

THE EXILE STATUS OF THE VIETNAMESE IN SOME CONTEMPORARY PROSE WORKS

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Abstract: *In the last decades of the twentieth century, when the post-war life became extremely poor and backward, many Vietnamese thought of finding a "promised land" in Europe. Many others, for personal reasons such as going to school, following family reunification, changing the current living environment, etc., have also left the country. The truth was only uncovered when, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, many prose works of writers who had experienced life in Europe were published. Thereby, readers can imagine the hardships, suffering, feelings of loneliness, lack of friendship, and lack of homeland of those who have left the country and lived in foreign lands. In this article, we focus on analyzing and explaining the exile status and life of Vietnamese immigrants and expatriates expressed in contemporary prose, while conveying a message of warning to decisions to leave hastily, delusionally; and to elucidate new features of the human image in Vietnamese literature.*

Keywords: *Exile status, Vietnamese, Vietnamese prose, Contemporary Vietnamese prose.*

1. Introduction

In the 80s and 90s in Vietnam, going abroad to work for a living (labor export) became a trend that attracted many people. Most of the participants thought that this would help them get rich quickly and live a happier life. Many other people, for personal reasons such as studying, family reunification, being adopted by foreigners, etc., have also left their homeland. Those who stay also believe that the person who left had a really good life. Only around the beginning of the twenty-first century, when more and more prose works about the lives of Vietnamese people abroad appeared, did people gradually know the truth. Novels and short stories by writers Nguyen Van Tho, Nguyen Lam Thuy, Tran Dung, Le Ngoc Mai, Thuan, Doan Minh Phuong, etc. not only show their experiences, but also express descriptively and profoundly life of overseas Vietnamese. Would Vietnamese people easily face life in a foreign land? How did they have to change to adapt to the new life? What was the biggest tragedy they encountered on the way to exile? We will clarify these issues in the article.

2. Research contents

2.1. The "shocks" during the exile journey

In the past few decades, most Vietnamese people's going abroad is voluntary. However, a large part of them due to lack of information and understanding, or because of too much concentration on the purpose of making money, or because they

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believed in a promised land in the West, they do not fully imagine the danger of what they are doing. Thus, even the least requirement to ensure people's life in a certain community, which is the language of the host country, is only equipped hurriedly and carelessly. Necessary conditions for people to earn money are even less efficiently equipped. Leaving with almost empty hands, many people find it extremely difficult to live in other nations. Even in many cases, the mentioned deficiencies as well as the differences in language and culture have created terrible mental shocks, making many people dizzy and surprised.

Typical for this feature of the image of an immersing person are the characters in the novel *Quyên* by Nguyen Van Tho. Accepting to leave the family and the homeland to find the promising land with her husband, Quyên must have never imagined that she would lose track of her husband on the way through the border from Russia to Germany, and that she was left in the middle of the wild, cold forest, was detained by the smugglers, was raped and pregnant. Until she found her husband, she was rejected, scorned by her man, and finally has to end her life on her own. It can be said that Quyên is one of the typical examples for the tragedy of disillusioned exiles, presented quite vividly in the novel of Nguyen Van Tho.

Besides Quyên, the characters Hung, Dung, and Phi are all victims of hasty and thoughtless decisions. In the venturing process full of grit, almost none of Nguyen Van Tho's characters later did not notice the mistake, loss, regret, even, in some cases, the price it costs is a life. Bold and reckless as Hung is, at a weak moment he must also confess: "When people first went to the West, people were greedy and very excited. But the longer they live there, when all things have become boring, they need many other things greater than material. Yes, if I had money, I would be in Vietnam with my mother and my younger brother" (Nguyen, 2009, p.24). Dung lost his wife, when they met again, his wife was pregnant with someone else, was ridiculed by the Vietnamese community in the refugee camp, Dung couldn't stand that humiliation, so he rejected his wife and then went missing. Phi came to Germany with all the rustic, weird looks, by looking after the restaurant for his wife, he had the opportunity to meet Quyên and take care of her and her child. Because of his wife's contempt, Phi came to Quyên to share his loneliness and hope for comfort. At the moment when Quyên wanted to repay Phi for rescuing her with a gesture of affection, Phi's wife appeared. The scuffle occurred led to Phi, for protecting Quyên's mother and her child, was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to prison. Engagement, in these cases, is a misunderstanding and, of course, it leads to huge "shocks".

