

Issues of Literature, Language, and Identity in Southeast Asia: Poetry by Marjorie Evasco and Dư Thị Hoàn from a Feminist Perspective

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[*Abstract*]

At the dawn of the 20th century, Southeast Asian female poets increasingly delved into introspective reflections on gender, giving rise to a heightened self-awareness in their artistic contemplations. This shift in perspective brought forth numerous crucial topics for discussion, such as the historical role of female poets, women's experiences, feminine language, female voices, and female identity. The exploration of language has empowered female poets to discover a "third space" that allows them to exist and eliminate the pervasive gaps of women in Southeast Asia, creating social changes, fostering concepts of feminine culture, and establishing progressive social institutions. Marjorie Evasco (1953-) and Dư Thị Hoàn (1947 -) are exemplary representatives of contemporary Southeast Asian women's poetry due to their significant artistic contributions and pivotal roles in promoting feminist literature in their respective countries. This study compares their poetic works, focusing on three crucial aspects: self-awareness of femininity and feminism as an identity autonomy, writing between two languages to express their identities, and

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constructing the image of mother and motherhood from personal and historical perspectives. Hence, the article highlights that Southeast Asian female poets, throughout different historical contexts, persistently forge their identities and strive for equal footing with men in society. Also, their invaluable contributions have significantly enriched the feminist literary tradition in Asia.

Keywords: Marjorie Evasco, Du Thị Hoàn, Southeast Asian Women's Poetry, Feminist Literature

I . Introduction

In Southeast Asia, the field of gender studies has flourished as a vibrant and thriving academic discipline (Roces 2022), gaining significant momentum since the 1990s, with a particular focus on the presence and roles of women in discourses of state power and politics, including Linda K. Richter's *Some Thoughts on the Feminist Movement in Southeast Asian* (1957), Stevens' *Why Gender Matters in Southeast Asian Politics* (1991), Barbara Molony's *Feminism in Southeast Asia* (2016), Rumi Yasytake's *Restoring Women to History: Women in Asia* (2000), Barbara Andaya's *Studying Women and Gender in Southeast Asia* (2007), Susan Blackburn and Helen Ting's *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements* (2013), and Amara Raksasataya's *The Political Role of Southeast Asian Women* (1968). Numerous scholars have contributed to the documentation of the progress made by Southeast Asian women across a spectrum of disciplines, such as economics, politics, healthcare, religion, and culture: Theresa W. Devasahayam's *Gender Trends in Southeast Asia: Women Now, Women in the Future* (2009), Ong and Peletz's *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia* (1995), Theresa W. Devasahayam's *Gender Trends in Southeast Asia: Women Now, Women in the Future* (2009), Mina Roces's *Gender in Southeast Asia—Cambridge University Press* (2022), and Theresa W. Devasahayam's *Women and Politics in Southeast Asia: Navigating a Mans World* (2019). The fact shows that women have increasingly become significant political actors. The rapid expansion and development of feminist theory in many countries

around the world, including Southeast Asian nations, has fostered a dynamic and pioneering approach to literary works of women. In the scholarly work *The Southeast Asian Woman Writes Back: Gender, Identity, and Nation* by Grace V. S. Chin, Kathrina Mohd Daud (2018) pointed out the profound significance of literature as a symbolic realm for representation, expressions and political participation for socially marginalized voices, including women. According to Bhabha, literature is a “third space” that empowers women to choose and define their identities (2004). Women writers have expressed their perspectives on the world through their artistic practices, engaging with political and ideological contexts and addressing common pressing issues such as ecology, history, culture, and politics (see more Swastika 2023).

Viewing writing as a political act, a vehicle through which women writers give voice to assert a “feminised” textual domain, this article delves into a comparative analysis of the poetry of Marjorie Evasco (1953-), a renowned contemporary female poet in Philippine literature, and Du Thị Hoàn (1947-), a Vietnamese poet of Chinese descent. They are supposed to exemplify the essence of contemporary feminist literature in Southeast Asia in three pivotal respects, including feminist consciousness as identity autonomy, the expression of identity through writing in two languages, and the image construction of a mother and motherhood from personal and historical perspectives. The article then identifies the diverse ways that Southeast Asian women writers have used to “explore their identities” (Boehmer 2005) could be identified. Feminist theory is employed to read the poetry of Marjorie Evasco and Du Thị Hoàn not only because of the similarities in their inspirations, themes, and styles but also because of their mutual quest for identity: writing as a means of establishing female identity beyond the dominance of patriarchy, safeguarding against “exclusion” from history by male power. Their works “align with feminist theories that seek to balance power between genders and challenge male dominance in society and family structures” (Odfeminina 2023: 5154). Meanwhile, a feminist lens enables the interpretation of symbols employed by these poets to portray themselves and their world, thus delving into the unique expressions of feminine discourse in literature and

affirming the multifaceted nature of texts examined from transnational and diachronic perspectives.

II . Feminist Consciousness as Identity Autonomy

Throughout history, Southeast Asian women have encountered numerous challenges to enhance their status and secure equal political rights as men. This struggle has persisted for over a century, even with forming coalitions to assert their self-determination in both public and private spheres and striving towards the achievement of the goal that “Women have the same rights as men in law; rights of education, property and inheritance; the same rights of association and expression of opinion” (Santillan-Castrencia 1957: 64). Southeast Asian female writers have exerted tremendous efforts to explore, shape, and validate gender identity within the dynamic landscape of globalisation. Particularly, this article connects the concept of identity to the role of motherhood, one of the central issues in feminist studies. In the realm of “motherhood,” feminist scholars argue that the association of motherhood with women’s “nature” is linked to their biological and social roles as mothers (Bernard 1974; Chodorow 1978; McMahon 1995). Motherhood is “central to feminine identity” (Kelly 2009: 157). Women, as mothers, assume a critical role as “pivotal actors in the sphere of social reproduction” (Chodorow 1978). However, it is significant to acknowledge that women from diverse cultures may perceive and experience motherhood differently, directly influencing their identity formation. In alignment with Pranee Liamputtong, I endorse the perspective that “identity” serves as a “category of practice” through which women come to understand themselves as mothers (2006). Motherhood experiences are noted to enrich women’s “self-understanding” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 17) and, at the same time, hold the capacity to transform women’s identities (McMahon 1995). Hence, it is no coincidence that the tension between roles of women in public (attached to the nature of their professions) and in private (as wives and mothers) “has been persistently explored in literature across Southeast Asia, reflecting a common interest and concern in the

issue” (Chin and Daud 2018: 5)

Among the 11 Southeast Asian countries, the Philippines is widely recognized as hosting one of the most robust women’s movements worldwide (Roces 2012) and “having one of the smallest gender disparities in the world” (Casambre and Rood 2012). Since Filipino women were granted the right to vote in 1936, their formal involvement in contemporary politics as active participants in national legislatures and local government has become increasingly significant, particularly following the establishment of “The Declaration of Filipino Women”¹ (Friesen 1989: 679). Perhaps “they have transcended most of the social and cultural constraints that other Asian women have been subjected to in their respective societies” (Aguilar 1990: 39). As a result, they were able to achieve equal access to social issues alongside men even in areas such as freedom of speech, education, culture, and politics. Filipino women play a pivotal and multifaceted role in humanizing social life. Under her circumstances, she fulfilled many of her roles. As a married woman and mother, she embraced the “pure housewife” role, dedicating herself to household chores and child-rearing duties. She could also adopt the role of an “alternative breadwinner,” pursuing a career beyond the confines of her home to provide financial stability for her family (Perez 2011). Filipino women are widely recognized as among the most empowered and politically active individuals of their gender in Asia. Their trajectory towards increased visibility and influence within society can be partly attributed to their indispensable roles within the family unit (Odfeminina 2023: 5149). Although women’s equality in economic and political realms has seemed to be ensured, it is essential to

