Biography

Born in central Vietnam in 1947, when that country was still a French colony, Duong Thu Huong (zhung tew huong) started her life with modest beginnings as the daughter of a schoolteacher mother and a father who was a tailor and guerilla fighter for Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh. As a teenager in the mid-1960’s, she joined the Communist Party, serving as the leader of a Communist youth brigade that, in part, provided entertainment for Communist troops during the Vietnam War. She was one of only three persons in the brigade of forty to survive the experience. Forever committed to and involved with politics, she also voluntarily joined the Vietnamese army in its brief war against China in 1979; she was the first woman to serve in combat on the front lines of the conflict. She also was a war correspondent and wrote news releases about the war. After the war, she wrote and spoke on behalf of the government and the Communist cause. During this time she supported herself primarily by writing fiction and screenplays.

In the early 1980’s, there was a major shift in her temperament and beliefs about the role of Communism in her country. She began to speak openly against corruption, bribery, chicanery, repression, and bureaucracy at public political events, as well as in her writings. During the decade she wrote three novels. The first two, Hành trình ngày thơ âu (1985; journey in childhood) and Bên kia bo oa vong: Tiên thuyêt (1988; Beyond Illusions, 2002), were not problematic for the government. In fact, at this time the government in Hanoi had called for writers in the country to comment about the nation’s social, economic, and political problems.

However, when she published Nhung thiên duong mù: Tiêu thuyêt (1988; Paradise of the Blind, 1993), she ran into trouble with government censors and mainline Communists. While no one thought the work to be overtly anti-Communist or antigovernment propaganda, it was too revealing of problems in its nuances and undertones. The two major objections from the government seem to have been the subtle comments about the role of women, both in Vietnamese society and in a Communist-controlled country, and about the government’s policy of land reform—the collective rather than private ownership of businesses and property. The work was extremely popular in Vietnam, where some forty thousand copies were sold before the novel was withdrawn and the government forbid it to be circulated. Ownership of the novel was declared illegal and punishable by imprisonment.

In addition, during the controversy about the novel, Duong committed a sin unpardonable by the Communist hierarchy, when she spoke openly for “pluralism,” meaning the recognition and legitimate involvement of political parties other than the Communist Party in the affairs of the nation. She also advocated for human rights in a manner that was unacceptable to the government. She was expelled from the Communist Party in 1989, and in April, 1991, she was arrested on fabricated charges and imprisoned without trial. Government officials accused her of having unsanctioned contacts with agents of foreign governments and of smuggling illegal documents out of the country. There was no substance to the charges, as Duong’s activities had always been open and public. During her seven months in prison, Duong was recognized by Amnesty International
and other organizations as a political prisoner. In addition, she was fired from her job as a screenwriter for the government-sanctioned Vietnam Film Company. Previously, she had been awarded prizes for her work with the organization.

Upon her release from prison in 1991, she found herself the subject of international attention and curiosity. *Paradise of the Blind* had been critically acclaimed, but the government then banned all of her works in Vietnam. However, her work was recognized and honored by other countries. In 1992 and 1996, two of her novels were short-listed for a French literary prize, the Prix Femina; in France, *Paradise of the Blind* was so well received that she was also given the title Chevalier of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government. In 1992, she received a grant from the United States-based Hammet-Hellman Foundation. In 1995, she sent another novel, *Tiêu thuyết vô đê* (1991), to publishers in France and England; an English translation, *Novel Without a Name*, was published in 1995.

Duong’s passport was revoked and other recriminations followed, primarily to prevent her from having contact with the outside world. Nevertheless, she was further honored with the International Dublin IMPAC Award in 1997, the Prince Claus Foundation Award in 1999, and the Grinzane Cavour Literary Award in 2005. In the spring of 2006, the Vietnamese government gave her permission to travel abroad, and she was interviewed by American novelist Robert Stone in New York City. That same year, she received the PEN-Novib Freedom of Expression Award.

In the early twenty-first century, Duong continued to write while in semiretirement in Hanoi, where she lived with her two children on a meager monthly pension from the government and the royalties from her work.

**Biography**

Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, Duong Thu Huong has been the most successful novelist to come from Vietnam, attracting readers both at home and abroad. As one who initially promoted Communism and fought it in two wars herself, she is uniquely qualified to expose the weaknesses of the failed system, which manifested themselves after the Vietnam War. All of her work is political, though she seldom directly attacks her country’s government as she does in *Paradise of the Blind*. The international attention her novels have received, as well as the numerous awards bestowed on them, proves her ability to write books that are not only political but also literary.

