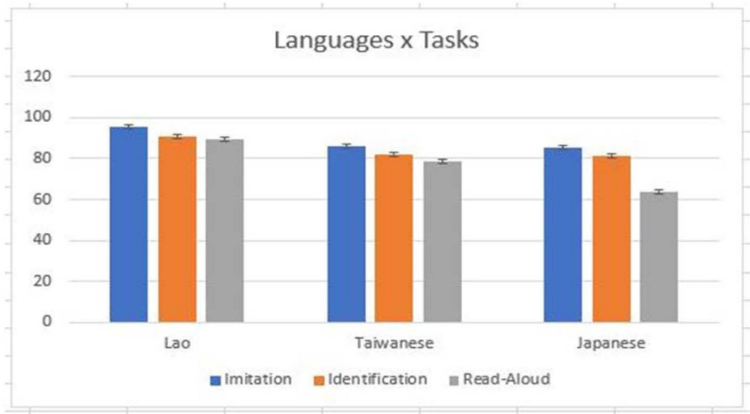
As shown in Table 5, the results of the mixed-effect model show that

all three main factors (Languages, Tasks, and Tones) are significant ( $p<0.0001$ ). The interaction effects (Languages x Tasks, Languages x Tones and Tasks x Tones) are also significant ( $p<0.05$ ). The three-way interaction effect (Languages x Tasks x Tones) is not significant.

<Table 5> F values and significant levels of the mixed effect model

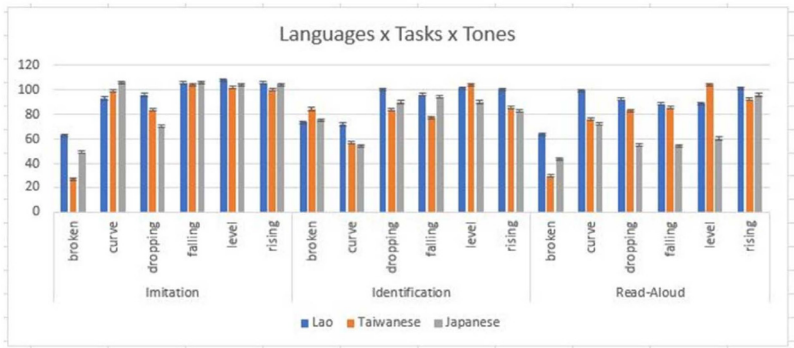
Factors	F values and sig. levels
Languages	$F(2, 446)=12, p<0.0001$
Tasks	$F(4, 438)=7, p<0.0001$
Tones	$F(5, 438)=25.6, P<0.0001$
Languages x Tasks	$F(2,438)=5.4, p<0.01$
Languages x Tones	$F(10, 438)=2.1, p<0.05$
Tasks x Tones	$F(20, 438)=4.6, p<0.0001$
Languages x Tasks x Tones	$F(10, 438)=1.0, p=0.36 \text{ ns.}$

As shown in figure 1, the participants were more accurate in the Imitation task, followed by Identification and least accurate in Read-Aloud tasks across the three L1 speaker groups ( $p<0.001$ ). Figure 1 also shows that compared to Japanese speakers, Lao and Taiwanese learners performed much better in all three tasks. A post-hoc pairwise analysis showed that Lao learners' accuracy RAU scores were significantly higher than those of Taiwanese ( $p<0.001$ ) and Japanese ( $p<0.0001$ ). The Taiwanese also significantly outperformed the Japanese across three tasks ( $p<0.05$ ).



<Figure 1> Mean RAU values of Languages x Tasks. Y-axis: Mean RAU values

As shown in Figure 2, Broken and Curve tones are the least accurately performed for Identification and Read-Aloud tasks across three L1 speaker groups ( $p<0.0001$ ). In the Imitation task, Broken tone was the worst performed across three L1 speaker groups ( $p<0.0001$ ). In contrast, Level, Rising, and Falling tones are ones most accurately perceived and produced across three L1 speaker groups ( $p<0.01$ ). The Dropping tone was more successfully imitated and identified than read aloud ( $p<0.01$ ). Also, Lao speakers were more successful in imitating Broken tone and in reading aloud Broken and Curve tones than the other two groups.



<Figure 2> Mean RAU values of Languages x Tasks x Tones. Y-axis: Mean RAU values

<Table 6> Correlation results

Tasks	Japanese	Lao	Taiwanese
Imitation vs. Read-Aloud	$r=0.37, p<0.005$	$r=0.47, p<0.0001$	$r=0.65, p<0.0001$
Imitation vs. Identification	$r=0.037, p=0.78$ ns.	$r=0.35, p<0.01$	$r=0.045, p=0.76$ ns.
Identification vs. Read-Aloud	$r=0.034, p=0.79$ ns.	$r=0.45, p<0.0001$	$r=0.20, p=0.15$ ns.

As shown in table 6, Pearson correlation analyses on the accurate RAU scores reveal that the correlation between Imitation and Read-Aloud task was significant at  $p<0.005$  across three L1 language speakers. On the contrary, the correlation between Imitation and Identification did not reach significance for Japanese and Taiwanese speakers. The correlation between Read-Aloud and Identification was significant ( $p<0.0001$ ) for Lao speakers only.



### 3.2. Tonal error patterns

#### 3.2.1. Japanese speakers

As shown in Table 7, in the Imitation task, there were two main patterns of error. The first was between Broken and Curve tones (47% of Broken was mispronounced in Curve tone). The second was between Dropping and Falling (30% of Dropping was mispronounced as Falling).

In the Read-Aloud task, the main confusion involved Broken and Curve (37% of Broken was confused as Curve), and between Curve and Rising (21% of Curve was read as Rising). Dropping was confused as Level (16%), Rising (20%) and Falling (7%). Falling was either mispronounced as Level (13%) or Rising (24%). Level was read as Rising (33%).

In the Identification task, the main pattern of errors was also between Broken and Curve (10% Broken was confused as Curve and 20% of Curve was misidentified as Broken). Curve was also identified as Rising (21%). In addition, Dropping was confused as Falling (6%) and Level (4%).

<Table 7> Proportional confusion matrix for 6 Vietnamese tones in the three tasks by Japanese speakers. The leftmost column indicates the target sounds, whereas the top row classifies the responses. Numbers in the cells represent the percentage of each response. The accurate responses are in bold. The prominent error pattern is italicized.

Imitation						
	broken	curve	drop	falling	level	rising
broken	<b>51</b>	<i>47</i>	0	0	0	2
curve	2	<b>98</b>	0	0	0	0
dropping	0	0	<b>70</b>	<i>30</i>	0	0
falling	0	0	0	<b>100</b>	0	0
level	0	0	0	0	<b>99</b>	1
rising	0	0	0	0	0	<b>100</b>
Read-Aloud						
	broken	curve	drop	falling	level	rising
broken	<b>46</b>	<i>37</i>	0	0	0	18
curve	1	<b>73</b>	0	2	2	<i>21</i>
dropping	0	3	<b>54</b>	<i>7</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>20</i>
falling	0	4	1	<b>57</b>	<i>13</i>	<i>24</i>

level	0	4	0	3	<b>59</b>	<i>33</i>
rising	0	4	0	0	2	<b>93</b>
Identification						
	broken	curve	drop	falling	level	rising
broken	<b>83</b>	<i>10</i>	0	0	0	7
curve	<i>20</i>	<b>57</b>	0	2	0	<i>21</i>
dropping	0	0	<b>89</b>	6	4	1
falling	0	0	4	<b>92</b>	2	1
level	0	0	0	2	<b>89</b>	9
rising	3	4	3	1	4	<b>83</b>

3.2.2. Lao speakers

As shown in Table 8, in the Imitation task, there were two main patterns of error. The first involved Broken and Curve tones (36% of Broken was mispronounced as Curve tone and vice versa; 12% of Curve was mispronounced as Broken). The second involved Dropping and Falling (8% of Dropping was mispronounced as Falling).