Another level of "venturing" is the reckless, end-of-the-road, blindfolding of those who have no other choice. The compositions of Tran Dung (*Men, Nam*), Nguyen Lam Thuy (*Last Day in Budapest, Gold Trade*) are about even more tragic tragedies.

The men (*Men*) (Tran, 2011), some of whom had been through the battlefields contaminated with Agent Orange, continue living and make life not too difficult, left the army, they signed up export labor to Germany. Of course, labor export was also not an easy thing to do in the mid-1980s twentieth century. However, in Germany, the beautiful

phrase “labor export” was estranged, especially after “the government of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany collapsed in large blocks”. The cultural disparity between the natives and the three Vietnamese immigrants makes “Fischi's words referring to “barbarians” and “lower class” are often heard openly on buses and in restaurants. Then: “In Pankow, a bunch of skinheads rehearse three Vietnamese laborers for a few blocks without any police intervention.” In that situation, Cuong - The main character of the short story *Men* - just realizes “the dream of making a lot of money in a completely legitimate way, is illusory”. In the end, despite the estrangement, contempt, even the dangers of life, those who leave for the purpose of making money have to do all the things that the natives saved for the people in the camp refugees like Cuong: finding the body of a millionaire in polluted waters, mining mercury, selling his kidney for as cheap as two buffaloes in his hometown, going to prison for hire according to the secret order of high-ranking officials, famous artists, footballers, murdering hires, exploiting plantations or working for a few years in extremely toxic places, working as soldiers somewhere, etc. Then even those deadly jobs sometimes become scarce, in order to have money to pay the debt at home, which is still expanding, Cuong and a fellow in the same situation recklessly accept to help the robot get into the power plant to solve the problem. The ending for Cuong is only one way of thinking after the writer's suggestion: “He put his hands to his mouth, vomited terribly. A flash of crimson fire rose up before his eyes, accompanied by a vague pain”.

Reading Tran Dung's stories, readers can realize the author's special concern for men - who have to make a very hard living in foreign lands. Not only do manual or unskilled workers have to expend their energy, but even educated people, in order to survive in a civilized country like England, also need to work hard, even exhaustedly. Nam (*Nam*) (Tran, 2010) graduates from a local university, but coming to England, he has to start all over again. The precious thing about Nam is a very extraordinary will and energy. Coming to the UK with only a C in English, Nam sets a goal to get a scholarship to a university - something that only “excellent Britons” dare to dream of. Therefore, the “race with thousands of young English-speaking boys from a young age” has exhausted Nam's strength. The day he receives the desired result, Nam “nearly broke a blood vessel in the brain. I saw dark and bruised surroundings”. After defending his graduation thesis, Nam is as thin and old as “an employee about to retire”. After graduating from school, striving “to maintain the position of chief engineer in one of the two London power departments”, Nam is like a few decades older, bald and his brain “almost forgot the origin of every action”. It can be said that, every step on the road to building a career in a foreign country, Nam has to pay the price with both the loss of his own feelings such as the love of husband - wife, father - children, and precious intangible assets. The price is strength and intelligence. However, unlike men who do manual labor, “venture” here more or less includes “concerns about seeking to develop personality”.

