



MIGRATION TOPIC IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAMESE PROSE

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Abstract: This article intends to point out that migration is a very interesting topic for the literature, especially in the context of globalization. Migration leads to many cultural exchanges, but first of all creating cultural "clashes" and forming "global citizens". However, whether it is cultural exchange or beats, the migrations are still happening; and for many humans, it is an indispensable requirement for survival. In recent decades, this topic has been expressed by many Vietnamese writers. The writings of Nguyen Van Tho, Thuan, Mc Ammond Nguyen Thi Tu and other writers - Vietnamese writers who have been or are living in exile, have shown new insights into reality and Vietnamese people, in the context of exchange, integration with the world. By analyzing typical works on the subject of migration of the above-mentioned writers, this paper aims to help the readers to better understand one of the issues of all humanity in contemporary Vietnamese prose.

1. Introduction

Migration is not a completely new topic, but in the context of globalization nowadays it is promising to bring many achievements for Vietnamese literature as well as worldwide literature. In general, the works on the topic of migration has been the most successful in the literary sector.

In the early twenty first century, with both objective and subjective conditions, local readers have witnessed the emergence of many valuable prose writings on the topic of migration of the writers who have been living or writing in overseas. In particular, many works have been awarded as: *Walking under rain* (Pham Hai Anh) awarded by



the Vietnam Writers Association 2003, *Search in memory* (Le Ngoc Mai) prize B of the second novel contest; *Paris August 11* (Thuan) awarded by the Vietnam Writers Association 2006, *And when the ashes* (Do Minh Phuong) awarded of Vietnam Writers Association 2007, *Quyên* (Nguyen Van Tho) awarded of novels 2006-2009 prize of the Vietnam Writers Association. In addition to the prizes awarded, many studies have turned to this object as a rich potential new land. The remarkable achievement and also the most important contribution of contemporary Vietnamese prose on the subject of migration, in my opinion, is that it contributes to enrich and deepen the reader's perception of reality and Vietnamese people in the context of globalization. There are a lot of researches that focus on postmodern innovations of prose works on the subject of migration. However, from the aspect of new content contributions are not many, even not yet. This paper's aim is to help readers can better understand one of the global issues in contemporary Vietnamese prose.

2. Content

2.1. Migration is the root cause of conflicts, shocks and cultural interference

These "clashes" or "cultural conflicts" occur when migrants are placed in a completely different living environment. Instead of a thorough preparation before setting foot on the land, they - Vietnamese immigrants - largely for lack of information and understanding; or for a purpose they consider as more important, may not imagine all or in spite of the dangerous nature and the hardships of what you are doing. Therefore, even the minimum conditions to ensure that people can live in a community are the languages of the host countries that are only equipped in a hurry, sloppy, not reached necessary level. The condition for people to make money - the goal of the majority (exported labors) - is not fully equipped. People who went away with nothing, have extremely difficulties in life in other origins. Even in many cases, the lack of the above plus the *differences* (between himself and foreigners), has caused terrible shock, making many people stunned and dizzy. Representing this



content is the characters in *Quyên* novel of Nguyen Van Tho. Agreed to leave family and hometown to find the potential land with her husband, who is well- educated with love, Quyên must have never imagined one day she again lost her husband on the way from Russia to Germany. She dropped in the cold wilderness; raped by a smuggler, then pregnancy; until she escaped to find her husband; unfortunately, she was dumped and contemned by her husband, finally she found death to end a bitter humiliated life. It can be said that Quyên is one of the typical tragedies of disillusioned exiles, which are quite animated shown in Nguyen Van Tho's novel. The series of events that Quyên went through from the first footsteps on overseas can be reconstructed as an action movie where the main character is completely in a passive state, constantly stumbling, is buried, and do not know where the life gone (Nguyen T. V., 2009).

However, Quyên is not the only case, in the grim migration described by Nguyen Van Tho, there are Hung, Dung, Phi and many others. They all did not see what they have to experience in strange land. Dung lost his wife, then, when the wife was found she was pregnant with other man. The community in the refugee camp scolded him, thus Dung could not tolerate the humiliation and abandoned his wife and went away. Phi was a backward and primitive man who had chance to meet Quyên and took care of her and her baby because of looking after his wife's restaurant. Because of the wife contempt, Phi found Quyên to share the loneliness and hope for comfort. When Quyên wanted to repay Phi by making love, his wife suddenly appeared. After that, the incident occurred, Phi, because of protecting Quyên and her daughter he had to being manslaughter and sent to prison. Brisk and reckless as Hung, but he also confessed: "When they first go to overseas, people are pensive, very interested. The longer you live, the more material becomes, the more people need than the material. Yes, I would be in Vietnam with my mother and my brother if I had money" (Nguyen T. V., 2009).

It can be seen, "go abroad", it was a very new experience, but going to a completely different land from his home, is a more difficult contest. Therefore, surprise, sock,



embarrassment, panic, stumble, despair, etc. are the unavoidable mood. In addition to the novel by Nguyen Van Tho, the issue was mentioned in many other works such as *The men*, *Nam of Tran Dung*; *Last day in Budapest*, *Gold trading* of Nguyen Lam Thuy; *Search in memory* of Le Ngoc Mai, etc.