In the Read-Aloud task, the main confusion involved Broken and Curve (26% of Broken was confused as Curve; and vice versa, 6% of Curve was read as Broken). Dropping was confused as Falling (10%). Falling was either mispronounced as Level (7%) or Dropping (6%). Level was read as Falling (9%).

In the Identification task, the main pattern of errors was also between Broken and Curve (26% of Broken confused as Curve and 23% of Curve was misidentified as Broken). Curve was also identified as Falling (4%); and vice versa, Falling was confused as Curve (6%) and dropping (3%).

<Table 8> Proportional confusion matrix for 6 Vietnamese tones in the three tasks by Lao speakers. The leftmost column indicates the target sounds, whereas the top row classifies the responses. Numbers in the cells represent the percentage of each response. The accurate responses are in bold. The prominent error pattern is italicized.

Imitation						
	broken	curve	drop	falling	level	rising
broken	<b>63</b>	<i>36</i>	0	0	0	1
curve	<i>12</i>	<b>88</b>	0	0	0	0
dropping	0	0	<b>92</b>	8	0	0

falling	0	0	1	<b>99</b>	0	0
level	0	0	0	0	<b>100</b>	0
rising	1	0	0	0	0	<b>99</b>
Read-Aloud						
	broken	curve	drop	falling	level	rising
broken	<b>64</b>	26	1	3	0	6
curve	6	<b>92</b>	0	2	0	0
dropping	0	2	<b>88</b>	10	0	0
falling	0	2	6	<b>86</b>	7	0
level	0	2	1	9	<b>84</b>	3
rising	0	1	0	2	1	<b>96</b>
Identification						
	broken	curve	drop	falling	level	rising
broken	<b>74</b>	26	0	0	0	0
curve	23	<b>70</b>	0	4	1	1
dropping	0	1	<b>97</b>	2	0	0
falling	0	6	3	<b>91</b>	0	0
level	1	0	0	2	<b>97</b>	0
rising	3	1	0	0	0	<b>97</b>

### 3.2.3. Taiwanese speakers

As shown in Table 9, in the Imitation task, there were two main patterns of error. The first involved Broken and Curve tones (67% of Broken was mispronounced as Curve tone and vice versa; 6% of Curve was mispronounced as Broken). The second involved Dropping and Falling (17% of Dropping was mispronounced as Falling).

In the Read-Aloud task, the main confusion involved Broken and Curve (58% of Broken was confused as Curve and 8 % of Broken was read as Rising). Curve was confused as Falling (24%). Dropping was also read as Falling (18%); and vice versa, Falling was mispronounced as Dropping (14%).

In the Identification task, the main pattern of errors also involved Broken and Curve (11% of Broken was confused as Curve and 29% of Curve was misidentified as Broken). Curve was also confused as Rising (13%). Dropping was misidentified as Falling (15%). Falling was misidentified as Curve (17%). Rising was confused as Broken (11%).

In general, the results showed that L2 learners across the three L1 languages were most successful in producing and perceiving Level, Rising, and Falling tones. In contrast, they had problems perceiving Broken, Curve, and Dropping tones. In addition, they had

similar tonal error patterns, namely the confusion between Broken and Curve, and between Dropping and Falling.

<Table 9> Proportional confusion matrix for 6 Vietnamese tones in the three tasks by Taiwanese speakers. The leftmost column indicates the target sounds, whereas the top row classifies the responses. Numbers in the cells represent the percentage of each response. The accurate responses are in bold. The prominent error pattern is italicized.

Imitation						
	broken	curve	dropping	falling	level	rising
broken	<b>31</b>	<i>67</i>	0	1	0	1
curve	<i>6</i>	<b>94</b>	0	0	0	0
dropping	0	0	<b>83</b>	<i>17</i>	0	0
falling	0	0	0	<b>100</b>	0	0
level	0	1	0	1	<b>97</b>	0
rising	0	4	0	0	0	<b>96</b>
Read-Aloud						
	broken	curve	dropping	falling	level	rising
broken	<b>33</b>	<i>58</i>	0	0	0	8
curve	0	<b>71</b>	4	<i>24</i>	0	1
dropping	0	0	<b>82</b>	<i>18</i>	0	0
falling	0	1	<i>14</i>	<b>85</b>	0	0
level	0	0	0	0	<b>100</b>	0
rising	0	6	0	0	6	<b>89</b>
Identification						
	broken	curve	dropping	falling	level	rising
broken	<b>82</b>	<i>11</i>	0	0	0	7
curve	29	<b>57</b>	0	1	0	13
dropping	0	1	<b>83</b>	<i>15</i>	0	0
falling	0	<i>17</i>	4	<b>79</b>	0	0
level	0	0	0	0	<b>100</b>	0
rising	<i>11</i>	4	0	0	0	<b>85</b>

3.3. Transcription of tone contours and voice quality

3.3.1. The broken tone

As shown in Figure 3, the Vietnamese produced this tone with fall rise contour with a glottal stop in the middle (FgR: 50%; fgR: 20%) or a creakiness at the beginning (cR: 9%). In contrast, in the imitation task, the Japanese and Taiwanese learners failed to copy this feature and produced only fall rise contours (Japanese: FR: 19%; Taiwanese FR: 31%). This explains why native Vietnamese listeners heard L2 productions as a curve tone. Nevertheless, it is interesting that in the Read-Aloud task, many speakers of the three L1 groups

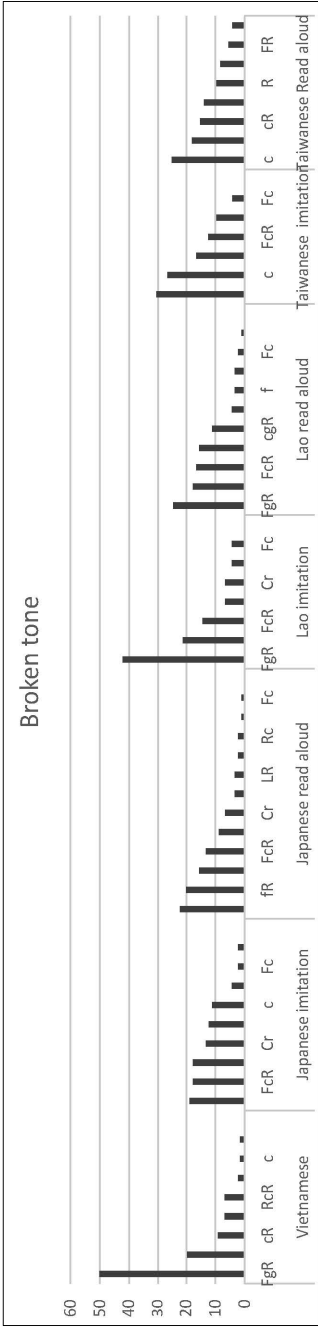
were able to produce the glottal stop in the middle of this tone contour (Japanese FgR: 22%; Lao FgR: 24%; and Taiwanese FgR: 18%) or the creakiness at the beginning of the tone contour (cR). This indicates that this unique voice quality feature may be learnable and that L2 learners can recognise this particular tone via visual written diacritic presented in the read aloud task, strongly suggesting the positive effect of formal teaching of tones, on Read-Aloud tasks.