The short story *Last Day in Budapest* (Nguyen, 2011) is meant as a reportage documenting Long's extremely tragic journey of exile. The story is so real that people would rather think of it as a “real person” record rather than a short story. The fictional nature of the story can only be realized in the way the writer allows the character to relive

his entire life on his last day in Budapest. The last day in Budapest, also the first day after 7 years in Hungary, Long was able to peacefully admire this most beautiful city in Eastern Europe, and before that, Long did not know any other place but his house and market. In the stream of reminiscences, “How can Long forget the arduous, hard, and miserable winters, etc. there are days when it's minus 25°C with snow up to the knee, wearing 4 pants, 5 pairs of socks, and still having to wrap a blanket? Thin nylon layer to prevent water from seeping in, shoes must be 2 sizes larger to put on. Had to drink vodka hoptotch all day to fight the cold. Long's face was burned many times with blood and bruises”. Although the working conditions are very harsh, Long still has to work hard to have money to send back to the poor, widowed mother to pay the debt borrowed to take care of her children to work abroad. But the end of the years of wandering abroad for Long was a “death sentence”: Long has liver cancer - a disease that even modern medicine and kindness could not cure. On the last day in Budapest, looking at the clear blue Danube, Long remembers the Red River of his motherland in a picture both terrifying and soothing: “Just one more night, the way back is so long, the autumnal breeze blows, the sound of the bamboo poles charging, and there waits our old and slim mother... Oh, how is that quiet riverside village so predestined, so affectionate with Long, the place where Long was born and raised, now waiting for Long, to forever lull Long to a thousand-year sleep”.

Lan Chi (*Finding in Nostalgia*) despite having lived and studied for many years in Moscow, her second trip abroad to France with her is a journey of commitment with many potential uncertainties. In the first days of arriving in Paris, Lan Chi's life is really difficult. In addition to having to endure and overcome the harsh weather, Lan Chi is always filled with anxiety about an uncertain future: “Paris was then in late November, there was no snow like in Moscow. but it was cold, it was cloudy when it was sunny and it was raining. After walking around a few stores, buying a few things, I also started sneezing and runny nose. With this not-so-sweet first memory of the Paris weather, I boarded the train to the South, had a slight fever, restless, unsure of what was awaiting me in that strange city” (Le, 2003, p. 129). Anxiety often overwhelms the mind, causing people to fall into an almost deadlocked state: “I constantly wonder what I am doing in this strange and strange place?”.

In general, commitment in the common sense is a universal characteristic of most expatriates - people who come to live in other lands, not their own. Leaving, itself, is a very new experience, coming to a new land completely different from one's hometown is an even more severe challenge; therefore, surprise, embarrassment, panic, tripping, disappointment or desperation... are inevitable emotion states of exiles that have been vividly and hauntingly expressed in many prose works of the early twenty-first century.

2.2. Change as a sole option to adapt to a new life

In such a harsh living environment, in order to survive, Vietnamese immigrants were forced to change themselves to adapt to the situation. To be able to survive in a

civilized country like Germany, Phi (*Quyên*) is forced to give up many habits such as: standing in the middle of a bar talking as loudly as arguing, spiting everywhere, throwing meat and fish bones on the ashtray, etc. especially the habit of picking his nose. Giving up these habits is of course a positive change. However, to do them, for Phi, is also not easy: “To cure her husband of that bad habit, Thi created a large slogan in her bedroom: “I don't pick my nose”. Although Phi is really upset, he refrains because he is afraid that diners will leave the shop. But the hand that is used to picking is also difficult to give up. So every time he puts his hand on his nose to pick it up, remembering his wife's pitiful face, even if he puts his hand down, he has to pretend to strike his nose. Over time, his nose seems to be getting longer, and the wings of his nose have shrunk” (Nguyen, 2009, p.128). Besides those changes that are considered positive and appropriate, there are many changes that are not necessarily negative that still make people either very miserable (abandoning the habit of eating rice with boiled water spinach), or is very hard (learning German, practicing being a chef, etc.). Such changes, even if they give the Philippines more ability to adapt, are still not enough to create a new type of person, completely suitable for modern Western society. In Africa, it is not possible to have a makeover, at most it is just a mixture, patchwork, and grafting. Phi's life in a foreign land is therefore still full of uncertainties.