Besides the story of cultural conflict / "shock" in prose works on the topic of migration, there is also the story of the accretion, interference, cultural expansion. The highlight of humanbeing and beauty of *Quyên* is that Nguyen Van Tho has spent many pages talking about love inspite of the differences in color, customs, the language between Quyên and Kumar – a Sri Lankan man living in the Goldberg refugee camp. In the unpredictable difficult journey of *the pink cheeks*, not Hung, Dung, Phi, or Vietnamese immigrants in the same situation, with the empathy and shared with her bitter embarrassment; that is Kumar. That may be predestined affinity, is the arrangement of fate (all three times, Kumar appeared in right time), but more important is that go through many hopes and disappointments, sticking out and split with three Vietnamese men, finally, at the age of experienced enough to realize that she is no longer a simple and passive woman Quyên realized that Kumar is a man who she expected. The image of "a black guy who hugging a yellow-skinned girl with dark hair in a lovingly affectionate manner on the platform" could not make people think of anything other than a love that overlooks the differences between two people who come from very distant regions of the earth. It is also a cross-cultural story, but the short story of Van Tat Thang *The present* revealed a new interesting side. The writer Nguyen Van Tho, who has lived and wrote for many years in Germany, is very knowledgeable in the role of exile as well as knowledge of Vietnamese literature in Germany - quickly recognized this interesting point in Nguyen Tat Thang short stories (Van, 2015, pp. 1,14-15). "*In the lines of Vietnamese literature abroad, many writers have written about the friendship of the Vietnamese with the natives. Most of them described the prominent characteristic of the natives like Russians, Poles, Czechs and Germans with all kindness when they helped and maintained the Vietnamese exiles. Van Tat Thang, by contrast with the previous writer who usually simulate in*



one side, he spent emotional papers on both sides and make readers surprise at the end when the young Vietnamese man – character “I” – who gave a German couple a present on Christmas.” (Nguyen T. V., Where he wants to share, 2015). This work reminds readers of a rare novel in the early twentieth century that also mentions the same content: *Western Beauty* (1927) by Huynh Thi Bao Hoa. It has been shown that cultural interference in literature is not only an era topic but also it is historical.

2.2. Migration created "global citizens"

Facing differences in the new environment, in order to survive, Vietnamese immigrants were forced to change to adapt to circumstances. In *Quyen*, character Phi is a vocational teacher at a school near Hanoi, he followed his wife to Germany as a dependant (his wife is an exported labor, a guest-worker in the East Germany bulb factory). To be able to survive in that civilized country, Phi must gradually abandon many habits: standing in the middle of a bar talking as loud as arguing, spitting everywhere, throwing bone into ash-tray when eating and especially nose picking habit. Renunciation of these habits, of course, is a positive change. However, with Phi, it is not easy to do this. In addition, many changes are not necessarily negative, but they still make Phi very miserable and painstaking such as get rid of eating habits with boiled spinach or learn German and do the work of a chef to be able to own a restaurant. Although such changes give to Phi more adaptability, they are not enough to create a new kind of person that perfectly suited to modern Western society. He cannot change his nature. The mixture and patchwork that Phi gained does not make his life in the foreign land less insecure and lonely.

While many people are forced to give up their habits to adapt to new living conditions, many others are actively adopting the new as a response to the inevitable demands of the law of existence. Character Phuc in the story *No one loves me* (Mc Ammond Nguyen Thi Tu), after the sea voyage he lost his family when he was eight years old. He came to Canada and became adopted son of Mrs and Mr. Thompson, this was like going to a strange planet. In the first instance, Phuc knew only a few words of



English that he learned in several months in the refugee camp, after ten years, he completely forgot the Vietnamese language. Along with the change of speaking language, Phuc had to gradually "*change his look*" in order for integration. The first was to "*give up*" the awkward real name – Phuc (Canadian transcription is fuck - a curse), and made a break with "Tran Van" "Nguyen Thi" of migrants to use a new name: Daniel. In addition to learning English, Phuc learned how to dress like a native and finally in "*his driver's license, health insurance and bank account, nowhere uses the name Phuc*". Even his body shape - which is the most difficult part to change, is no longer the parent's birth. The day returning home after 10 years away, Phuc became very different: "*The tall man was not like anybody in the house, his skin was fair white, his hair was brown, he wore short-sleeved shirts. Everybody was frightened by the jeans hanged over his knees, the cuffs were brushy with two large holes in the back of the buttocks.*" (Mc Ammond, No one loves me, 2011).