### **3.3.2. The curve tone**

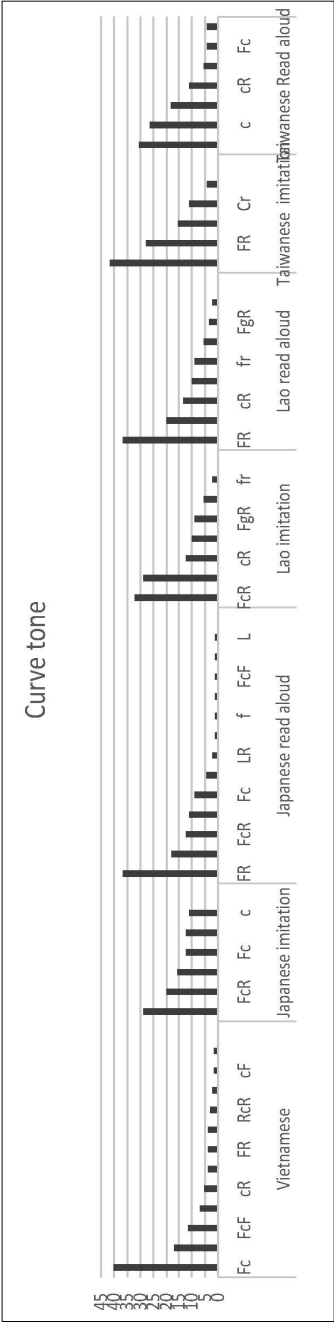
Figure 4 showed that native Vietnamese speakers produced this tone with either sharp fall contours that ended with creakiness or mild laryngealization (Fc: 40%); or a sharp fall sharp rise contours with creakiness in the middle (e.g., FcR: 17%; FcF:11%). In contrast, the L2 learners produced the curve tone only as a sharp fall sharp rise contour with no creakiness in the middle (Japanese Imitation: FR: 29%; Japanese Read-Aloud: FR: 37%; Lao Imitation FR: 29% Lao Read-Aloud 37%; Taiwanese Imitation: 28%; Taiwanese Read-Aloud: 31%). This shows that many L2 learners failed to employ voice quality on this tone, a distinctive feature in Northern Vietnamese tones. Nevertheless, some L2 learners could produce this creaky feature (Japanese Imitation: FcR: 20%; Japanese Read-Aloud: FcR: 12%; Lao Imitation FcR: 32%; Lao Read- Aloud: 20%; Taiwanese Imitation: c: 42%; FcR: 15%; Taiwanese Read-Aloud: c: 26%, FcR: 11%)

### **3.3.3. The dropping tone**

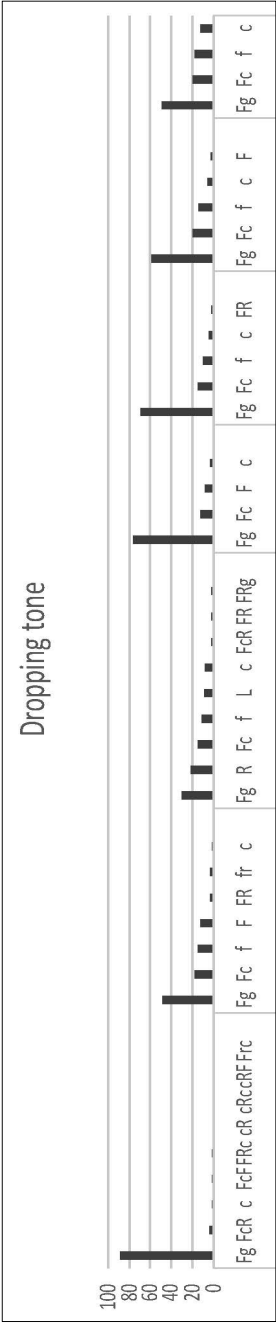
Figure 5 shows that while native Vietnamese speakers produced more sharp fall contours that ended with a glottal stop (Fg: 89%) for this tone, most of the L2 learners' contours also had a final glottal stop (Japanese Imitation: Fg: 48%; Japanese Read-Aloud: Fg: 30%; Lao Imitation: Fg: 77%; Lao Read-Aloud: 69%; Taiwanese Imitation: 58%; Taiwanese Read-Aloud: 49%). In contrast, some L2 learners produced the dropping tone as a sharp fall contour with no final glottal stop (Japanese Imitation: f: 14%; Japanese Read-Aloud: f: 11%; Lao Imitation: F: 8%; Lao Read-Aloud: f:10%; Taiwanese Imitation: f:14%; Taiwanese Read- Aloud: f: 18%). This is why the two native Vietnamese listeners perceived them as a falling tone (as shown in tonal error patterns in section 3.3 above).



<Figure 3> Percentage of frequency of tone produced – Broken tone



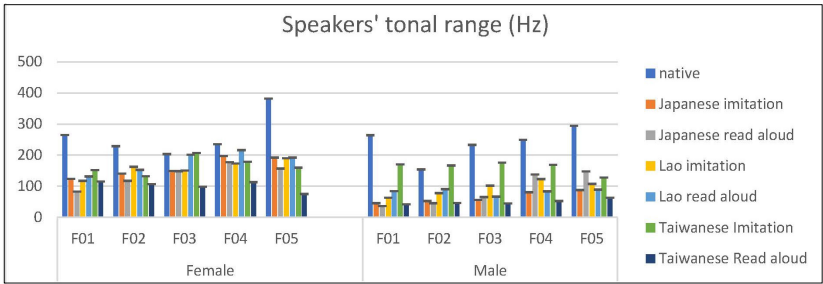
<Figure 4> Percentage of frequency of tone produced – Curve tone



<Figure 5> Percentage of frequency of tone produced – Dropping tone

3.4. Speakers’ F0 range

The results of the mixed-effect model on the speakers’ tonal range (F0: Hz) across five points of the tone contours show that the main factors of groups and the interactions of groups x genders are significant (groups [Vietnamese, Japanese Imitation, Japanese Read-Aloud, Lao Imitation, Lao Read-Aloud, Taiwanese Imitation, and Taiwanese Read-Aloud]:  $F(6, 51) = 8-32, p<0.0001$ , groups x genders:  $(F(6,51) = 2.7-11.6, p<0.0001)$  while gender is not significant ( $F(1, 24) = 0.4-2.5, p= 0.19 \text{ ns.})$  As shown in Figure 6, the L2 learners had a significantly narrower tonal F0 range than the control Vietnamese, across both male and female speakers and across two tasks, Imitation and Read-Aloud ( $p<0.0001$ ). Taiwanese male speakers in Imitation task and Lao speakers in both Imitation and Read-Aloud tasks also have larger tonal range than other groups ( $p<0.01$ ).



<Figure 6> Mean tonal F0 range (Hz) of speakers across five points of the tonal contours

IV. Discussion and conclusion

In this section, we summarize and discuss the results by addressing the four research questions raised in section 1.5.