In addition to being forced to give up habits to adapt to new living conditions in a state of misery, pain and torment; Many people have actively absorbed the new as a satisfaction of the inevitable requirements of the law of survival. Phuc (*No one loves me*) (Mc Ammond Nguyen, 2011) after crossing the sea, losing his family at the age of eight, coming to Canada to become the adopted son of Mr. and Mrs. Thompson is like entering a strange planet with poor English thanks to a few months living in refugee camps learned. Yet, after ten years: “He swore to God, his Vietnamese language disappeared from what date, month, year he did not know. After ten years of leaving, he returned to Vietnam as a deaf and dumb man. Not only changing his voice, Phuc has to gradually change to integrate. Commencing with getting rid of his awkward name - Phuc (Canadian transliteration as Phac - a swear word), discarding the “Tran Van” and “Nguyen Thi” of the immigrants to use a new name - Daniel. Then Phuc learned to dress like a local. Even the appearance - the most difficult part for a person to change, is no longer original. Finally: “His driver's license, health insurance, bank account, the name Phuc is nowhere to be found”. The day he returns to his hometown after 10 years of separation, Phuc become very different: “The tall guy is like no other one in the family, the skin is white like a girl, the hair is brown, the shirt is short-sleeved. People are freaking out with jeans that hang over their knees, jagged fringes, and two huge holes in the back”.

Not only for the purpose of integration, many people also actively change to erase traces. In *Heaven's Gift* (Nguyen, 2014), a Vietnamese daughter in 7th grade in Germany does not want to go with her mother on the street because of shame. The reason is that her mother never memorizes a single German word, is “... every time she goes to the street, she sees Vietnamese people selling smuggled cigarettes, being chased by the police, running around, and even acquaintances of her parents' hand was locked in a car and taken to the station. Talking to the old man, she cried and kept asking: Why not other

people, but Vietnamese people? It can be seen that such drastic changes mostly appear in the young and adaptable class. Meanwhile, the first generation, either unable to adapt, or still wants to keep their old habits and roots. This has created conflicts that are not easily resolved between generations in many Vietnamese migrant families. That is also the reason why citizens are like bananas - bananas are yellow on the outside but white in the inside, always containing many tragedies, the biggest being the tragedy of lack of identity, the tragedy of "global citizens".

In general, using the realistic penmanship, the writers pointed out the inevitable change of Vietnamese characters in the new living situation. It's not a simple, one-way process especially for those who have lived an important part of their lives in their homeland. In other cases, the new living environment has changed people to the point where there is no trace of the homeland left. This creates a special feature of the image of an venturing person compared to the concept of people in other fields.

2.3. Finding the meaning of existence

Getting committed to finding the meaning of existence is the human concept with more or less nuances of existential philosophy. This concept can be clearly seen in the novels of Doan Minh Phuong and Thuan.

In Doan Minh Phuong's novels, the characters all begin their fate by leaving. But leaving, both in *And when the dust* and *Rain in the next life*, are not for the purposes of permanent living: to "find a husband" like Lien (*Paris 11 August*), to "do a doctoral thesis" and solve the current impasse in love and work in Hanoi like Lan Chi (*Finding in nostalgia*), to earn money to pay off debts like Long (*Last day in Budapest*)..., but to find the answer to the question: "Who am I?", to relieve a great anxiety about the essence, about life.