¹ “The Declaration of Filipino Women,” a sheet of paper, was printed to prepare for the Women’s Rally from March to October 1985. This Declaration advocated for the advancement of women’s rights and welfare, the promotion of family and children’s welfare, the creation of economic, political, and social conditions necessary for the meaningful realization of women’s rights, and the equal pay for men and women performing the same work and their equality before the law. In the institution of marriage, the management and disposition of property should be determined jointly by both husband and wife, and women should have the right to access maternity benefits without running the risk of losing their jobs due to pregnancy, etc. The impact of this Declaration has deeply resonated with Filipinos due to the rapid emergence of women’s organizations across the country in the 1980s (Friesen 1989).

acknowledge that achieving moral and cultural equality remains a goal to strive for. Literature is pivotal in empowering women to attain this goal through their literary works. Perhaps the most indelible mark was left by Angela Manalang Gloria with her poetry, which challenges the powerful narratives of Philippine nationalism and “pushes back against the constriction of Filipinas into the roles of dutiful mothers and wives” (Amorao 2018: 38). It can be affirmed that building upon the legacy of Angela Manalang Gloria² onwards, the next generation of female Filipino poets, including Marra PL. Lanot, Sarah Gambito, Maningning C. Miclat, and especially Marjorie Evasco have carried the torch of feminist literature in this country. Their contributions have gradually established a culturally equal status for women in Philippine society. Karim (1993) noted that there was an emerging consciousness of indigenous feminism that was distinct from Western experiences, deriving from attempts to evoke local systems of thought and behaviour. The literary works of Filipino women writers from the 1970s to the 1990s harmoniously intertwined elements of the earlier romantic tradition with a keen awareness of contemporary issues, “strengthened by a sense of regionalism and even feminism” (Dimalanta 2000: 315). They continually broadened the notion of what constitutes femininity in the realm of literary art, and the mission of feminist emancipation continued to be pursued by the “new women writers” (Albuero 1994: 224)—including Evasco. “Blood Remembering,” “At the Mirror’s Edge,” and “The Mound of Bones” by Evasco are three poems that capture the profound influence of the mother on the author, the daughter’s transition to become a mother, and the enduring bond of motherhood itself. Drawing from these poems, Judith C. Odfeminina observes that Evasco’s poetry often “depict women as loving mothers, responsible daughters, and strong individuals seeking independence and equality” (2023: 5154). In Evasco’s poetry, women play an essential yet culturally traditional role, often in a stance of reconciliation with the natural world. Therefore, ecofeminist aspects can be discerned in her poetry (Calabias 2023; Yu 2019). Evasco skillfully taps into indigenous and empowering

² Angela Manalang Gloria is famous for her influential poem, “Revolt from Hymen”, which stands as a powerful manifesto opposing patriarchalism.

sources of femininity to propel Philippine ecofeminism that is attuned to native and vernacular thought (Calabias 2023: 38). As both a writer and a mother, she endeavours to revive women's innate connection with nature, thereby paving the way for native Philippine ecofeminism (Calabias 2023: 42).

In 1987, the poetry collection *Dreamweavers* by Marjorie Evasco was published as a significant contribution to feminist literature that deeply resonated in Philippine society. This remarkable anthology opens with a heartfelt open letter of Evasco addressed to the late American feminist and Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa. In her letter, Evasco shared a poignant story about her aunts—four of her father's elder sisters, who had selflessly sacrificed their opportunities for higher education to take on manual labor jobs for rice and food to send their brothers to school (Evasco 1987). Evasco began "to learn how to see into the underside of the world" (Evasco 1987: 3) and "to understand the symbols of my forebears' language of daily struggle" (Evasco 1987: 3). At the same time, she felt an urgency to draw connections between the words and truths that she said out of her own life and the subterfuge poetry in the lives of many women (Evasco 1987) before her and in her own time. Evasco exhibits a profound understanding of gender and femininity, which aligns with her keen awareness of the existence of patriarchy, and the imperative need for women's solidarity to fight for equality in society. Drawing inspiration from the essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" by Hélène Cixous (1975), which convey the importance of women writing about themselves and actively bringing women to writing, Evasco shares a similar message that women should re-learn the wisdom of their bodies (Evasco 1987). In her arguments, Evasco aims for a global feminist perspective, believing that writing is a way of protesting against male power and defining women's identities. She also emphasizes the solidarity among women to eliminate the situation of being pushed to the periphery of things, rendering them invisible (Evasco 1987). Based on her own experiences, Evasco realized that the female body is inherently suited for creative endeavors. The work of female writers will significantly contribute to dismantling "the forces that break women up and apart from themselves, each other, and the rest of the world" (Evasco 1987: 5).

A prime example of this tendency is the poem “Caravan of the Waterbearers.” It can be seen as a call for women to unite against patriarchy. The poem vividly portrays water bearers on their arduous journey. They carry a long-standing cultural tradition, gathering strength in their resistance against male domination. In line 7, Evasco skillfully employed the singular form of the word “woman” to evoke a sense of isolation and solitude experienced by each woman (We have been trained to avert our gaze/ when man’s flesh, muscle, bone/ pierces woman, shielding/ the child’s eyes from the fallout/ of the lord’s transgressions/ upon our kind). However, in line 22, the shift from the singular form of “woman” to the plural one “women” signifies the collective unity and strength that emerges when women join forces together (We have joined the trek/ of desert women,/ humped over/ from carrying our own oases/ in the claypots of our lives,/ gathering broken shards we find/ in memory of those who went/ ahead of us, alone”). Typically, the term “rank” is commonly associated with men, but in line 29, Evasco purposefully employed the word “ranks” to describe groups of women and emphasize their collective strength: “When we seize the watersource/ our ranks will complete the circle.” Just as the imagery of water throughout this poem, waterbearers become potent symbols of tolerance, patience, fertility, as well as embodiments of “purity, wisdom, tolerance, and virtue” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1997: 70). Women, akin to the nature of water, have an innate inclination to come together and form connections. When they find the water source as a symbol of life and rejuvenation, “their ranks will complete the circle.” In this context, “the circle” metaphorically represents the profound solidarity among women in their collective resistance against male dominance. Evasco firmly believes that through unity, women could break free from being pushed to the periphery, rendering them “invisible” and separated from each other (Evasco 1987). The poem accentuates the value of women in their roles as pillars of strength and nurturers, “suggesting that women can lead and contribute equally in society” (Odfeminina 2023: 1554). Similar to the resilience of water bearers, Southeast Asian female writers throughout history have demonstrated an unwavering commitment to “writing our very blood on paper, validating our personal as well as our shared humanity” (Evasco 1987: 6),

continually raising hopes for a future society built upon democracy and equality.