*First, does perception or production exert a stronger influence on imitation of tones?*

The results show that learners were significantly more accurate in imitating than in reading Vietnamese tones aloud or identifying



them. This indicates that L2 imitation may reduce the effect of phonological categorization. The learners' more accurate performance in the Imitation task also indicates that they do not lack the skills to correctly perceive or articulate Vietnamese tones. Their difficulty in the Identification and Read-Aloud tasks appears to come from the phonological encoding of tones, that is, the retrieval of segmental and tonal information and the attendant application of tone labels. This result is consistent with findings in previous studies (Hao and de Jong 2016; Hallé, Chang and Best 2004).

The positive correlation between Imitation and Read-Aloud tasks indicates that these two tasks share a common production error pattern: learners had problems producing Broken, Curve, and Dropping tones, suggesting that production exerts a stronger influence on imitation. It means that L2 learners seem to have difficulties with the motor production or articulation of these tonal features in both the imitation and the Read-Aloud tasks.

Second, *what are the general error patterns of Vietnamese tones by L2 learners?*

The analysis of the error patterns of the confusion matrices (Tables 7, 8 and 9) reveals that all the three tasks across three L1 languages shared a prominent error pattern, the mutual confusion between Broken and Curve tones, and between Dropping and Falling tones. One major type of errors was that Broken was produced as a Curve tone. That is, the Broken tone was produced with only falling and rising contours while it should have been a sharp falling- sharp rising contour with a glottal stop or a creaky feature in the middle of the tonal contour. Another common error involved Dropping and Falling tones. In Northern Vietnamese, the Dropping tone is sharp falling, short and marked by strong final laryngealization. L2 learners did not realize the final laryngealization of the tone and produced it as either a Falling tone or a Level tone. This result is strongly supported by the tone contour and voice quality transcription data. Particularly, many Japanese L2 learners failed to produce the glottal stop and/or creakiness in the Broken and Drop tones, thus making the two native Vietnamese listeners confuse many Broken as Curve tones and Dropping as Falling tones.

This can be said to be a negative transfer from their L1 since voice quality is not a distinctive feature in Japanese while it is in Vietnamese. Nevertheless, the Lao and Taiwanese speakers could produce this creaky feature which is also available in their tone systems, indicating a positive transfer from their L1s.

Furthermore, the confusion between Broken and Curve tones not only occurred in L2 learners but also in cross-dialectal data, e.g. Southern listeners identifying Northern tones (Kirby 2010). Brunelle and Jannedy (2013) showed that large numbers of Northern Vietnamese Broken tones were misidentified as Curve tone, which can be attributed to the fact that Broken and Curve are merged into a single tone in Southern Vietnamese and therefore, are not clearly distinct for the Southern Vietnamese subjects. In general, the results of this study suggested the effects of phonetic realizations of lexical tones in Vietnamese on L2 learners' perception and production.

*Third, how are tonal features (i.e., tonal range, tonal contours and voice quality) produced by L2 learners different from those produced by Vietnamese control speakers?*

The result on speakers' tonal range showed that L2 learners had a narrower tonal F0 range than the Vietnamese. This mirrors our findings on heritage Vietnamese speakers, who either were born or who grew up in Australia, having more compact (narrower) tonal ranges than that of the contemporary Southern Vietnamese speakers in Vietnam (Đào and Nguyễn 2017) and Korean learners whose tonal ranges are narrower than control Vietnamese (Đào and Nguyễn, 2019). This is also in line with results by Tu et al. (2016) that Korean learners generally have a narrower pitch range than Mandarin speakers, and similar to the results from Japanese speakers of L2 Mandarin (Tu et al. 2014) who also had narrower pitch range than control Mandarin speakers.

The results on tonal contour transcription showed that many L2 learners failed to produce native-like tonal contours (i.e., their tonal contours were different from those of the control Vietnamese), indicating a deviation or underdevelopment of tonal distinctive features in L2 learners of lexical tones.

In addition, native Vietnamese listeners not only rely on tonal contours but also on voice quality feature in identifying tones as found in the two native Vietnamese listeners' perception patterns and consistent with results by Brunelle and Jannedy (2013). However, many L2 learners seem to ignore or fail to realize this feature, since they did not produce/copy a glottal stop in the middle of the Broken tone and creakiness or mild laryngealization (tense voice) at the end or in the middle of the Curve tone. This suggests that the voice quality feature is more "marked" (Eckman 1977; Hyman and VanBik 2004) and may take longer to acquire, in line with previous studies on heritage Vietnamese speakers (Đào and Nguyễn 2017) and first language acquisition data; Đoàn (1999) noted that the articulation of the creaky feature in the middle, and/or falling-rising of the Broken and Curve tones respectively, is difficult for Vietnamese children under three years of age. Nevertheless, some L2 learners adapted their production to these cues, indicated by the fact that a few of them successfully produced the glottal stop feature in the Broken and Drop tones in the read aloud task. This confirms that learners can develop their phonetic targets in active interaction with native Vietnamese speakers. This result suggests that this voice quality feature is learnable but requires explicit teaching in formal instruction, implying that neural plasticity is not hindered by neural maturation and is indeed possible after different forms and lengths of auditory training (Chandrasekaran et al. 2012; Skoe et al. 2014; Song et al. 2008).

Furthermore, the results also indicated that there was one consistent asymmetrical perceptual pattern among Vietnamese tones by L2 learners. Specifically, the tone pairs Broken-Curve, Dropping-Falling and Curve-Falling share phonetic similarities. Broken-Curve share fall-rise pitch contours, Dropping-Falling and Curve-Falling share a sharp falling contour particularly if the distinctive voice quality feature was not pronounced. This is consistent with suggestions by Polkka (1991, 1992) that a high degree of phonetic similarity between two non-native segments could increase perceptual difficulty for the listener. In fact, previous studies (Kiriloff 1969; So 2005; Wang, Spence, Jongman and Sereno 1999; Wayland and Guion 2004) have reported that non-native

language learners have great difficulties in producing and perceiving lexical tones that are similar.

Fourth, *how do speakers' different L1 experiences with prosodic features (pitch accent vs. lexical tones) affect L2 prosodic speech production and perception of Vietnamese tones?*

The results showed that Lao speakers significantly outperformed Taiwanese and Japanese speakers, and the Taiwanese significantly performed better than the Japanese in perception and the production of Vietnamese tones across three tasks. This suggests that prior experience with one tone language may facilitate the acquisition of tone in another language, consistent with Wayland and Guion (2004).

In addition, the misproduction and misperception of non-modal voice (glottal stop and creakiness) and contour tones (bidirectional fall-rise) in Vietnamese by L2 learners across three different L1 speaker groups supports the *Markedness Differential Hypothesis* (Eckman 1977), suggesting that voice quality is more “marked” and thus are more difficult for L2 learners than modal voice tones (e.g., unidirectional contours: rising, falling, and level). Furthermore, as predicted, it is found that the Japanese had more difficulties acquiring the “marked” non-modal voice (glottal stop and creakiness) such as Broken, Curve, and Dropping tones than Lao and Taiwanese speakers. This on the one hand suggests a negative transfer from their L1 Japanese and on the other, indicates that the active use of phonation type in encoding L1 tones may have played a role in the better perception of Lao and Taiwanese in the production of Vietnamese tones.