Unlike realism, existentialism does not describe people as products of circumstances, but the real conception of man is only in him and "only reality is valid, all dreams, waiting, and hopes can only define people as disillusioned, unfulfilled hopes, and useless waiting" (Loc, 2007, p. 926). The existential mark in Doan Minh Phuong's novels is expressed in the fact that the writer is not interested in describing and explaining how this personality trait was born or formed in a particular living environment. On the contrary, both *And when the dust* and *Rains in the Afterlife* give the reader a profound feeling that material existences such as war, money, morality, personality, crime, punishment, repentance, etc. - the issues that have long been thought of as very important, are not all of existence. The story of a sinful man (Mai's father) who causes serious emotional trauma to the women in the same family, causing each one to embrace a pain, a story that "must not be told" in *Rain in the Afterlife*; or stories about a woman who can be the mistress of many men in a family like the relationship between Miss Sophie and father and son Michael in *And when the dust* can become appealing and interesting topics in another discourse. Here, Mai does not have a word of complaint or judgment about the father's status, even after knowing all the facts, just as An Mi does not care about the disparaging words about Miss Sophie. In Doan Minh Phuong's art world, there is a more formidable existence: nothingness and destruction. Therefore, it is

possible to realize from that a concept of life that is not new, but it still needs to be repeated again and again: to be alive is to be happy and, all categories of human being are worthy of respect. This is very consistent with the spirit of existentialism: “Existentialism wants to create a category of human as the totality of values different from the material category” (Loc, 2007, p.928).

Another aspect of Doan Minh Phuong's existentialist-influenced conception of man is the depiction of human with a sense of “self-achievement”, awakening to self-consciousness of personal noble values". That is, people "must understand themselves directly without any intermediary” (Loc, 2007, p.928). To achieve that, Doan Minh Phuong's characters often have to risk themselves completely. In *And when the dust*, An Mi (An) departs in a state of serious mental trauma. It is the extreme panic after witnessing her mother's death due to bombs. The seven-year-old child has no idea about his future. She just knows she needs to be hurriedly escape from bombs, escape from death. Therefore, An Mi ignores even the urgent screams of her three-year-old sister. In this case, An Mi endangers herself completely to the call of her life instinct. Because that action could not be explained by the fact that An Mi is too young to understand the important thing that she had to take care of her sister, but because An Mi has absolutely no answer to the question of whether she is strong enough to protect her sister, will they be able to escape the bombs and bullets? Fully committed, An Mi becomes a free subject. But “Freedom” is not in the sense of “not being forbidden”, “not being held captive or enslaved” (Hoang, 2009, p. 1376), but “to be responsible for all one's own actions” (Loc, 2007, p. 920). From the act of leaving behind her little sister, becoming the adopted child of a German family, getting married, from the event of her husband died in a traffic accident until facing death, An Mi had to go through many fears. Even though there is no God that can change a person's fate, An Mi still believes in life instinct. Life with An Mi is a venture to find the answer to the question “Who am I?”. All answers from the objective side, with An Mi, are not satisfactory, not convincing. An Mi can never be Miss Sophie or Michael, but she can only be her, An - an orphan from a war-torn country who is longing to return to her origin, to herself. That is the most reasonable answer that An Mi has found for herself.

Also being an existential sense, but Thuan's tendency to research and express is not like Doan Minh Phuong. Thuan focuses on building absurd character types. “Absurd” has the usual meaning of “inconsistent with common sense” (Hoang, 2009, p.1000). “Absurd” is also an existential category proposed by Camus with the meaning of expressing "the inert, unconscious and tasteless appearance of life” (Tran, 2005, p.44). With this existential meaning, being aware of the absurdity and the nausea of life will help people to rise up, get out of “the state of things and objects to rise to the divinity of being free and self-responsible persons” (Tran, 2005, p. 44). In Thuan's novels, the character is described as both absurd in the common sense and irrational in the sense of existential philosophy. Typical is Lien (*Paris 11 August*) with full of contradictions inside people: never loved but tired of love story, never hoped but despaired, not contacted but experienced, not fully lived her whole life but wanted to die, very emotional but also very cold, sometimes very active but sometimes very indifferent, living in the present but always remembering the past... Putting Lien next to Mai Lan,

