Summary

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.

**Additional Summary: Summary**

**Chapters 1-3**

*Paradise of the Blind* begins in the 1980s. Hang, a young Vietnamese woman receives a telegram telling her to visit her uncle, who is very ill, in Moscow. Hang works in a textile factory in Russia, thousands of miles from Moscow. The account of her train journey to Moscow is then interspersed with her reminiscences of her childhood and adolescence in Vietnam and the earlier history of her family.

Que, Hang’s mother, lives alone in a village after the death of her parents. When she is twenty she marries Ton, a schoolteacher. They are happy together for nearly two years, until Que’s brother Chinh returns, in about 1956. He has been fighting with the communists, who now run the country. Chinh forbids Que to speak to Ton because his family are landlords and are therefore enemies of the peasantry. They belong to what Chinh calls the exploiting class, who must be denounced and punished. Such denunciations are carried out in front of all the villagers. All the landowners are denounced, and their land is confiscated, which includes Que’s sister-in-law Tam and her grandmother Nhieu. However, Hang’s father escapes. Que is left alone; Chinh will not even let her talk to Tam. Distressed, Que disappears from the village for six months, during which Chinh also leaves.

Some years later, the land reforms, which have been a failure, are rescinded. The Special Section for the Rectification of Errors arrives in the village, and at public gatherings the villagers vent their grievances over the injustices they suffered. Que is a target for vengeance, because Chinh is her brother, but Tam protects her.

On the train ride to Moscow, Hang recalls a visit she made with a friend to Kiev and then returns to the family story. Her mother could no longer live in the village and leaves for Hanoi, where she lives in a working-class slum and makes a living as a street vendor. Ten years later, Hang is born. She grows up miserable and lonely,
knowing nothing about her father, since her mother refuses to answer her questions.

When Hang is nine, Uncle Chinh returns. It is ten years since he and his sister have seen each other. Que invites her neighbors to meet him, and they are all impressed that he is responsible for ideological education in a northern province. Chinh reproaches Que for being a street vendor, since he thinks such people are members of the bourgeoisie who are enemies of the revolution. He says he will get her a job in a factory, even though she does not want one. The real reason for Chinh's visit is that he wants his share of the money from the sale of their parents' house. Que takes Hang to the village to get the money.

Chapters 4-6

Finally, Hang's mother tells her the story of her father. Ton flees the village and finds shelter at the home of the parents of a former student of his. They ask him to leave quickly, however, because it is dangerous for them to harbor strangers. Ton takes a three-day trip up the river in a sampan. Eventually he arrives in a Muong minority region, where he settles down and marries again, becoming the son-in-law of the village vice president. He teaches the village children, and his wife bears him two sons. After six years, a traveling salesman stops at the village, and it transpires that he knows Hang's mother. Ton visits her in Hanoi, and that is when Hang is conceived.

Hang next recalls a visit she and her mother made to Aunt Tam, who has become rich. It is the first time Hang has met her aunt, and Tam tells the story of how she survived after she was evicted from her house. During the Rectification of Errors, her house was restored to her as well as her five acres of rice paddy fields. She tells of what happened to Ton. After visiting Que, he returned to the Muong village and his wife, but she refused him permission to visit Que again and to care for his child. Feeling shamed, Ton drowned himself in a river. Tam has not forgiven Chinh for his persecution of her brother.

Back in the present, Hang recalls a quarrel with her roommates in Russia over a lost sewing machine, before returning to her childhood memories. She recalls how, as she and her mother are about to return to Hanoi, Aunt Tam showers her with love and gives her gold earrings. It is an unsuitable gift for a nine-year-old and it makes Hang feel uncomfortable.

When they are back in Hanoi, Uncle Chinh visits and tells Que that he has found her a job as a clerk in the office of a factory. But she refuses to accept it. After Chinh leaves, Que is depressed but is comforted by her neighbor, Neighbor Vi. During Tet, the national holiday celebrating the Lunar New Year, Aunt Tam arrives, bringing huge provisions as a gift for Hang. She also gives Hang money.

A year or so passes, and Que and Hang visit Uncle Chinh and his wife and two young sons. They believe Chinh has recently been very sick, but he denies it, although he is clearly undernourished.

Que discovers a new purpose in life by sending gifts to her two young nephews, even though she is robbed of everything she has at her vendor's stall. At Tet, she takes more gifts for the boys, but Hang does not enjoy the visit and decides she will never visit her uncle again. Meanwhile, Aunt Tam showers gifts on Hang, who is now a teenager.