In summary, this study investigated the production and perception of Vietnamese tones by Japanese, Lao, and Taiwanese learners, comparing their performance in an Imitation task to that in Identification and Read-Aloud tasks. The results showed that the Imitation task was generally easier for L2 speakers than the Identification and Read-Aloud tasks, suggesting that Imitation was performed without requiring the phonological encoding skills required by the other two tasks. It is also found that Lao and Taiwanese speakers outperformed the Japanese speakers, suggesting

that prior experience with one tone language may facilitate the acquisition of tone in another language. The result on speakers' tonal range showed that the L2 learners have significantly narrower tonal F0 range than control Vietnamese speakers. The results of error pattern analysis and tonal transcription also suggest that non-modal voice and contour tones are more difficult for L2 learners than modal voice tones.

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## Death and the Inoperative Community in the Works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Merlinda Bobis



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### [ *Abstract* ]

Gabriel García Márquez's short story "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World" ["El ahogado más hermoso del mundo," 1968] and the novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* [*Crónica de una muerte anunciada*, 1981] and Merlinda Bobis's novel *Fish-Hair Woman* (2012) and short story "O Beautiful Co-Spirit" (2021) feature unusual scenarios of death: the arrival of a drowned man's corpse at an island; the inaction of the community to stop the foretold death of a supposedly-innocent man; a woman with long hair that can fetch dead bodies at the bottom of the village river; and a Filipino Catholic and a Malaysian Muslim working together to prepare an Italian Catholic's corpse for a funeral. These narratives demand critical attention as all deaths make the community's existence meaningful as they alter its social reality. Looking into the works of the aforementioned Colombian writer and Filipino writer and unveiling how death affects the community, this paper relies on Jean-Luc Nancy's theory on death and inoperative community.

**Keywords:** magic realism, death, inoperative community, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Merlinda Bobis

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## I . Introduction

Colombian fictionist and Nobel Prize in Literature laureate Gabriel García Márquez weaves narratives that confound readers around the world with beauty that is both worldly and unworldly, whether it be in short form or in novel form. This literary characteristic can easily be seen in his short story “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World” [“El ahogado más hermoso del mundo,” 1968] and the novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* [*Crónica de una muerte anunciada*, 1981]. Similar to his other writings, these two narratives are evidently influenced by German novelist Franz Kafka. As pointed out by Sam Jordison (2017), García Márquez has “twisted...ideas” but with a straightforward narrative voice:

You get a special sense of wonder through describing a world where ice is no more or less remarkable than a ghost who keeps bothering you in your bathroom, a world where the risk of children being born with pig’s tails is accepted as a fact of life. (*The Guardian* 9/05/2017)

This is what makes him stand out among his fellow fictionists not only in Colombia and Latin America but also the world. His works baffle readers with stories that seem to be laid out with irresolvable problems as well as otherworldly characters and settings, thus putting García Márquez among the best magic realist writers. The short story and the novel mentioned above create tension between the magical and the real.

The same can be said about Filipino writer Merlinda Bobis and her works. Although unlike Gabriel García Márquez who wrote in his native language, Bobis writes mainly in English, and this is in part to her having migrated to Australia. This migration does not remove her identity as a Filipino writer, but rather it expands her worldview as well as her role becoming the writer who “clearly embodies the push and pull between different cultures and languages. Yet, the liminal space that seems to inhabit never means disruption or affliction” (Granado 2003: 39). Her works like the 2012 novel *Fish-Hair Woman* and the 2021 short story “O Beautiful Co-Spirit” reflects this liminality, which adds to and strengthens the very foundation of magic realism in her works.

Thus, in this essay, I utilize the aforementioned works by Gabriel García Márquez and Merlinda Bobis. Although the two writers are from different countries and have written in different languages, the similarities in their works are outstanding because of the use of magic realism, notwithstanding several references within the respective texts to the colonial histories of Colombia and the Philippines, both of which were former colonies of Spain. In addition, all texts to be utilized in the essay have similar theme: death. For example, García Márquez's short story, "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World" is about a dead man's corpse being found by children who are playing by the beach. The story is not about solving the crime or identifying the dead man, but instead it is about the community being immersed into the existence of the handsome dead man. The corpse creates an atmosphere that divides the community at first yet also unite them in the end. The novel *Chronicle of Death Foretold* does not start with a corpse, but it starts with the knowledge that the main character, Santiago Nasar, is about to be murdered. This "foretold" death is known by the whole community, yet somehow, his death still occurs, because several members in his community has refused to stop it due to grudge or laziness, or simply because unfortunate instances have prevented his friends to save him. The whole novel is in the perspective of a narrator who has returned home to interview the witnesses and investigate Nasar's death that occurred twenty years ago. In this sense, the novel is a puzzle put together by the community through sharing their stories. On the other hand, Merlinda Bobis's short story "O Beautiful Co-Spirit" is about a Filipino woman asked by her estranged neighbor to help her prepare the corpse of the latter's roommate-lover for a funeral. Other than the argument the two parties had years ago, the two begin to work together for the dead despite their obvious religious and cultural differences. Lastly, the novel *Fish-Hair Woman* tackles the story of a woman blessed with extremely-long hair that she can move on her own to "fish" out the corpses in the village river.

In this regard, I explore the concept of "community" by first looking into its traditional understanding and then following Jean-Luc Nancy (1991)'s notion of "inoperative community."

Because one prominent theme in all works is death, I also examine how death unsettles the community. This paper posits that Gabriel García Márquez and Merlinda Bobis have proven in their works that the knowledge of death, or rather the reminder of the finitude of one's existence, is what brings the community together through sharing.

## II. The Arrival of Death and the Community in Question

According to J. Hillis Miller (2011), individuals are “preexisting subjectivities” that are part of a bigger group or collectivity. The communication among individuals is often understood as an understanding of having “similarities” (i.e. “the other is like me”). Moreover, these subjectivities, being part of a collectivity, becomes separated from “the outside world” (Miller 2011: 13, 7). Thus, because this collectivity, or community, depends on the idea that the outside world is excluded for it to exist, there is a foreboding feeling of fear of being invaded, or “the terror of invasion” (Miller 2011: 10). Miller (2011:14) states that the community creates a “community” or “collective” consciousness, in which the idea of death is suppressed. Pierre Bourdieu (1995: 27) adds that an individual needs to be part of social groups and engages in “networks of relations” where he or she has to be under certain “controls and constraints.” Participation then, according to Bourdieu, creates “the *illusio*”: the acknowledgement of the community's laws (Bourdieu 1995: 167).

One of the earliest works that redefine the notion of community is Benedict Anderson's seminal work on nationalism, *Imagined Communities* (1983), which dismisses the notion that “nations” are natural or unavoidable. Viewing the nation as a cultural construct, Anderson (2006: 6) defines “nation” as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” Although this notion of community is “imagined” and will not be concretized in some way, it does not mean it is not real: “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members,

meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (ibid). Thus, Anderson's notion of community, more specifically, the nation, is the kind of community that is very much familiar (if not the most familiar) "style" of modern community.