Published in around the same period as *Dreamweavers*, the poem “Small Path” by Dư Thị Hoàn in 1988, marked a significant milestone in the awakening of feminism in Vietnamese women’s poetry during the Đổi Mới³ era (Renovation) (Nguyễn 2017). Born in Hai Phong in 1947, Dư Thị Hoàn (real name Vương Oanh Nhi) belonged to a Chinese immigrant family who came to Vietnam to settle. Vương Oanh Nhi’s father was the editor-in-chief of the Vietnamese news division of the *Cương Phong* newspaper—the sole mouthpiece of The Kuomintang of China (Chinese Nationalist Party) in Southeast Asia, which was located in Hai Phong during the era of French colonial rule (Nguyễn 2017). Dư Thị Hoàn embarked on her journey in the realm of art relatively late, at the age of 40 years old, coinciding with the transformative era, Đổi Mới, when artistic expressions were “freed” from certain constraints (Đoàn 2020b). In Vietnam, feminism and women’s roles have long been acknowledged in the cultural sphere, particularly receiving significant attention in the early twentieth century. However, from the Đổi Mới era onwards, with Việt Nam’s entry into the globalized world, Vietnamese literature found its place in the global literary landscape. Women emerged as agents of change in this transitional phase: “from being symbolic representations of a nationalized feminist perspective, both glorified and silenced, to become empowered voices and active participants taking action and engaging in the new life” (Đoàn 2020a: 168). Vietnamese women have experienced a remarkable transformation in their economic, political, and cultural roles. Women became empowered thanks to the fact that the women’s role as “the head of the household” has become legitimate within the dynamics of familial power, together with the expansion of their cultural and educational initiatives. As a result, women’s active participation directly impacts various

³ Đổi Mới is a comprehensive reform program implemented in Vietnam in the late 1980s to build a socialist-oriented market economy, especially in the economic and political fields. The reform process in Vietnam officially began at the 6th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (December 1986). Financial reform was carried out in parallel with other fields such as administration, politics, culture, education.

socio-cultural facets in society. From a particular standpoint, the economic reforms undertaken during the Đổi Mới era of Vietnam can be viewed as “gendered transformations” (Werner 2002: 443-463). During the early stage of the Đổi Mới era, Dư Thị Hoàn emerged as one of the pioneering female writers who broke free from traditional constraints and exhibited a remarkable spirit of renovation, compared with other contemporary female poets. She was seen as one of the trailblazers in a new era where individual spaces began to replace the social spaces dominated by the ravages of war. Through her writing, she skillfully represented individual voices on behalf of collective ones (Đoàn 2020a). Having stepped away from conventional poetic avenues to venture into the realm of the *Small Path*, Dư Thị Hoàn fearlessly asserted the voice of an independent individual through her verses which serve as powerful praise to the intrinsic beauty of the female self: “If given a chance/ To choose you as my model/ Gathering paint brushes for a grand contest/ In my arrogance, I’d rejoice/ You make artists surrender, in awe/ Your allure knows no limit/ Your beauty, unbounded by rules/ Unique elements, together they converge/ In your existence, creation comes alive” (“Mai”).⁴

Viewed from the perspective of the Doi Moi era, the aforementioned verse of Dư Thị Hoàn sparked a transformative shift in aesthetic perception. As Chu Văn Sơn beautifully articulated, “she boldly defied traditional norms seen as inherent standards to adhere to,” “embraced the uncommon rather than the conventional” (Chu 2001: 75), and showed respect for the truth and natural essence. The essence of this artistic statement lies in the sincerity of an independent individual—a rarity in Vietnamese poetry before the Đổi Mới era. Capturing the sentiments of Dư Thị Hoàn as she delved into *Vagina Monologues* of Eve Ensler, the prose poem “Feminism?”⁵ serves as a vivid exemplification of the originality

⁴ This poem was published in Dư Thị Hoàn. 1988. *Small Path*. Hai Phong: Hai Phong Literature and Art Association, pg. 7. Except for “Feminism?” (<https://www.tienve.org/home/authors/viewAuthors.do?action=show&authorId=907>), the other poems of Dư Thị Hoàn in this article are quoted from her two poetry collections: Dư Thị Hoàn. 1988. *Lối nhỏ*. [Small Path]. Hai Phong: Hai Phong Literature and Art Association; or Dư Thị Hoàn. 1993. *Bài mẫu giáo sáng thế* [Foundational Kindergarten Lessons]. Hanoi: Writers’ Association Publishing House.

inherent in this aesthetic concept. Viewing the female body as a text, Ensler's play *The Vagina Monologues* grants the vagina a voice to express the rich and creative experiences of femininity. In "I Was There in the Room," Ensler describes a woman's vagina in the process of becoming a mother—with the task of pregnancy and birth, as "an archaeological tunnel, a sacred vessel, a Venitian canal, a deep well with tiny jams." These depictions are a celebration of the mother's body in union with the vagina—a "miracle of creation," "the ultimate form of art reserved only for women" (Coulibaly 2016: 3076). Reusing the symbol "vagina" in Ensler's text, Du Thị Hoàn's "Feminism?" features the narrative of a woman who "escaped the torture sentence in her previous life, fled to this life" so that "no one would hunt her again." "Feminism?" is a narrative of a woman who "escaped the torture in her former life, running to this life" to "no longer be chased after by anyone." She has a "perfect figure" that also satisfies her creator, and men "respond collectively," "respectfully" escorting her to the altar. However, on the day that she expects her menstrual cycle, her body remains "clean and oddly vacant" due to her vagina being "trapped in her former life" while "sought after by men," turning it into being "subject to torture." In this poem, the "vagina" is deemed a metaphorical representation of female sexuality. It is a physical part of women's bodies and profoundly significant in their lives. It symbolizes the very essence of their identity, interweaving their past, present, and future. Meanwhile, "vagina" also not only symbolizes creative power and motherhood but also becomes a sign of sexuality, often subjected to attempts of male control. Therefore, by exploring the "vagina" as a subject to reflect on the presence of women in society, the poem of Du Thị Hoàn serves as a powerful testament to feminism. It becomes a call for the voices of the "female body" that have been suppressed or silenced in the male-dominated society, implying that understanding and acknowledging the female body can ignite compassion and foster a shared mission for positive changes in women's lives and the future of humanity.

⁵ Du Thị Hoàn, *Feminism?*, <https://www.tienvu.org/home/authors/viewAuthors.do?action=show&authorId=907>.

III. Embracing Bilingualism: A Pathway to Unveil Identity

In Southeast Asia, as in any male-dominated society, gendered spatial divisions often confine women to the private sphere. Thus, writing and publishing are vital avenues for Southeast Asian women to transcend these private domains and enter the public discourse. Through writing, they reclaim their identities, a sign of “rebellion” of women in the patriarchal society. Writing also empowers them to transition from passive listeners/readers to active speakers/creators. It resonates with Cixous’s call: “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing” (Cixous 1976), safeguarding against “exclusion” from history by male power. Accordingly, language stands as the most optimal instrument for celebrating female identity.