**Biography**

Duong Thu Huong was born in 1947, in Thai Binh, Vietnam, the daughter of Duong Dinh Chau, a North Vietnamese military officer who fought in the communist guerilla army against the French in the 1950s. Duong Thu Huong’s mother was Ngo Thuy Cham, a primary schoolteacher. Duong grew up in poverty and as a child often went hungry. She attended an arts college in Hanoi, studying music, dance, and painting. At this time she had no particular interest in literature and no desire to be a writer.

In 1968, during the Vietnam War (1959–75), Duong volunteered to lead a Communist Youth Brigade, an arts troupe that sang and put on the-atrical performances for the North Vietnamese troops. She served in this capacity for the next seven years, until the end of the war in 1975, when she traveled south to Saigon. While she was in Saigon she read some of the world’s great novelists, including Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, and Leo Tolstoy.

Returning to Hanoi, Duong became a screenwriter at a film studio but soon became disillusioned with life in the communist state. She started to write political pamphlets and protested against censorship, for which she was fired from her job. In 1979, however, Duong was one of the first women to volunteer for battle when
China invaded Vietnam. But her disillusionment with government corruption and repression increased in the 1980s, and she began to express her feelings and frustrations first by writing short stories and then through the medium of the novel.

Her first novel was *Beyond Illusions* (1987). It sold 60,000 copies and made her a well-known literary figure in Vietnam. *Paradise of the Blind* followed in 1988 (English translation, 1993), which was also a big seller in Vietnam. The novel was shortlisted for the Prix Fémina Étranger, 1992, and translations of it made Duong an internationally famous writer. However, the novel aroused the disapproval of the Vietnamese authorities, and Duong was expelled from the Communist Party in 1989. In the same year, her third novel, *Fragments of Lost Life*, appeared, which, like the first two, chronicled the disillusionment of ordinary Vietnamese with their political system.

In April 1991, Duong was arrested and imprisoned without trial for seven months for allegedly trying to smuggle secret documents out of the country. The document was in fact a manuscript of one of her own novels. A campaign by Amnesty International and others helped gain her release in November, 1991.

In 1994, Duong was allowed to travel to France, where she was awarded the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. She could have sought political asylum in France, but chose instead to return to Vietnam. Her passport was subsequently confiscated.

Duong’s other novels are *Novel without a Name* (1990; English translation, 1994), *Memories of a Pure Spring* (1997; English translation, 2000), and *No Man’s Land: A Novel* (2005). Her fame as a writer has helped her to avoid further imprisonment, but she has still faced harassment by the authorities, such as being followed by government agents and having her telephone tapped. As of 2005, she remains determined to continue writing, whatever the personal cost.

**Critical Essays: Analysis**

Since Duong Thu Huong’s novels were first translated into French, English, and other languages in the late 1980’s, she has been by far the most widely read and acclaimed writer from her native Vietnam. The success of her works lies in her ability to successfully intertwine themes that are both personal and political. It is hard to escape the omnipresent historical and biographical elements of her books; yet it would be misleading to interpret her novels by giving too much attention to these matters. She has lived her life amid the backdrop of the Vietnamese War; hence, this war is her subject matter. Similarly, the biographical elements of her life sometimes find their way into her fiction in heavy-handed ways. Nevertheless, the impetus of her efforts is neither historical nor biographical.

Of more importance are the political elements in her work, which are never far from the background of her plots and the lives of her characters. Originally, she used and developed her talents as a writer to promote the Communist cause in press releases from the front lines during the short Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979. Her writings during the early 1980’s were primarily her work for the Vietnam Film Company, a government organization.

However, by the time she wrote her first novel, *Hành trình ngày thơ ấu*, she had begun to expose weaknesses and failures of the Communist government after its takeover of Vietnam in 1975. She realized that the government, primarily because of its corruption and violations of human rights, was systematically making life worse for all citizens. In this first book, which is a novel of initiation, a twelve-year-old girl travels across the country to find her father, who is fighting in the war, to seek his help for a social problem—the abuse of one of her friends. The girl comes to see that justice cannot be found because of the war and the policies of the government, which are alluded to but not overtly condemned. Duong more forthrightly tackles this conflict.
between loyalty to government and loyalty to justice in her second work, Beyond Illusions, in which a young married couple is divided in the course of action for its life. Linh, the wife and Duong persona, is committed to doing what is right, despite the consequences. Her husband, Nguyen, on the other hand, betrays justice and human rights in order to secure favors for himself and to protect his family. Both novels were extremely popular in Vietnam during the 1980’s, and hundreds of thousands of copies were sold.