Chapters 7-9

Hang remembers when Aunt Tam stayed at their house, looking after Hang as she studied for her college entrance exams. Because Aunt Tam is looking after Hang, Hang's mother becomes indifferent to her. Hang tries to win back her love, while Que seeks acceptance from Uncle Chinh's family. Hang goes to stay with her aunt for a week, where she enjoys the feasts that Aunt Tam prepares. At one banquet, almost the entire village is invited, including Duong, the village vice president, who is hated for his high-handed behavior. Aunt Tam
criticizes him to his face about an incident in which a man was arrested without a warrant. She says the man's only crime was that he insulted Duong and the Party secretary. Aunt Tam then tells stories about wise and foolish leaders in Vietnamese history, which everyone enjoys except Duong. Embarrassed by Aunt Tam's taunting of him, he makes an early departure.

Hang reveals that this is not her first trip to Moscow to see her uncle, who visits Moscow on government business. She saw him there a year ago and discovered that he makes money by trading on the black market.

**Chapters 10-12**

Ten days after the banquet, Hang returns to live with her mother and also to attend the university. She is happy for a while, but then Chinh falls ill with diabetes. He needs American medicine, and Que makes sacrifices in order to provide it. As a result, she and Hang do not have enough to eat. Hang wants to sell one of the rings that Aunt Tam gave her, but her mother will not let her. Aunt Tam finds out about the situation and demands her gifts back. She refuses to allow her money to be used to help Chinh, whom she regards as a mortal enemy of her family. After this, Hang's relationship with her mother deteriorates, and during a quarrel her mother throws her out of the house. For a while Hang stays at a dormitory in her high school while she continues her college education, supported by Aunt Tam. But then her mother is hit by a car, and her leg is amputated. Hang visits her in the hospital and they are reconciled. Hang discontinues her studies and takes a job in Russia, so she can support her mother.

Back in the present, Hang arrives in Moscow. Uncle Chinh is no longer in the hospital but is staying at the apartment of Mr. Khoa, a Vietnamese graduate student. She finds Chinh alone in Khoa's room. It turns out that he works for Khoa and two other Vietnamese students, cooking and housekeeping for them. When the men return, they do not treat him well. When he is not there they speak mockingly about him, and the one Hang calls the Bohemian picks an argument with him over his practice of enforcing Communist Party orthodoxy. The next morning, the Bohemian gives Hang money to cover shipping expenses for Chinh's black market trading.

Hang returns to the Russian province where she lives in a dormitory for textile workers. She finds a telegram asking her to return home because Aunt Tam is dying. She returns to Moscow where the Bohemian helps her to get an exit visa and also buys her a plane ticket. She returns briefly to her mother's house before going to the village where Aunt Tam lives. Aunt Tam has managed to hang on to life, waiting for Hang to come. She gives Hang a key to a trunk that holds the jewelry she bought for her and map of the garden to show where Hang's inheritance is buried. After Aunt Tam dies, Hang arranges for three memorial ceremonies, but she decides to disobey her aunt's instructions to live in her house. She cannot live in the past and must strive to fulfill her own dreams.

**Themes**

**Failure of Communism**

What sets in motion the multiple individual tragedies of the novel is the attempt by the victorious communists to impose the principles of Marxism on their society. According to Marxism, in every society there is a struggle between the exploiters, the landowners or factory owners (the bourgeoisie), and the exploited, the peasants and the working classes. The so-called land reform that the communists enact in the novel is a catastrophic failure and causes great injustice, "sowing only chaos and misery in its wake," as far as Que's village is concerned. In the village, anyone who owns even a tiny amount of land is declared to be an enemy of the peasantry, even though these small landowners have never exploited anyone. Nonetheless, their property is arbitrarily seized on the orders of Que's brother, Chinh, who thinks only in terms of rigid Marxist
theory of class struggle. It is Chinh's adherence to this theory that creates and perpetuates injustice in his own family. Putting ideology above family, he denounces Ton, his own brother-in-law, for the simple reason that Ton's family hired farm labor and, therefore, belong to the exploiting class. Chinh's ideological zeal leads to Ton's exile and death; Que's unhappiness; the lifetime enmity of Ton's sister, Tam; and Hang's loneliness as she grows up without a father.

In addition to applying Marxist theories in a rigid, uniform manner regardless of local conditions or common sense, the Communist Party depicted in the novel is also corrupt. Chinh and his Party hacks use official visits to Russia to make money by trading luxury goods on the black market. The hypocrisy of this is apparent in Moscow when Chinh, who must be well aware of what is going on, hecters his colleagues, telling them they "must behave in an absolutely exemplary manner while you are in this brother country." Not only this, Chinh enriches himself with the perks available to government officials. He owns a new Japanese television set and refuses to sell it even to help raise money for his sister Que, who has just had her leg amputated.