In *The Conflagration of Community*, Miller (2011: 6) provides models of the society. The common model is the organic society which has "institutions, laws, and conventions." However, Miller adds that there is another model of community, and this notion is highly influenced by the works of Giorgio Agamben, Georges Bataille, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Maurice Blanchot. This is the inoperative community. According to them, the idea of being together is a myth. In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy (1991) posits that "being together" is "sharing," and not being fused into a communion. Borrowing from Bataille, Nancy emphasizes singularity, communication, the other, and finitude:

Community is revealed in the death of others; hence it is always revealed to others. Community is what takes place always through others and for others [...] A community is the presentation to its members of their mortal truth (Nancy 1991: 14-15).

Although this rejection of the notion that the community is formed via "togetherness" may show the similarity or even an underlying link between Anderson's "imagined community" and Nancy's "inoperative community," there are still substantial differences between the two notions of community. Pieter Vermeulen (2009: 96) notes that imagined community centers itself within the idea that the community is formed based on people living within the same country, the inoperative community, on the other hand "starts out from the violence and exclusions that traditional forms of community have produced in order to conceive of more ethically aware forms of community." Moreover, the idea of death between these two communities are different: in the imagined community, death is glorified via the promotion of self-sacrifice not only as meaningful but also a huge contribution to the community; while the inoperative community "resist[s]... that process of abstraction" (Vermeulen 2009: 97). Despite the seemingly irreconcilable

differences between Anderson's and Nancy's communities, Vermeulen posits that there might be "a complementary rather than oppositional relation between the notions" in such a way that Nancy's "inoperative community" may be perceived as "an ethical addition that corrects the imagined community's tendency towards exclusion and totalization" (Vermeulen 2009: 96).

To avoid using the traditional idea of community, Nancy uses the terms "singularity" and "singular being" when he talks about the individual. Blanchot (1988) later on expands on Nancy's idea of inoperative community through "unworking," coining the term "the unavowable community." This alternative model of community, the inoperative community, theorized by Nancy, undoes the traditional myth of togetherness through the notion of finitude. In this regard, I posit that the works of Gabriel García Márquez and Merlinda Bobis portray the inoperative community vis-à-vis the introduction of death.

As mentioned earlier, the most commonly accepted model of community is the one with commonality: language, values, laws, beliefs, and institutions. In this model, communities are formed based on the members and their propriety, as well as their cooperation, formed bonds and acceptance of cohabitation with other individuals (Miller 2011: 16-18). In this community, there is a sense of belonging, home and identity. In other words, this model is somewhat a property. In all the works we are discussing in this essay, this model of community exists at first.

In *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, we see how important traditions are in the community. The narrative exists because of a traditional event (the marriage) that happened the night before the murder of Santiago Nasar. During those moments, the community celebrates with the Vicario family for having their youngest daughter get married to the rich, young man who recently arrived in town. On the other hand, the short story "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World" portrays a community where everyone seems to be fine with their everyday life. Eventually, several members of the community feel unease when an unusual object suddenly appears by their shore. The same can be said in the aforementioned works



of Merlinda Bobis. In her novel, the village people live their usual lives, working in their farms, going to church every Sunday and having celebrations during their patron saints' days. In "O Beautiful Co-Spirit," Bobis writes about how a woman living in silence in a building where everyone seems to have agreed to live by themselves as long as they do not disturb one another.

To be more specific: the importance of traditions and norms in the community in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* also becomes the medium for starting the narrative. In the novel, we see Angela Vicario, the newly-wedded wife, being returned to her family by her groom on the night of their consummation, because after they have had sex, no blood stain appeared on the matrimonial sheet. In other words, the husband feels betrayed by Angela Vicario for not being a virgin before marriage.

Bayardo San Roman, the groom, drags Angela Vicario back to her family home and kisses her mother thanks and goodbye. Pura Vicario, the mother, feels ashamed by the discovery that her youngest daughter is not a virgin, so she beats her until she names the man who has taken away her virginity. Angela refuses to reveal the identity of the man responsible, perhaps because this will surely destroy the family's reputation and honor. Because she believes that this will save her honor, and because she thinks other people would do the same, she names Santiago Nasar as the culprit because of his reputation as a rich womanizer. The value of honor is also seen when the narrator of the novel interviews both Pedro Vicario and Pablo Vicario, the twins and brothers of Angela, as well as the Santiago's murderers. They talk about their conversation with the town's priest:

"We killed him openly," Pedro Vicario said, "but we're innocent."

"Perhaps before God," said Father Amador.

"Before God and before men," Pablo Vicario said. "It was a matter of honor." (García Márquez 2003: 49)

Perhaps the importance of honor and value is also the possible reason why almost everyone has done nothing to stop Santiago's death. Everyone in the community knows that Santiago is about to

be killed, yet they do nothing. The twins are eventually pardoned, and the bride and groom eventually reunite 17 years later.

However, looking at the novel as a depiction of the traditional notion of community is unfulfilling and is disgraceful to the otherworldly beauty of the magic realist text. If we look at the novel in Nancy's lenses, we will see his idea that the actual experience of community has a different direction, and that is "incompletion" or the lack of totality. According to Nancy (1991), individuals experience community not as "work" that singular beings produce, but as "unworking" (*désœuvrement*), which struggles against the work that the community has acquired traditionally. He also adds that our perception of ourselves as "absolute" and away from the outside world, does not coincide with the ontological connectivity. One must acknowledge that each person is a singular being characterized by "being-outside-itself" (Nancy 1991: 24) and by the interrelated essence of "being-in-common." This leads then to the inoperative community, which does not rely on understanding the community based on identity and foundations. For Nancy, singular beings are open to one another and in constant state of change.

Miller (2011: 93) also explains that the community is constantly destabilized by the imminence of death. This parallels Nancy's notion of the *la communauté désœuvrée*, or the "unworked community," which is a group of individuals bound by the experience of finitude while being unable to know one another wholly. In the short story, the arrival of a dead man, at first, does not destabilize the community. The whole community has reacted the way they are supposed to act: innocent children play with the corpse upon discovery, not realizing that the plaything is a dead man; the male villagers bring the corpse to town and go to the other villages to identify the man; and the women take care of the corpse in case his family comes to retrieve the body or for proper funeral. It was only until the women have had too much time being with that corpse when the disruption occurs:

Fascinated by his huge size and his beauty, the women then decided to make him some pants from a large piece of sail and a shirt from some bridal linen so that he could continue through his death with

dignity. As they sewed, sitting in a circle and gazing at the corpse between stitches, it seemed to them that the wind had never been so steady nor the sea so restless as on that night and they supposed that the change had something to do with the dead man. They thought that if that magnificent man had lived in the village, his house would have had the widest doors, the highest ceiling, and the strongest floor, his bedstead would have been made from a midship frame held together by iron bolts, and his wife would have been the happiest woman. They thought that he would have had so much authority that he could have drawn fish out of the sea simply by calling their names and that he would have put so much work into his land that springs would have burst forth from among the rocks so that he would have been able to plant flowers on the cliffs. They secretly compared him to their own men, thinking that for all their lives theirs were incapable of doing what he could do in one night, and they ended up dismissing them deep in their hearts as the weakest, meanest and most useless creatures on earth. They were wandering through that maze of fantasy when the oldest woman, who as the oldest had looked upon the drowned man with more compassion than passion, sighed: "He has the face of someone called Esteban." (García Márquez n.d.)