With the publication of Paradise of the Blind in 1988, however, Duong came into serious trouble with the government. While she followed her usual method of criticizing the government by criticizing individual members of the government, her exposé of the weaknesses of land reform was not visibly directed at the corruption of individual Communist Party members so much as at the established policy of the entire government. Accordingly, the work was banned in Vietnam, while becoming an international best-seller in Europe and North America. Readers will note that the comments about land reform in the novel are few in number and of little substance; nevertheless, the Communist government would not permit the novel’s circulation.

In Novel Without a Name, Duong again increased the scope and magnanimity of her attack on the government by writing what is basically an antiwar novel, but of course the war is the American war in Vietnam. She came to question the purpose of removing the capitalists and democrats from South Vietnam when the result was increased economic disaster and the loss of human rights for all citizens, whether in North or South Vietnam. The novel is told from the point of view of a young soldier in the army who is fighting for North Vietnam and comes to understand the futility of his efforts, even after his country’s victory. Duong creates another novel with a similar theme in Luu Ly (1997; Memories of a Pure Spring, 2000), which is the most biographical of her works and recalls many of her own experiences in Vietnam’s wars against the United States and China.

Ostensibly, she left war and politics behind in Chon vang (1999; No Man’s Land, 2005) by turning to the personal and internal conflicts of women. The main character, Mien, is happily married and living on a farm with her husband, when a previous husband whom she thought dead returns after an absence of fourteen years. Politics have not been completely omitted, however, as the returning husband represents the life that Mien could have had, in contrast to her current husband, who embodies the life she is living. In something of a national, disparate allegory, questioning what might have happened if South Vietnam had won the war, Duong suggests that things would be horrid, no matter which country won.

The bleakness and pessimism of the repeated themes of her work are abetted by the style of her prose. Many of her characters survive the atrocities of the war and its aftermath, but few are able to conquer or come even close to making peace with them. At times, she writes of Vietnam when life was war free and carefree, before the Communists and Americans wreaked havoc on the nation, and readers can find sentimentiality in these depictions of a time when life was good. However, she becomes less sentimental in depicting life during and after the war. While wartime is never good and people are victimized to the point of no return, many people do go on and find stability in their lives and in society. Duong’s characters, however, are never able to do this.

Typically, her novels unfold in the same way. In straightforward prose, she records a series of episodic events punctuated and advanced by dialogue. Food, both its preparation and consumption, is discussed in great detail in her work, which shows the importance of food in Vietnamese society. Events are recorded from the points of view of two or three main characters, each of whom has a personal agenda that represents some political truth, policy, or ideology. Evil triumphs, though the good survive to suffer.

Paradise of the Blind

Type of work: Novel

Growing up in Vietnam in the 1980’s, Hang is reared without any men, and her life is torn between two forceful and strong-willed women: her mother Que, who represents the failure of the Communists after the Vietnam War, and her Aunt Tam, who embodies the government that could and should have been.

Even the title of Duong’s third novel, Paradise of the Blind, is itself an attack on the Communist government which took over Vietnam after the country’s war with the United States ended in 1975. The novel has no “paradise” but exists only as a dystopia, and not one of the characters is blind. The title refers to Communist leaders, who publicly spoke of and pretended to create what they called a “peasants’ paradise” or a “workers’ paradise,” but were clearly failing in Vietnam, as they were in other Communist countries. There is no paradise; there are only blind people promoting a paradise based on a flawed political theory, which can never succeed.

Duong constructs this novel as a political allegory around the three main characters. Hang, the young girl who is experiencing a coming-of-age, represents postwar Vietnam, and the two women who control her represent the political struggle occurring in Vietnam after the Vietnam War. Hang’s mother, Que, is the traditional Vietnamese who has “lost” after acquiescing to the circumstances of the war by giving herself over to the will of the Communists. She does this literally in the plot when she sends her husband off into hiding. The other woman, Aunt Tam, the sister of Hang’s exiled father, represents capitalism and democracy, but she also cannot succeed; she can only maneuver and buy into the corruption and bribery of the political and economic system in various ways as the plot enfolds.