Thuan like wanting to highlight many other absurdities: ugly Lien, beautiful Mai Lan; Lien is clumsy, Mai Lan is clever; Lien has inferiority complex, Mai Lan is very confident... In general, in Thuan's opinion, the world is full of contradictions. For those in exile, this is even more evident. Whether coming from Vietnam or China, Czechoslovakia, Cuba, Lebanon, North Africa, Arabia, etc. the lives of immigrants in France are still full of instability and paradoxes. Paris is not the paradise that people dream of. Racism - a serious disease with no cure - here has brought immigrants into a dead end of despair. The absurdity in this case is not expressed only in paradoxes. The existential meaning of the image is the writer's expression of the tastelessness of life. Regardless of the circumstances, no matter who it may concern, Lien is still a meaningless entity. Struggling in loneliness, Lien can not find the meaning of life. There is nothing more beautiful to describe Lien than "silent", "not saying anything", "nodding", "nodding again", "shakes head", "doesn't understand", "silly", "embarrassed"... Lien's only weapon to defend herself when being "attacked" is two glaring eyes: ... "more than thirty years, the glare has become a reflex, Lien can't even replace it with a smile, or a wave of her hand, a smirk, a pout, or a curved nose. So she keeps glaring" (Thuan, 2005, p.129). When the weapon is no longer strong enough to protect Lien, with an empty soul, Lien looks desperately at the approaching death. But it is her *self-determination* to die, ending the nausea of an impersonal life that made Lien a unique person. Because when a man feels himself the absurdity of a state of "living meaninglessly" (se survivre) [JP Sartre's term], a mechanical life, living to exist, is when he is conscious profoundly of his existential uniqueness. Of course, in Lien, it is just a sudden consciousness. Lien does not have enough internal strength, does not have the unique abilities to take on the *solitude*, to see herself as a unique person. But there is one thing that, for sure, makes Lien a unique person in the reader's mind.

In *Chinatown*, the absurd is also evident in the status of the expatriates whether of Vietnamese or Chinese origin. It was a man of Chinese origin named Thuy who was born and raised in Hanoi but has no homeland: "Thuy's great-great-grandfather was born in Ho Nan. Thuy's great-grandfather Thuy was born in Ho Nan. Thuy's grandfather was born in Ho Nan. But Thuy was born in Yen Khe" (Thuan, 2009, p.23). It is a Hanoi girl who has a deep love affair with a Chinese guy who lived on Luong Ngoc Quyen street named Au Phuong Thuy, who had studies abroad in Russia, now lives in France, but her mind keeps haunting the image of Chinatown. It is a baby boy - the result of a Chinese-Vietnamese love affair - that in his mother's imagination: "At eighteen, he will have three nationalities: French nationality, Vietnamese nationality, Chinese nationality. At the age of eighteen he will represent Tai Feng in the Bay Area, and he will arrange for me a job as a translator in Baghdad" (Thuan, 2009, p.23). It can be seen that Thuy, the woman who calls herself "I" and their child are embodiments of so-called global citizens - citizens trapped between cultures. They can have up to three or four nationalities, but they cannot belong to any one country. That situation makes the exiles often suffer from many tragedies, the most painful of which is the tragedy of not having a fatherland, lacking a homeland.

3. Conclusion

Thus, it is clear that the truth about the life of Vietnamese people abroad is not quite as good as people think. The writers, in realistic style, have described very accurately and vividly, giving readers a fuller awareness of the reality of the lives of the Vietnamese who have left their homeland. It is not only the cultural difference that causes shocks, but also the hardship and threats to health and life. More deeply, with the perspective of existential philosophy, some writers such as Doan Minh Phuong and Thuan also express the tragedy of being broken, the tragedy of lack of affection, lack of homeland and country, which lead to the absurd state of existence. The descriptions and analysis, whether in the style of realism or existentialism, help readers see more deeply about the human destiny in the context of globalization. The expansion of understanding for readers through the above-mentioned kind of venturing person has both warning value and the value for enriching the image of human in contemporary Vietnamese literary works.

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