Evasco and Du Thị Hoàn emerged as prominent figures in the contemporary feminist literature of Vietnam and the Philippines, respectively. One of their notable shared experiences is that they both grew up and created their literary works under the influence of two languages and cultures. Indeed, the phenomenon of writers being able to use two or more languages is not uncommon in Southeast Asia. Notably, throughout the 20th century, various factors, including population migration, the political aftermath of colonialism, the rise of postmodernism, and the impact of globalization have contributed to a significant increase in bilingual writers (Kellman 2002: 7). Since the 1960s, writing in the English language has gained prominence in just the Philippines, compared to the 1950s. This transformation witnessed the emergence of some distinguished Filipino writers who skillfully navigated both English and Tagalog languages while some others could adeptly write in English and other local languages, such as Cirilo F. Bautista, Jose Y. Dalisay, Jr., Jose F. Lacaba, Marra PL. Lanot, Edgar B. Maranan, Soledad S. Reyes, Alfredo Navarro Salanga, Epifanio San Juan, Jr., Rolando S. Tinio, and Nicanor G. Tiongson, etc. (Cruz 1986). For bilingual writers, the choice of language to create is a political act (Burton et al. 1994). At the same time, the use of the vernacular language is employed to convey content, particularly in some subjects related to psychology, sociology, or messages about Filipino

nationalism. Emerging during the decades from the 1970s to the 1990s in Philippine literature, women writers embraced the practice of writing in both English and their mother tongues as a way to “emancipate” themselves, simultaneously addressing issues of class, race, gender, and other sociopolitical concerns (Albuero 1994: 224). Despite its initial introduction as a tool of cultural colonization, English also opened doors for Filipino women to access education and express their thoughts and ideas, which were often suppressed in traditional patriarchal systems. Amanda Solomon Amorao, in her work “Writing Against Patriarchal Philippine Nationalism: Angela Manalang Gloria’s *Revolt from Hymen*,” highlights the subversive role of English language and literature in creating a space for women writers to “write back”: “their implications in nation-building were not only expressed on the political stage but also in recurring themes identifiable in the body of women’s writings in English emerging at the time” (Amorao 2018: 31). Hence, the use of English by Evasco as a creative medium also serves as her contribution to perpetuating the feminist legacy initiated by Gloria. Besides, by choosing to write in Cebuano, a regional language that comes second in terms of popularity in the Philippines, Evasco actively confronts the marginalization of minority languages, preserves the unique cultural identity of indigenous peoples and shapes a profound connection with her ancestral roots and heritage (Evasco 1987).

Evasco highlights the inherent advantage of bilingual composition: “the possibilities and range of voices (personae) expanded, enriched by and rooted in two different cultural/literary traditions”, and asserts her role as a bilingual poet in the Philippines who can “take pride in being able to drink from two wellsprings” (2012). Like many other esteemed bilingual writers in the Philippines, Evasco found inspiration in the works of renowned authors, such as Shakespeare, Donne, Blake, Whitman, Dickinson, and Jorge Luis Borges, as well as fueled her love for the Cebuano literary tradition through the poetry of Tem Adlawan, Pantaleon Auman, Rene Amper, Adonis Dorado, Myke Obenieta, Cora Almerino, etc. It can be said that Evasco’s utilization of her mother tongue, Cebuano, in her literary works goes beyond merely the

respect of language use. It also holds significant ideological implications. Using a second language alongside the mother tongue can help the writer creatively express herself, mainly when “living among people who speak a language different from his own discovers after a while that he senses his native tongue in a new manner [...] new aspects and tonalities of the native tongue are discovered, for they stand out against the background of the language spoken in the new milieu” (Milosz 1994). Evasco claimed that while writing in English opens doors to the wider world, writing in her mother tongue is like a “journey back home”—a “difficult journey” but one that embraces “the intrinsic rightness” and promises “intangible rewards of the pilgrimage” (Evasco 1999). In her own words, Evasco describes the experience of writing in her native language: “Whenever I tried my hand at writing in my mother language, my ears curled like a child’s fingers around the vowels of a tongue I knew, but seemed to have forgotten how to dream in” (Evasco 1999). On the contrary, according to Isagani R. Cruz, Filipino writers use English to harness its melodious attributes. This idea is further emphasized by Marjorie Evasco herself when she stated that “crafting a poem is, for me, exploring a musical configuration” in which “my main instrument is the human voice (or the voices I hear), and its (their) capacity for aural inflexions and finely calibrated tones to render the textures of a complex human experience” (Evasco 2012). Music helps to bridge the gap between words, allowing sounds and images to blend seamlessly with their meanings. It weaves together the ancient narratives that encapsulate the cultural and historical layers of a nation, as beautifully expressed by Evasco: “At this watershed of words/ Silence is our breath and base for music/ When the dark tones of your voice/ Lay the gravel, my song will grow limbs/ Weave the oldest story with nimble feet” (“Dancing a Spell”).⁶

Language serves as the foundation for various expressions of identity, and writing emerges as a potent instrument for (re)shaping

⁶ “Dancing A Spell,” along with two other Evasco’s poems, “Elemental” and “Heron-Woman,” were anthologized in *Returning a Borrowed Tongue: An Anthology of Filipino and Filipino American Poetry* (1995). Nick Carbo (Editor). Coffee House Press; First Edition.

identity through discourse (Ivanić 2006). It enables writers “to both position ourselves to others and talk about the world” (Hyland 2012:17). For bi/multilingual writers, this has an even more significant resonance (Kibler 2017: 28). The coexistence of two languages in the artistic realm of Evasco and Dư Thị Hoàn has become their wellspring of inspiration, inner fortitude, and creativity. Bilingual writing can be seen as a strategic tool to transcend the constraints imposed by patriarchal society. Furthermore, this deliberate choice by the two poets stands as an affirmation of difference and cultural pluralism. The proficiency in utilizing two languages enables them to gain a deeper comprehension of the surrounding world, allowing them to perceive things from two distinct cultural and linguistic viewpoints. The process of writing is viewed as a bridge between two worlds, forging a robust connection that transcends spatial, cultural, and temporal boundaries. Pace Deleuze and Guattari, Evasco and Dư Thị Hoàn participate in the deterritorialization and reterritorialization process of languages through their bilingual writing to discover and forge novel artistic forms. The distinction lies in how Evasco and Dư Thị Hoàn approach the use of two languages in their works. Evasco employs both languages concurrently in her writing as a distinct style, establishing her own language code and her use of English, which can be seen as a continuation of the feminist tradition in Philippine literature since Gloria. Meanwhile, Dư Thị Hoàn, when faced with Chinese as his mother tongue and Vietnamese as his second language, chose Vietnamese as her primary writing language to fight against being “marginalized.” She identifies herself “as a pure Chinese descent with genealogy extending back seven generations in Vietnam” (Dư 2003). Dư Thị Hoàn was born and raised in Vietnam, and she was exposed to both cultures early (she studied at a prestigious high school in Hai Phong and only learned to spell Vietnamese at the age of eight) (Vũ 2018). Her love for the Vietnamese language blossomed when she heard her future husband, her Vietnamese teacher at the time, recite *Truyện Kiều* (*The Tale of Kieu*) in her seventh-grade year. Since then, she has become “fully immersed in a captivating world of the Vietnamese language that she found both simple and miraculous” (Dư 2003). In the poetic journey of Dư Thị Hoàn thus far, it is evident that she

has written only a relatively small number of poems in Chinese. Besides two officially published poems, including “A West Lake Tour” (西湖游) and “Melancholy of the Night-Blooming Cereus” (昙花哀),⁷ the majority of her works are written in Vietnamese, though with a possibility that there are more unpublished poems in Chinese (Du 2003). Composing mainly in her second language—Vietnamese—is both an active choice of freedom and identity for Du Thị Hoàn. In 1954-1955, the wave of anti-Chinese sentiment in Vietnam made her family end up in economic hardships (Nguyễn 2017). Having completed ten years of high school, Vương Oanh Nhi graduated from high school with the highest score in the high school exam of the 1965 class in the entire North, but her Chinese background prevented Vương Oanh Nhi from going straight to university. Not receiving a notice to go to university, Nhi applied to be a worker, a proactive way to improve her Chinese background to become a proletariat in the hope of being allowed for a correspondence study. The policies implemented by the Vietnamese government towards the Chinese-Vietnamese community resulted in numerous difficulties for her family, leading to a gradual decline in their living conditions. After the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, the anti-Chinese wave in Vietnam pushed Du Thị Hoàn’s family (32 years old at that time) into an arduous circumstance. She stopped being a worker and switched to other odd jobs to support her children because her husband (poet Trịnh Hoài Giang) was affected by anti-Chinese sentiment and also shunned his wife (Nguyễn 2017). Like “a child being kicked out of the crowd” (“Written for an old poet”), Du Thị Hoàn sees poetry as a spiritual fulcrum and poetry becomes a medicine to soothe the trauma in her soul. She made a choice of “not using the mother tongue” when composing poetry, but instead opted to express herself “in the language of the suffering people—Mom and you [siblings] have left behind” (“Letter from a Chinese”). This choice is a difficult and painful dilemma she faces: between her husband and children or her parents, between the Chinese or Vietnamese community, and between leaving or staying. As a woman of Chinese descent living in the Vietnamese community, Du

⁷ These two poems were published in Du Thị Hoàn. 1993. *Bài mẫu giáo sáng thế* [Foundational Kindergarten Lessons]. Hanoi: Writers’ Association Publishing House.