Besides the purpose of "integration", many people want to change to remove their traces. In *The gift of heaven* (Nguyen Cong Tien), a Vietnamese daughter in seventh grade in Germany did not want to go with her mother when she was out in the street because of shame. The reason is that the mother did not know any German word, and "*whenever she went to the street, she witnessed the Vietnamese people selling illegal cigarettes, being chased by police, and there were also acquaintances of her parents whose hands were locked and were put in the car to the police station. Talking to him, she cried and kept asking: Why are not other people, but the Vietnamese?*" (Nguyen T. C., 2014). As can be seen, such drastic changes are more likely to occur in younger people who are more adaptable, while the first generation is either unable to adapt, or still wants to preserve their old tradition and origin. This created conflicts that were not easy to solve among generations in many Vietnamese immigrant families. Not only that, it is the root caused to the creation of citizens who are compared with banana – a kind of fruit that skin is yellow but the intestine is white, always contains in their heart many tragedies, in which the biggest tragedy is lacking



of identity cards and tragedy of the *global citizens*. The compositions of Mc Ammond Nguyen Thi Tu, Thuan, etc, expressed obsessively that pattern.

In *The smell of heaven* (Mc Ammond Nguyen Thi Tu), the little girl Tran Thi My Dung regarding nationality is a Canadian - Vietnamese. But this little citizen has not been recognized by her relatives even since she was not born yet: "*Her mother drank some Chinese medicine but she did not die*", "*Her father never told her mother about the suspicion of people in family, her father's friends and his own.*" (Mc Ammond, *The smell of heaven*, 2008). Because Dung is not the result of love: her mother married her father only because he is good at English, and that was a necessary condition to survive in this nation. Thus, her grandmother once said straight to her father: "*Who knows if she is your baby? The girl who escaped from the shelter in refugee camps could not believe*" (Mc Ammond, *The smell of heaven*, 2008). In that circumstance, the name that an uneducated mother from a poor village of West Go Cong gave to her - Tran Thi My Dung - became absurd in the class in Canada. Her parents fear that she is said to lose her origin, they forced her to learn Vietnamese and eat Vietnamese food. However, "*she said: braised fish was stinking, fish sauce was ill-smelling. Hue beef vermicelli she did not eat and said that the vermicelli stems is big like a pack of worms*" (Mc Ammond, *The smell of heaven*, 2008). To express a non-Vietnamese not the West food which she likes, she must use the English-Vietnamese dictionary: the wild mushroom has *smell of heaven*. In the third grade, her grandmother intervened and asked her father took her to church to baptize and enrolled her from public school to religious school, but she often blasphemed God as a heretic. Differences in language, culture and behavior caused to conflicts between her and her friends, teachers, and families repeatedly occur without anyone else on her side. It was only when she died in the forest of Cranberry fungus and her body was not intact, people took the rest of her body to test the DNA and knew that she was indeed her father's daughter. This means that it is too late for people to know where they belong to. Dung was completely trapped among different cultures.



In *Chinatown* of Thuan, irrationality and irony also exist in the status of immigrants. It is a Chinese man named Thuy who was born in Hanoi but he does not have homeland: *“his great-great-grandfather was born in Ho Nam. His great-grandfather was born in Ho Nam. His grandfather was born in Ho Nam, but, he was born in Yen Khe”* (Thuan, 2009, p. 23). It also is a girl in Hanoi who has a deep-rooted love with a Chinese man in Luong Ngoc Quyen Street named Au Phuong Thuy, who has studied in Russia and lives in France but his thought is always obsessed by Chinatown. And it is a boy - the result of the love between a Chinese and a Vietnamese – who is in the imagination of his mother: *“At the age of eighteen, he will have three nationalities: French, Vietnamese and Chinese. At age eighteen he would represent the Tai Feng Company in the Gulf, which would give me a translator job in Baghdad”* (Thuan, 2009, p. 23). In general, they are all *global citizens* – who were trapped among different cultures. They may have three or four nationalities, but they do not belong to any country. In Vietnam: *“Thuy has never put his foot into my house. My father opened the door and told him that I was busy with my study. My mother opened the door and told him I had a headache”* (Thuan, 2009, p. 24), *“Thuy told me that his parents wanted to see my parents. Although we did not have an engagement, the two families needed to meet once before the wedding. My mother told that she did not want to talk about my wedding. My mom was tired. My father was silent.(...).Twenty-three years we have known each other, Thuy seems to be not present tomy parents. Even Thuy's name was avoided by them* (Thuan, 2009, p. 57). In China, character “*l*” – a Vietnamese woman and the story-teller – an imagine that the great-great-father of eleven generations of my parents could be a Giao Chi people. In Paris, *“A year later in Paris, the white T-shirt employee in Cité island did not care about Thuy. In my extension card, only the name and date of birth of Thuy were written. I was afraid of not having enough information, I rushed to write more, she flicked her hand, she said to me that you should never think of bringing your husband to France.”* (Thuan, 2009, pp. 228-229). In that situation, immigrant status and non-nationality people either often have great deal of tragedies, or their mental states are very unstable.



3. Conclusion

It can be seen that the contents I have just analyzed above are new issues which If the writer limited in only "domestic space", they will be less interested or the issue will be harder to exploit. In the status of immigrants, Vietnamese overseas writers emotionally expressed the situation, posture and mood of the fugitives. In the context of "a boundless world" is becoming increasingly clear, this achievement not only broaden the reader's perception to the world, but also help them to prepare the necessities for the vast integration is coming very soon.

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