At the end of the novel, Que loses her leg in a freak accident that is not her fault, and is left handicapped forever. Tam simply dies from hard work and her inability to make peace and survive within the Communist system. Both women spend their lives hating each other and maneuvering for the love and attention of Hang, and in so doing they destroy any chance Hang has for a successful, happy, and peaceful future. Such is the state of Vietnam.

Similarly, the two main male characters in the novel are also allegorical figures. Hang’s father, Ton, is an honorable, French-educated, intelligent, handsome, and resourceful schoolteacher. He is the French-American male power figure who would change the country’s government into a democracy with freedom, human rights, and capitalism. In contrast with him, his brother-in-law, Que’s brother Chinh, is a Communist who espouses a great ideology but behaves with little morality. He fails to take care of his family, and he ruins Que’s chance for happiness by forcing her to drive her own husband, Ton, into exile in the north. Here, Ton takes refuge among the Hmong, a traditional Vietnamese tribal minority, who take him in and provide shelter and safety. Ton eventually kills himself after a failed attempt to take care of his wife and daughter. His death represents the passing possibility of Vietnam’s political identity and success as a Western-style democracy.

Uncle Chinh, the Communist character, turns into the villain of the novel, with little or no goodness to his credit. Living in Russia, he survives there as something of a lackey and servant to foreign students at a university. After Hang completes her college education, paid for entirely by Aunt Tam, she, too, visits Russia as a “guest worker,” where she is summoned to see her uncle. Here he betrays her and leaves her in a room with a group of Russian men, who presumably rape her after he exits, though the narrative does not explicitly record this. Though absent from most of Hang’s daily life, Chinh is always somewhere in the background, causing trouble, and he surfaces only when he needs something from Tam, which usually turns out to be the money that she has earned, penny by penny, as a street vendor. Duong’s meaning is entirely clear: Uncle Chinh represents the greed and corruption of the Communist government.

Duong does not provide a chronological narrative of all of these events. Rather, the novel begins late in the action, when Hang is living in Russia and is summoned to visit Uncle Chinh. Hang visits him out of
obedience to the traditional Vietnamese values of families, but she does so to her own detriment. Again, the political commentary shows how following the ways of the past will damn Vietnam as effectively as trying to make Communism work or resurrecting the ideals of the French and Americans. As Hang travels within Russia to find her uncle, Duong provides numerous flashbacks of Hang’s childhood in order to reveal the political intrigue surrounding the main character.

Vietnamese government censors objected to this novel, but their concern was probably not with its underlying political allegory. In her first two novels, Duong had written of the problems in the country, and her Communist characters did not fare well, but she was not subjected to censorship. However, in the first chapters of *Paradise of the Blind*, she explicitly focuses on one particular aspect of Communist ideology: land reform. Duong reveals several important ways in which everyone was victimized by this so-called reform and how no one benefited from it. It is noteworthy that the government itself gave up on land reform about the same time that the novel appeared. The Communists were evidently willing to change a misguided policy, but they were not willing for their policy to be publicly criticized in Duong’s novel.

**Analysis: Discussion Topics**

The Communist government of Vietnam banned Duong Thu Huong’s book *Paradise of the Blind* shortly after its publication. Find specific instances in the text which would have been objectionable to the Communist censors.

The women in *Paradise of the Blind* are all subservient to the wishes and commands of the men in their families. Show how this is true for the three main characters—Hang, Tam, and Que.

Find several instances in the novel where capitalism and free enterprise are in contrast to the principles of Communism as a political theory.

Look closely at chapter 6 in *Paradise of the Blind*, in which the families celebrate the most important holiday on the Vietnamese calendar, Tet. What are the particular traditions, such as food, that are part of the celebration?

The novel has three main settings: Hanoi, the countryside village, and Russia. How do the respective settings abet meaning and character development?

Food is central to life and culture in Vietnam. Find episodes where the preparation and consumption of food reveal this centrality.

The author uses flashbacks throughout the narrative not only to recall events from Hang’s childhood but also to explain events before her birth. Locate instances of this and speculate about why Duong did not provide a straightforward, chronological narrative.

At the end of the novel, translators have provided “A Glossary of Vietnamese Food and Cultural Terms” in the English translation. Tie specific entries in the glossary to occurrences in the plot.

**Bibliography**