Thị Hoàn is a minority. As a woman of Chinese descent writing in Vietnamese, she becomes a minority of a minority. To avoid the risk of being repeatedly peripheralized, Du Thị Hoàn chose to write in Vietnamese (not Chinese—her mother tongue) as her main language. This is a political choice because it is the only way to connect her with Vietnamese culture and find a place in Vietnamese society. Obviously, Du Thị Hoàn's work quickly reached the public and received the attention of Vietnamese literary critics at that time because she wrote in Vietnamese, not Chinese. This is probably the most reasonable choice for her to stay in Vietnam and continue to write. This does not deny that she was under pressure from the political regime and linguistic ideologies of the community where she lived and worked in—as mentioned by Laitin: “working-class or unemployed immigrants have a strategic incentive to assimilate the language of their new home” to “get a decent job” and “make possible social mobility” for their children, at the same time preserve “the values, culture, and language of his homeland”—both goals can be ensured by “learns the language of the dominant group (1993: 59). As a result, the poetry of Du Thị Hoàn reveals a profound “dual identity”: reflecting the bicultural identity with the fusion of Chinese and Vietnamese cultures, while also embodying the bilingual characteristic as the foundation for shaping identity and expressing history and personal experiences. She candidly said, “The Chinese essence is not something I deliberately sought. It is the quintessence of the Vietnamese language that inspires and impassions me.” *Vuong Oanh Nhi* is the fusion of two cultures while *Du Thị Hoàn* is the outcome” (Du 2003). For Du Thị Hoàn, Chinese is “Lost Memory,” a place that retains “collective memory of a lost homeland, childhood, cultural identity due to the trauma of forced dispersion” (Naghibi 2009): “Ngu Cong’s wisdom in mastering the native tongue of a strange land/ night dreams of eight cranes traversing the sea/ long to become the Eight Immortals,” “I am the living proof of that influx of drifters/ hearing Fuxi casting the hexagram that night/ finding the forgotten genealogy book / counting the surviving ethnic groups / to the year of peace” (“Recitation of a Woman Roaming”). Fluctuating between the two cultures, Du Thị Hoàn's identity constantly produces and reproduces itself anew through transformations and differences (Hall 1990: 235).

She likened herself to “a moth diving straight into the pages” (“Untitled 2”), walking alone on “an unmarked journey” (“Roaming”), deeply sensing the profound tragedies and personal struggles in life: “Woman on a long path/ whichever season she seems not to exist” (“Roaming”). Language is a crucial concern for Du Thị Hoàn due to its significance as the poet’s primary instrument. Additionally, language is regarded as an essential element of ethnicity and culture, frequently used to differentiate one community from another. In this case, the Vietnamese language plays a vital role in establishing a connection between Du Thị Hoàn and the Vietnamese-speaking community. Vietnamese language is the cornerstone that enables Du Thị Hoàn to fully embrace her identity as a member of the Vietnamese nation, to acquire “cultural capital,” and adopt the thinking patterns that define her position within the community. It becomes the cornerstone of her identity. During the period marked by anti-Chinese sentiment, her decision to write in Vietnamese not only saved her from socio-linguistic isolation but also became a means of resisting the divisions that constantly threatened to marginalize her.

Evasco and Du Thị Hoàn engage in a dynamic exchange between two languages, not only in their poetry but also through the act of translation. Evasco perceives translation as more than just a means to appreciate the linguistic richness of both languages. She views it as a pathway to grasp the interconnectedness of poetic expressions within these two linguistic realms. Translators partake in one of humans’ paramount cognitive activities: reading and comprehending poetry. Poetry is a linguistic construction and a manifestation of cultural dynamics within the historical context. Thus, translation plays a vital role in the poetic journey of a bilingual poet. In the doctoral thesis *Poetry in Translation as Discourse: A Reconstructive Translation into Cebuano of Poetry in/from English by Contemporary Writers of the Central Visayas Region* (1998), Evasco translated twenty selected poems written in English by ten poets from the Central Visayas region, such as Cebu, Bohol, Negros Oriental, and Siquijor in the Philippines into Cebuano. Her main aim was to reinforce the significance of the mother tongue and cultural heritage that the colonial experience

and the dominance of English in the Philippines may have overshadowed. Through her work, she also aimed to open up a novel domain of interlingual translation practice between various regional languages in the Philippines, and also translation from the national languages (Filipino and English) into regional languages across the country. Meanwhile, in the case of Du Thị Hoàn, the presence of China persists through language as an enduring cultural heritage that is continuously inherited and revitalized through the acts of composition and translation. Initially, translation was just a way for Du Thị Hoàn to fill in the blanks of creative inspiration. Still, as she immersed herself in the practice of translation, she discovered a world of intriguing and enchanting experiences with words. Hence, “translation” was not merely an act of converting one language to another; it was actually a process of discovering, interpreting, and reinterpreting the world. She said, “I felt weightless as if I were on a space voyage. I am eager for the day of return, carrying with it the happiness and sorrows of celestial exploration” (Du 2003). Despite the limited number of published translations, mainly including some poetry translations into Chinese and the book *The Ugly Chinaman* (丑陋的中国人) under the pseudonym Nũ Lang Trung (Giấy vụn Publishing House, 2013), her translation efforts were driven by a commitment to deliver the finest translations to readers. She aimed to ensure that others would not need to undertake retranlations (Du 2003). Tracing “the bloodline to the Chinese community in the foreign land, including language, intonation, costumes, customs, and practices” (Du 2003), she was a cultural messenger to introduce Chinese literary works to the Vietnamese most effectively. To her, the Chinese language is not only the source language during the translation process but also the language of her ancestral heritage with the cultural icons of the Chinese nation, such as Fu Xi, Zhaojun, Qu Yuan, Li Bai, and others whom she paid homage to in her poetic works. It is evident that no matter whether Du Thị Hoàn has to “travel widely to all four corners of the world,” “leave the Loess Plateau, sow the seed in distress,” and go through many ups and downs, her Chinese heritage is preserved within her through language: “Childhood began amidst the flood season/ ceaseless are the letters of human (人), belonging to (之), beginning (初)/ mother’s lullaby/ weighty as the soul of days

gone by” (*Recitation of a woman roaming*). As Gadamer stated, true tradition is something we cannot escape; each individual is intrinsically intertwined with tradition, tradition is always part of us (Gadamer 1992).