After several glances at the corpse, they have all agreed that the man's name is Esteban. They imagine what his life could have been, how he would have been as a living man, and how much joy he could have brought to the villagers. However, when the male villagers have come back home with no new information about the dead man, "the men thought the fuss was only womanish frivolity." While the women are glad that no neighboring villages "own" the corpse (so now they can keep it), the men want to get rid of the "newcomer once and for all." This scenario reflects what Nancy (1991: 26) calls as the inevitable "exposure" of the organic community to the "outside," which is symbolized by the corpse, leading to the undoing of the community itself. In a sense, the corpse has contaminated the community, similar to what Jacques Derrida states: that all communities will attempt to preserve themselves from outside contamination because they are open to what Derrida (2002: 87) calls "the other, the future, death, freedom, the coming or love of the other, the space and time of spectralizing messianicity beyond all messianism."

The same rings true to Bobis's short story "O Beautiful Co-Spirit." Although the story opens with Farah and Pilar already in the morgue to see Lucia's corpse, Pilar, whose perspective we follow mainly in third-person narration, remembers that she was in the morgue because of what happened the night before. We learn that Farah and Pilar are "just polite 'hi-hello' neighbours now, barely speaking to each other after that thing with the birds" (Bobis 2021: 2). However, unlike their usual short greeting by the stairs, Farah stops Pilar, who was taking out trash and minding her own business, to ask if she would come with her the next day to the morgue. The request is awkward because Pilar even remembers how Lucia berated her years ago for removing the bird feeder outside the building. Moreover, Farah does not even recall Pilar's name. The reason why Farah asks Pilar to come with her was because of acknowledged ignorance of Catholicism. Farah, being a Malaysian Muslim, wants to prepare and honor Lucia's corpse the "Italian Catholic" way. However, she does not know anyone else who is Catholic among her neighbors. She also simply presumes that Pilar is Catholic because she is Filipino. However, despite being baptized as Catholic, Pilar does not think she can do any Catholic prayer or ceremony at all for the dead: "And not all Catholics are the same. I really don't know the prayers. And maybe Italian Catholics do things differently" (Bobis 2021: 3). Nevertheless, Farah begs her to come because it was better than nothing. Here in this awkward scene, despite the absence of the dead body, we see two individuals already being affected by reminder of finitude as they set aside their differences for the sake of a corpse. Their everyday lives are disrupted by someone's death, even though one of them is not even remotely acquainted to the dead. Unbeknownst to them, as they set aside their religious differences, Pilar and Farah form a community.

Meanwhile, *Chronicle of Death Foretold* depicts the role of ego in the community. We can say that Santiago Nasar, because of his womanizing tendency, is egotistic, and, therefore, is an easy target for anything related to the "outside contamination." Moreover, the community easily turns on him, resulting in his foretold death. Nancy states that any egocentric tendencies are rejected by the inoperative community:

Community is what takes place always through others and for others. It is not the space of the *egos*—subjects and substances that are at the bottom immortal—but of the *I*'s, who are always *others* (or else are nothing). If community is revealed in the death of others it is because death itself is the true community of *I*'s that are not *egos*. It is not a communion that fuses the *egos* into an *Ego* or a higher *We*. It is the community of *others*. (Nancy 1991: 15)

In *Fish-Hair Woman*, the portrayal of the rejection of ego in the community is different from that of *Chronicle of Death Foretold*. In one of the earliest chapters of the novel, we see Tony McIntyre, an Australian writer who has come to explore the Philippines to search for an inspiration for his writing, regrets coming to Estrella's village because of a strange event that occurs every now and then since the beginning of the Philippine government's attempt to eradicate rebels from the mountains. Dead bodies find their way to the village river and turn the river water unpalatable. Having a long hair that she can manipulate, Estrella is tasked to fish the dead bodies out of the river. While everyone prays and wishes that the dead body is not one of their people, Tony McIntyre disturbs the calmness by being hysterical, exclaiming that he regrets coming because of what he is seeing. It is not because of his white skin or being Australian that automatically alienates him from the village, but because of his selfish act of uproar that disturbs the silence for the dead being salvaged from the river. While everyone else prays for everyone's lives, Tony McIntyre makes a scene about himself. What follows is the suspicion of him being a spy for the government or even simply being gay due to a perceived effeminacy, which is unacceptable during those times. Estrella, whose perspective we follow, also assumes that some of her neighbors probably thinks that Tony McIntyre is there to take away their prized possession—Estrella and her hair. All of these suspicions may not have been started if not for Tony McIntyre's ego and his overt disregard of what is earlier called the "community of *I*'s."

Miller (2011: 14) also posits that individuals remind themselves their mortality, their finitude, even within traditional communities, as evident in the cemeteries as essential spaces for collective experience. On the other hand, the ontological instability of the

community comes from the imminence of death as well as from the uncertainty (or “un-workability”) of death on the other:

The death upon which community is calibrated does not operate the dead being’s passage into some communal intimacy, nor does community, for its part, operate the transfiguration of its dead into some substance or subject—be these homeland, native soil or blood, nation, a delivered or fulfilled humanity, absolute phalanstery, family, or mystical body. Community is calibrated on death as on that of which it is precisely impossible to make a work (other than the work of death, as soon as one tries to make a work of it). Community occurs in order to acknowledge this impossibility, or more exactly—for there is neither function nor finality here—the impossibility of making a work of death is inscribed and acknowledged as “community.” (Miller 2011: 14–15)

All the works of Gabriel García Márquez and Merlinda Bobis mentioned in this essay are consistent with Nancy’s statements. As mentioned earlier, community and “being-with” emerge clearly upon the encounter of death, becoming unworkable. Nancy (1991: 15) further states that community “occurs in order to acknowledge this impossibility, or more exactly—for there is neither function nor finality here—the impossibility of making a work out of death is inscribed and acknowledge as ‘community’.” Bobis’s and García Márquez’s works seem to suggest that we can learn nothing from death because, once dead, we lose the chance to learn whatever it may teach us. The islanders in “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World” have never learned anything at all from the corpse, even though it has altered the community; the narrator in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* does not uncover whether or not Santiago Nasar’s death is just; in “O Beautiful Co-Spirit,” the narrative ends with the beautifying Lucia’s corpse and we learn nothing despite all the memories she associate with the rites they have performed; and lastly, Estrella still exclaims that at the end of her act of fishing the dead, she and her hair remain as possessions of her village. What happens is that all the characters in the aforementioned texts almost make use of fiction or imagination: The islanders imagine Esteban the Corpse as a living man; the neighbors have inconsistent and somewhat unrelated stories about the death of Santiago Nasar;

Pilar remembers the stories of her grandmother; and Estrella writes to her readers and wishes that the readers will never witness death itself:

You who read this, may you never need to pretend that you have forgotten. May you never know the kinship between fishing for the dead and killing. The first time, you break, so you practise the art of forgetting. You teach your gut to keep whole. I am seamless, you tell yourself. You breathe in deeply then let go and thank heaven it's not you in the water. This is an artful exercise, this conversation between the lungs and gratitude. (Bobis 2012: 11)

All narratives ponder upon death and the fears and the experience of witnessing death. Esposito (2010: 123) states that:

It's true, therefore, that the death of the other returns us to our own death, but not in the sense of an identification and even less of a reappropriation. The death of the other instead directs us again to the nature of every death as incapable of being made properly one's own [*inappropriabile*]: of my death *as* his since death is neither "mine" nor "his" because it is a taking away of what is properly one's own, expropriation itself. Here is what man sees in the wide-open eyes of the other who is dying: the solitude that cannot be lessened but only shared. The impenetrable secret that joins us [*ci accomuna*] together as our "last" [...]