IV. Discourse on Mothers and Motherhood from Personal and Historical Perspectives

As mentioned in part 2, motherhood is a central aspect of the female experience—both biologically and culturally—the subject and material for the writing of women poets, deeply connected to their identities. Throughout history, the mother’s role, prestige, and cultural status have been consistently emphasized. Mothers play a central role in the family, not only as caregivers and educators of their children but also as bearers of numerous other responsibilities. They are those shaping the moral and spiritual foundation of their families. Thus, during the 18th and 19th centuries, motherhood was idealized as the epitome of womanhood. It was considered a natural and instinctive aspect of humans, as children relied on their mothers for their upbringing and protection (Gotlib 1983). Some contemporary feminists, notably Adrienne Rich asserted that motherhood should be seen as an institution, a possible concern about feminism, and theoretically, a diverse academic field of study (Rich 1995). Rich’s distinction between institution and motherhood created the theoretical basis for further studies of motherhood. Andrea O’Reilly later developed the terms “motherhood” as an institution and mothering as an experience into a theoretical foundation for a meaningful and systematic analysis of the maternal instinct (O’Reilly 2010). Besides, the central feminist goal of Sara Ruddick’s study (1989) was to make the private political by connecting maternal thinking with a larger social dimension, a politics of peace, and a feminist perspective that identifies maternal thinking as an engaged and visionary standpoint (see Takševa 2018). In general, the mother-daughter relationship holds a central position within the scope of feminist theory, as it offers valuable insights into the role of mothers in their daughters’ lives, the relationship between mothers and daughters, and the broader impact of

motherhood on a woman's life (Irigaray 1993). Motherhood gives a positive image for women as they are often regarded as upholders of morality and social cohesion. Exploring the theme of motherhood enables us to recognize the significant role of female poets in history, the experiences of women, feminine language, female voice, and female identity. As Rachel Blau du Plessis highlighted, "motherhood is incredibly tangled, a space in which one is learning and changing all the time, understanding process in a new way. Thus motherhood leads to knowledge, to thinking, to literary thinking, and to poetics" (cited in Field 2005).

A recurring and significant theme found in the poetry books of Evasco and Du Thị Hoàn is the exploration of motherhood and the portrayal of mothers. It is understandable when considering that both Evasco and Du Thị Hoàn are mothers with profound personal experiences and insights into motherhood from a gender perspective. In their poetry, the experience of motherhood is perceived as more than just fulfilling a biological role in preserving the species. It is viewed as a multifaceted expression of femininity, allowing them to assert their true female essence.

Nurturing the bond of maternal love shared between mothers and daughters is a way of expressing women's subjectivity, and motherhood is regarded as a unifying factor that helps connect women. Adrienne Rich captures the profound nature of this connection, describing "that earliest enwrapment of one female body with another can sooner or later be denied or rejected felt as choking possessiveness, as rejection, trap, or taboo; but it is, in the beginning, the whole world" (Rich 1995: 218). Du Thị Hoàn has composed at least eight poems that touch upon the theme of motherhood, with "Ten Years of Crying"⁸ as one of the most notable about her mother's absence.

Why did you promise to return that night?
To lull your grandchildren into sleep
To tend the chickens with care
For me to work in the factory

⁸ Published in Du Thị Hoàn. 1988. *Lối nhỏ*. [Small Path]. Hai Phong: Hai Phong Literature and Art Association, pg. 44-46.

For my husband to toil away
Why didn't you tell me clearly?
Now you and me, on separate paths we tread.

The phenomenon of “absent mother,” as described by Francus, refers to a deceased mother who is no longer present in the development of her children (Gevirtz 2012). However, the mother's absence can be viewed as a punctuation mark to underscore her essential role and impact on her children's lives (Banks 2010). One way or another, the absence of Du Thị Hoàn's mother emphasizes the great need for her presence in Du Thị Hoàn's life and accentuates the void of loneliness left behind due to her mother's absence. During the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979, her mother and siblings embarked on a journey fleeing Vietnam due to the height of anti-Chinese sentiment. Her mother sought refuge in the US, while tragically, her two younger brothers went missing and were presumed dead while attempting to cross the border on a train. Meanwhile, her father was compelled to endure a gruelling nine-year stint in a re-education camp without any formal conviction, leaving profound traumas in her life (Du 2009). Thus, the poems of Du Thị Hoàn are captivating narratives that emerge from her “rememory” through skillfully weaving together the histories of her family, community, and her own experiences. “Ten Years of Crying” stands out as a poignant narrative that springs from the haunting memories of Du Thị Hoàn, who was seemingly “born in a restless sleep” (“Recitation of a Woman Roaming”), eternally trapped in an unsettled state of destiny. She consistently contemplates her cultural identity, and to her, “motherland” sometimes merely brings about a sense of nothingness within her (“I fell to my knees before the word of nothingness. Who are you?—“Motherland”). This artistic technique of structural repetition in this poem, such as “Why... you...”, “Will again...” and “Crying for...” evoke a swirling rhythm and a sense of torment, portraying the mental anguish within the daughter. Each subsequent verse intensifies the overwhelming feeling of loss due to the mother's absence, fueling the poet's grief to an exaggerated state: “For me to throw myself into your lap/ Weep until I'm breathless/ Weep for the sky to fall/ Weep for the power pole to collapse/ Weep for the rail tracks to be washed away/

Weep for the train's horn to be silenced/ Weep for hands to abandon the steering wheel/ Weep for the train not to dare roll...". The memory of the absent mother evokes a montage of vivid images, blending the past and present to create a temporal thread and a premonition of the future: "My mother tenderly caressed her nursing grandchild's cheek/ train whistles gently cradled the small dream in her arms/ with hesitation, she handed over to her in-law/ me and her sole grandchild/ and a few incomplete and influent Vietnamese sentences," "smartening up her cloth bag stitched from a pillowcase/ hurriedly leading two innocent sisters/ my mom stepped onto the final carriage...". The mother who fled in distress has vanished, and her existence was just confined to the painful echoes of memory. The poet's heart brimmed with excruciating pain since she was aware of that being the last goodbye. This helps to explain the sense of losing her roots, suffocation, and deprivation that the absence of the mother inflicted upon the daughter's soul. From Rabuzzi's perspective, mother-self is viewed as a binary-unity which is both two and one at the same time, thus her mother's absence caused a profound loss in the daughter's life. The poem vividly captures a raw and agonizing pain that she could not hold back, resulting in tearful exclamations that express her genuine anguish: "Why did you conceal it from me?/ That the train that night was the final one/ Carrying relatives across the Vietnam-China border/ That it marked the last moment/ Mom, I cannot bear this falsehood/ Mom!" Indeed because the significance of a mother in a child's life is undeniably profound, her absence can lead to potent psychological tragedies. Adrienne Rich referred to it as "the essential tragedy of women" (Rich 1995: 237), including themes of both life and death. The absence of the mother, whom Du Thị Hoàn knew she would never meet again, inflicted a lasting psychological fracture that permeated her entire existence later. Her poetry was born from the depths of those traumas (Du 2009).

The consistency observed in numerous poems about motherhood of many female poets lies in the connection between motherhood and mortality. One such example of "the absent mother" is also found in Evasco's composition titled "Mother's Death Anniversary."⁹ Through the evocative use of lyricism and

symbolism, this simple and beautiful poem encapsulates the spiritual odyssey of the mother's soul when the poet was guided by the illuminating candles lit in remembrance of her mother:

Comes now the time to light
Candles for the dearly dead;
Beacons for a homing flight
Out of her grave to your bed
In the trackless night.

Would she know her way
Into the light?
Will your prayers
Be her second sight?

According to Chodorow, the cyclical nature through which mothers pass down to their daughters what they have received from their own mothers creates a continuous and boundless flow in the experiences of the world (Chodorow 1991). In this context, motherhood becomes an intimate, sacred, and inseparable sentiment. It represents a tender, visceral, and profound connection involving freshness and blood between two physical beings, as one has spent "nine months and ten days" within the other while the other is born from that very same body. Promoting such a connection is heightened when the daughter is profoundly aware of her mother's essence within the depths of her own being (Chodorow 1991). In the poem above, Evasco delves into her quest for a connection between her own self and her deceased mother ("Your prayer will/ Be her second point of view") and perceives writing as a primary strategy for forging a connection with the soul of her departed mother, mitigating the sense of permanent separation inflicted by death. The symbolic act of "lighting a candle" bridges the spiritual gap between the poet and her deceased mother. In this context, the candle serves as a "signal" to her mom, beckoning the mother's soul to embark on "a homing flight." Despite being unable to behold her mother in a tangible form, the daughter's eyes find a

⁹ Marjorie Evasco. 1987. *Dreamweavers: Selected Poems 1976–1986*. Manila: Editorial and Media Resources.

means of communion through the language of the spirit (“prayer”). The daughter and her mother become united through a singular “sight.” These collective efforts of lighting candles and offering prayers are dedicated to perpetually sustaining the enduring bond between mother and daughter. The mother is the metaphorical “light source,” so the act of lighting a candle for light means rediscovering the presence of her mother once again. Also, “light” proves the most popular archetypal symbolism for sublime spirituality and spiritual qualities. As noted by Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant “Light consistently embodies life, salvation, and the divine blessings bestowed by God” (1997: 15). It is the radiant source that nurtures the sunlit world, the splendor and gentleness of the moon, as well as the life-giving fire that sustains humanity.

On the contrary, when it comes to the theme of motherhood, the exemplary humanitarian spirit of two remarkable female poets, Evasco and Du Thị Hoàn, shines through brilliantly. These poets exemplify an unwavering affection and genuine concern for women who find themselves oppressed, rendered voiceless, forgotten, trampled upon, or exploited. In her poem “The Creator” (1988), Du Thị Hoàn extols the exquisite beauty of a woman during childbirth—a beauty that evokes both pain (“pale”) and contentment (“relieved”), and refers to the mother at this moment as “the creator.” Through her verses, she discovers the allure of motherhood, the intricate connection between fertility and mortality, and the agony and joy that a mother endures during labour.

She lay pale and relieved on the delivery table
The midwife’s face radiated, in her hand.
A star
Startled, I turned around
Encountering her face which is hiding
The joy of illegitimate pregnancy

The poet uncovered and praised the true bliss of a mother who had recently given birth to a child under an extraordinary circumstance: “illegitimate pregnancy.” It is crucial to note that during the 1980s in Vietnam, societal prejudice against expectant women was deep-seated, yet from a compassionate perspective of

Dư Thị Hoàn, that mother was still “the creator” who created a human being and sowed the seeds of life. Despite being born out of wedlock, the newborn exuded radiant beauty, shining like “a star.” The new humanistic spirit of Dư Thị Hoàn is reflected in her reverence for the innate nature of humanity and life (honoring the mother’s body), even when it defies prevailing social prejudices and challenges societal aesthetic norms (illegitimate pregnancy). The poet wholeheartedly values authenticity, necessitating a departure from superficiality and rejecting colourful and flowery writing styles. This artistic conception boldly confronts the pervasive hypocrisy within society, challenging anti-humanist perspectives and the deep-rooted prejudices imposed upon women for generations. In general, the poetry of Dư Thị Hoàn, whether exploring the broader theme of women or delving into the realm of motherhood, consistently steer clear of idealized and romanticized writing styles. Instead, her words resound with a naked and even painful truth. Thus, if Dư Thị Hoàn’s poetry is perceived as a manifestation of “anguish,” “that anguish is ultimately the torment of the heart since it has to face pseudo-humanity, particularly within the sphere of her personal life which has turned her into the most direct and frequent victim” (Chu 2001).

Contemporary feminist critics, notably Cixous emphasize the significance of the body as the foundation for writing, thereby asserting the experiences of motherhood to influence the poetic expression of female writers. Similarly, Kristeva suggested that poetry, through rhythm, intonation, and echolocation, can establish a primal continuity that replicates or revitalizes the mother’s body. Relating Ba’i—an indigenous concept associated with the sea—“sea” with the symbolic meaning “as a mother” in the Philippine language, Jose Kervin Cesar B. Calabias argues that Ba’i is the feminine indigeneity principle underlying Evasco’s poetry. He also asserts that Ba’i converges Western ecofeminism with indigenous Filipino ideas of femininity, genealogy of female subjectivity, and women as mothers in Philippine literature. This indigenous feminine power “is mobilized as the sap of Evasco’s poetry” and “reconstituted as her creative agency” (Calabias 2023: 42). Evasco also believes that poetry about women’s motherhood often explores

the relationship between the female body and creativity. Evasco recalled, “I have remembered our mothers’ original language, the metaphors of connectedness” (1987: 4). In “Birthing Poems,”¹⁰ she vividly portrayed the agonizing sensations of a mother’s body as she gave life to a newborn baby:

This is the hushed hour,
the time of waking
to the distant hum
of the beginning song.
Inside the caves—
head, heart, belly—
the word-shapes
sound the interiors,
bats winging night
till light breaks through:
the rush of waterborne creatures
with heads, hearts, bellies
screaming my pain, full-
filling my body's
birthing places.

Simone de Beauvoir once stated that, biologically speaking, reproductive function poses a significant obstacle for women in their pursuit of freedom. However, women can lead a life of liberation by disregarding their reproductive role. Building upon this notion, Kristeva later underscored the importance of the mother’s role and its impact on the development of an individual. According to Kristeva, the mother’s body is an intermediary entity between nature and culture. Giving birth and embracing motherhood becomes a powerful affirmation of the unique essence of female existence (see more Zerilli 1992). In “Birthing Poems,” Evasco skillfully delves into the intricate nuances of birthing in a woman’s physical and emotional aspects. It is the mother’s pain during childbirth, which is vividly portrayed through detailed depictions of the body and the tumultuous state of both the physical being and emotions of the mother. Inside, the hidden was the “screaming my pain”. The

¹⁰ Marjorie Evasco. 1987. *Dreamweavers: Selected Poems 1976–1986*. Manila: Editorial and Media Resources.

phrase “head, heart, belly” is stressed twice, with the first time in the singular form representing an individual and the second time in the plural form as “heads, hearts, bellies,” referring to women as a collective group. The dynamic shifts of the world depicted through phrases, such as “the time of waking,” “the distant hum/ of the beginning song,” “bats winging night,” and “light breaks through” center around the transformations of an expectant mother’s body (“filling my body’s/ birthing places”). As Cixous asserted, “Giving birth is neither losing nor increasing. It’s adding to life another” (1976: 891). Inside the mother’s body, the fetus is connected to the mother and the world, one entity nested within another, forming an eternal flow of human life.