In *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, the narrator interviews several of his neighbors, exposing their experiences not only of Santiago Nasar's death but death in general. One instance is when the narrator asks the butchers whether or not "the trade of slaughterer didn't reveal a soul predisposed to a human being" (52), and the response is a protest: "When you sacrifice a steer you don't dare look into its eyes" (ibid). One butcher also mentions that he cannot eat the meat of the animal he butchered and another says that he cannot butcher a cow he has known for a long time, especially if he has drunk its milk.

Santiago Nasar himself has an experience with death. His father's death has forced him to stop studying to manage the family ranch (García Márquez 2003: 8). Moreover, the family maid

mentions that she remembers how horrified Santiago Nasar was when she “pulled out the insides of a rabbit by the roots and threw the steaming guts to the dogs” (Garcia Marquez 2003: 10). Victoria Guzman, the maid, says that it has taken her twenty years to understand “a man accustomed to killing defenseless animals could suddenly express such horror” (ibid). The narrator also notes that most neighbors recall that the weather during Santiago Nasar’s death was “funereal,” as if foreshadowing his impending death, just like how his dream has warned him about his murder (Garcia Marquez 2003: 4). In a sense, Santiago’s death is already foretold before it has occurred not only by his murderers but also by the prophetic scenes that happened. For example, his mother, a known seer and interpreter of dreams (as long as her stomach is empty), fails to see the meaning of her son’s dream as an omen. Trees in dreams are accepted as bad omens by the community. She misunderstood the trees with birds. Divina Flor also has a vision of Santiago Nasar holding a bouquet of roses, which would turn out to be similar to how he carries his intestines at the end of his life. Moreover, Clotilde Armenta, the proprietress of the milk shop, remembers Santiago as being dressed in “aluminum”: “He already looked like a ghost” (Garcia Marquez 2003: 15).

The narrator in the novel never explicitly states his own opinion about Santiago’s death, except when he says that Santiago died without understanding his own death, but even this opinion is shared by the whole community. This may seem to avoid engaging with moral and ethical issues of the murder. As seen in the varying and various statements of his neighbors, we never reach a satisfying resolution in understanding Santiago’s death. Perhaps the narrator stands as a representative of the community as well as the novel’s readers in witnessing death. In other words, the community and the novel’s readers identify themselves with Santiago Nasar despite the detachment the narrator tries to keep as a journalist.

Both the narrator and Santiago’s entire community seem to want to use his death to predict their own:

FOR YEARS we couldn’t talk about anything else. Our daily conduct, dominated then by so many linear habits, had suddenly begun to



spin around a single common anxiety. The cocks of dawn would catch us trying to give order to the chain of many chance events that had made absurdity possible, and it was obvious that we weren't doing it from an urge to clear up mysteries but because none of us could go on living without an exact knowledge of the place and the mission assigned to us by fate. (García Márquez 2003: 96-97)

The community has a need to position their own end alongside Santiago's in a much larger context ("assigned...by fate"), displaying the desire for conclusion. The whole novel, as the community's chronicle, is their attempt to have an understanding, or even a foretelling, of their own death. And this is evident when the narrator tells the unusual "future" of his neighbors, such as Flora Miguel, Santiago Nasar's fiancée, being prostituted after running away with a lieutenant, Aura Villeros, the midwife, who, after hearing Santiago's death, needs to use catheter to urinate, and Don Rogelio de la Flor, who is in good health, died after seeing Santiago's corpse. So how does one "go on living without an exact knowledge of the place and the mission assigned to (them) by fate?"

On the other hand, the corpse in "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World" is not part of the community of the islanders, but rather it becomes part of it. At first, the drowned man cannot fit in the community, not only for being dead, but because of his size. No bed can fit him, not even a table sturdy enough for his wake. However, Esteban the Corpse seeps into the everyday lives of the community. The naming of the corpse as "Esteban" is, in itself, an act of introducing the corpse into the community, as well as creating its own being. Though he cannot express his humanity (one may even say that he has already lost it after death), the community starts providing the corpse its own identity, thus starting the process of Esteban belonging to the community. In his death, Esteban and the whole community become alive. The community moves for the dead man, despite it not being able to move on its own. Though the corpse cannot partake in the community, the community thinks otherwise. Esteban both exists and does not exist because of the community's action, while death brings life into the community. In a way, the drowned man stabilizes and destabilizes the community.

In “O Beautiful Co-Spirit,” Pilar recalls the steps in preparing the dead: “*Labaran. Bestihan. Ayusan. Para hermosa*” (Bobis 2021: 5). Although Farah has invited Pilar specifically because she is Catholic, the ritual she does is not really connected to Catholicism, but rather a ceremony done by some Filipinos. After they learn that Lucia’s body is clean (“Labaran” or “wash”), they dress her up (“Bestihan” or “dress”) and then the story ends with an “ayusan” (“grooming”). However, as they do each of this step, Pilar remembers her past experience of helping her grandmother in the preparation of a dead body. The two then share brief moments of enlightenment when it comes their own cultures. Because of the silence of the room, Pilar and Farah seem to grapple in the dark for some connections beyond the room. They turn to language and see how certain words are similar in their native languages, like the word “kindness.” Farah says that it is “kebaikan” in Malay, and Pilar explains that in Bisaya it is “kabootan,” which literally means “co-spirit,” while also adding that it is “kagandahang-loob” (literally “beautiful inside” or “goodness”) in Filipino. In response, Farah whispers to Pilar that because of what Pilar has done now, she is Farah’s “beautiful co-spirit.” This talk about “beautiful co-spirit” echoes Nancy’s thoughts in the sense that the awkwardness between Farah and Pilar has dissipated and has given way to a small community.

### III. Conclusion

The aforementioned texts by Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez and Filipino author Merlinda Bobis depict the inoperative community through their sharing of experiences with death. As seen in both texts, the self (or the “I”) does not juxtapose itself with the other, but rather it is the “exposure” of the self toward the other. Nancy (1991: 29) states:

Only in this communication are singular beings given—without a bond *and* without communion, equally distant from any notion of connection or joining from the outside and from any notion of a common or fusional interiority. Communication is the constitutive

fact of an exposition to the outside that defines singularity. In its being, as its very being, singularity is exposed to the outside.

This is what Nancy calls “finitude compearing,” which is an act of sharing at the moment of awareness of one’s finitude. In both texts, the individuals are aware of the existence of other individuals, thus they become the other of the other. This intensifies in the moments of reminding themselves of their own finitude: the arrival of the drowned man’s corpse and the collective recollection of Santiago Nasar’s murder. Both texts then, though having the characteristics of magic realism, are vivid portrayals of the finitude of human being and the collective awareness of one’s finitude.

Both Gabriel García Márquez and Merlinda Bobis have the capacity to write narratives that seem out of this world, yet also very much similar to the world we know. This paper has tried to understand the García Márquez and Bobis’ understanding of community with the help of Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of inoperative community. García Márquez and Bobis seem to question our traditional understanding of community through their narratives. Though the texts are written under the magic realist genre, García Márquez and Bobis’s works are anchored in reality, as they mirror what we are as a community in the face of death.

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Multi-disciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies

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Freeman, Michael and Claude Jacques. 1999. *Ancient Ankor*. Bangkok: Asia Books.

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