In addition, it can be seen that the poetry of Evasco and Du Thị Hoàn conveys the notion of motherhood as a wellspring of creativity and life sustenance. Childbearing, nurturing, and safeguarding are intrinsic attributes that have existed since the dawn of human history and are tied to women. Giving birth and embracing motherhood becomes a way of preserving eternal femininity. As Julia Kristeva observed, through “giving birth, the woman enters into contact with her mother; she becomes, she is her own mother; they are the same continuity differentiating itself” (1980: 239). In the poem “Tribute to the Woman Who Knits,” Du Thị Hoàn expresses her deep empathy for the confidence of a woman devotedly knitting through the night and embracing all the challenges without a complaint. Her sole purpose is to create a beanie for the little angel expected to arrive on Christmas. Through words, the poet skillfully paints a vivid picture of the woman knitting with patience and diligence, eagerly awaiting the moment of becoming a mother. Every stitch persists through the harshness of the “cavernous” winter night when her fingers were “numb with cold.” However, the “knitting needles continue their diligent work” to craft “a beautiful beanie/ for the little angel/ one day, it will be Christmas.”

I also sit and knit, like her
On a winter night,
Fingers numb with cold
The wool ball under my feet rolls faster,

Dwindling faster
In dreamy eyes,
Needles diligently knitting¹¹

The slow rhythm of the poem, the rolling motion of the wool ball, the echo of alliterative expressions (*dreamy, diligently, cavernous, beautiful, explicit*), the repetition of words (“faster”) and rhymes (“winter” and “numb with cold”) all beautifully evoke the very rhythm of the pregnant mother’s body—a circle of endless fertility. The line “I also sit and knit, like her” is an acknowledgement of the intersubjective connections that bind women together. Furthermore, it beautifully illustrates the deep-rooted interconnectedness between poetry writing and motherhood, both of which share cultural practices in the realm of motherhood. Du Thị Hoàn perceives the mother as a positive agent, a microcosm (humans) harmoniously connected to the macrocosm (the world). Within this microcosm (the mother) lies the capacity to carry another microcosm (the embryo of a child). Meanwhile, Evasco envisions the mother as a potent creative force. The mother embodies a remarkable “two-in-one” relationship, wherein the mother and the child form a “dual unity”. This concept becomes apparent in the poetic composition “Solsequiem”¹² of Evasco, inspired by the painting *Maternidad* by the Spanish cubist artist Picasso:

She had known ever since she felt
the miracle of his heart quickening in her,
it would end the way it began: her arms
gathering his hurt body again and again
into her indigo mantle, the shield of her love
bringing the world to complete silence.

Maternidad was painted by Picasso during his Blue period (1901-1904), an artistic phase dominated by shades of blue that exuded a melancholic yet calming tone, evoking a sense of

¹¹ Published in Dư Thị Hoàn. 1988. *Lối nhỏ*. [Small Path]. Hai Phong: Hai Phong Literature and Art Association. pg. 30.

¹² The verses in *Solsequiem* are quoted from: <https://www.galeriapaloma.com/la-maternidad-pablo-picasso>. (Accessed May 20, 2023)

tranquillity. The vivid blue of the mother's cloak harmonizes with the dark blue hue of the room's wall, creating a captivating contrast against the gentle, pale white of the boy's long-sleeved shirt. Evasco interprets Picasso's art as a portrayal of motherhood. The poet captures a tender scene in which a mother lovingly cradles her child in one of Picasso's paintings. In this poem, the mother's heart-wrenching fear emerges as she contemplates her child's mortality: "She had known ever since she felt/ the miracle of his heart quickening in her/ it would end the way it began." The mother embraces her son with "a frail body," and "her cloak transforms into a shield of her love" to guard him against the clutches of death. As she tenderly "bends down" to "soothe" her child, her very presence becomes a force that repels the looming threat of mortality to her child: "As she bent/to soothe him,/ death quietly slipped out/ and into the world's double horizon." It was "the shield of her love" to silently quell the forces of death. As we observe in Picasso's painting, the mother depicted in Evasco's poem holds a central position, much like a "woman at the center of a room/ mending a child's heart." With its unspoken power, motherhood can banish death's shadows and safeguard the entire world. This mother represents not only the mother of the poet herself but also the universal mother of human beings as a whole, who is capable of comforting an entire nation and healing the traumas embedded in their memory. Simultaneously, Evasco supposes a work of art can reflect the creator's soul. In this context, the artists' care for their world parallels the boundless love of a mother given to her child: "Picasso tends/ to the world before it completely shatters/ his hands shaping a small blue universe/ illuminating the script, enfleshing the Word." Picasso placed the woman at the very heart of the world, just before it shattered, then he crafted a universe immersed in the hue of blue which symbolizes spirit and mind (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1997: 15). The poet envisions the artist as a caretaker of the world, illuminating the universe much like a mother tenderly nurturing her child with boundless love. She echoes the words of Dostoevsky, who proclaimed that "Beauty will save the world," which means that art is capable of rescuing our world from an impending collapse. Indeed, Picasso's painting had a profound impact on Evasco's soul,

enlightening her about the tenderness of motherly love. The concluding line “clarifies the Word” is an allusion to the Christian scripture “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...” (John 1:1). The poem vividly draws a parallel between the artists’ noble mission and the role of Christ, portraying the artists as a savior and healer in their own rights.

In general, when a female poet narrates the tale of her mother, she simultaneously weaves her own story. The narrative is born from the other, while this story interweaves the other. This breaks the silence that often envelops the history of the mother’s existence while continually unearthing new poetic revelations. The nuanced portrayal of narratives surrounding mother and motherhood in the poetry of Evasco and Du Thị Hoàn exemplifies creations centered around this theme, akin to the flow of life. It constantly transforms, carrying intricate, abundant, and enchanting meanings within them.

V. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, feminism has significantly contributed to numerous accomplishments of women in modern times, one of which is the shaping and evolution of female poetry. Moving beyond the confines of individual and familial spheres, Southeast Asian women today are tirelessly pushing boundaries to engage directly in shaping national discourses. No longer confined to merely being a supportive entity for men, they have emerged as a dynamic force within society, fearlessly utilizing their stories to confront and challenge the prevailing dominance of patriarchal systems. As pioneers of feminist thought in poetry in two Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam and the Philippines, Du Thị Hoàn and Evasco laid a strong foundation for self-discovery in the female community through literature. This provided a transformative space that allowed marginalized groups, including women, people of color, and LGBTQ communities, to engage in political discourse actively. Du Thị Hoàn and Evasco are compelling exemplars of the emergence of modern female voices and transnational encounters in Southeast Asian literature during the post-colonial era. Southeast Asian women have shown

remarkable self-awareness regarding femininity and feminism. Rather than accepting a passive role as subjects of judgment, these female writers have fearlessly made their voices heard, instigating a transformative shift in the “cultural texts” that reflect their lived experiences. Through the narratives of their personal experiences, they continuously forge fresh perspectives on gender, reorganizing power dynamics in literature and society. Their self-advocacy serves as a driving force for them to assert and fight for their rightful presence in life. In doing so, the female writers exhibit a profound understanding of emerging issues in contemporary history, speaking up for those previously silenced amidst the dominance of male power. In general, using the juxtapositional model of comparative literature to compare Southeast Asian women’s poetry from the perspective of different schools of literary theory— including feminism—is a potential direction of interpretation. This research direction focuses on the interaction and dialogue between texts, thereby generating new meanings for writings in different countries, asserting that there is no spatial and historical separation between literatures of different languages. More importantly, by reading as collision (Saussy 2003), this method relocates the place, the status of being pushed to the margins and displaced (Kadir 1995), at the same time neutralizes the imperialist view expressed in the division of centre/periphery, developed world/undeveloped world, our world/others’ world, thereby affirming the role of the literature of Southeast Asian countries in the region and the world.

Acknowledgement

This research was funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED) under grant number 602.04-2023.01

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Received: February 17, 2024; Reviewed: June 15, 2024; Accepted: July 1, 2024