There is also the corruption of Duong, the vice president of Aunt Tam's village, who seizes land to which he has no right. The most savage indictment of hypocrisy of the communist rulers comes from the student Hang refers to as the Bohemian, who harangues Chinh in Khoa's Moscow apartment: "They decreed their thousands of rules, their innumerable edicts, each one more draconian than the last. But, in the shadows, they paddled around in the mud, without faith or law." The Bohemian asserts that what all the Party officials really sought was not the good of the country but power and perks for themselves. Indeed, this is the thread that runs through Chinh's life. For example, he claims to be concerned with his sister's welfare, but the real reason he gets her a job in a factory is that he thinks having a street vendor for a sister is harming his own chances of advancement in the Party. It is ironic that Chinh lectures his sister about putting the interests of her own class above her self-interests, when he himself, under the guise of ideological purity, does the opposite.

Loneliness, Love, and the Bonds of Family

The devastation brought about by the land reform, which results in the persecution and eventual death of Hang's father Ton, is that Hang grows up with deep feelings of loneliness, and two families are permanently divided. Mocked by her neighbors for being the fatherless child, Hang looks back on her childhood, seeing it "like a ball kicked across the road, aimless, without any purpose." She lacks any sense of self-worth, a consequence of growing up without a name, not knowing who her father was. She compares herself to "an anonymous weed [that] grows between the cracks of a wall" and also feels a long-lasting sense of humiliation and injustice about her life. One night she dreams she is being beaten, and this feeling of senseless oppression stays with her as she matures. She feels shame at having to associate with her uncle, who has been the cause of such distress to the family. When she visits him in Moscow she refers to her life as "this slow torture, this bottomless sadness." When she is twenty she refers to the "dark circles of misery" she sees under her eyes when she looks in the mirror, and she sees the same unhappiness in an entire generation of young Vietnamese, who see no future for themselves in their society.

The child takes its cue from its mother, and Que's life has been similarly devastated by the loss of her husband. For years, she has nothing to live for, and no one to love. Hang senses this, realizing that her mother's beauty and youth had faded early, "From sorrow. For nothing. For no one." There is a deep sadness about Que's existence as a widow who eked out a living on the margins of society. She attempts to overcome the loss of her husband by doing everything she can to win acceptance from her brother's family, showering gifts on her young nephews and serving Chinh's needs as best she can. This is how she finds meaning in her life, by clinging onto the bonds of family, even though Chinh has not behaved well towards her and is in fact the direct cause of much of her misery.

Aunt Tam lives a lonely life as well and is in perpetual mourning for her lost brother. She carries a sense of injustice around her all her days, with terrible consequences for her peace of mind. As Hang observes of her
aunt, "This past had poisoned life for her, taking with it all joy, all warmth, all maternal feeling, all the
happiness the world might have offered her." The love that Aunt Tam bestows on Hang, like Que's service of
her brother, is an assertion of the primacy of blood ties. "She's a drop of his blood," Tam says of Hang when
she first meets her. Aunt Tam takes into her house her distant relative, Madame Dua because "a single drop of
our own blood, even a hundred times diluted, is worth more than swamp water."

The desperate need of both women to preserve the bonds of family is to be expected in a culture which places
such importance on respect and reverence for ancestors. Indeed, ancestors are worshiped and prayed to in
times of crisis. When Que is alone as a young woman, she burns incense and prays to the ancestors, imploring
them to protect her, and Aunt Tam maintains an altar to the ancestors in the center of her living room.

Characters

Bich

Bich is a peasant whom Chinh puts jointly in charge of land reform in Que's village. He is wholly unsuited to
the position. Before being elevated by Chinh, Bich was a good-for-nothing who wandered from village to
village. He was discharged from the French Colonial Army for drunkenness. Bich is handsome but lazy,
although he knows how to flatter the village elders. After Chinh promotes him, he becomes for a while a
respected figure in the village, mouthing the revolutionary slogans that he has picked up. But he brings no
wisdom, only injustice, to the position he occupies, and after the Rectification of Errors he leaves the village
and lives in obscurity.

The Bohemian

The Bohemian is the nickname Hang gives to a Vietnamese student whom she meets in Moscow at the
apartment of Khoa. He is handsome and charming and reminds Hang of a character called Yen Thanh the
Bohemian in a film she saw. She also remembers that he was one of the students who used to tease her at the
university. The Bohemian berates Chinh regarding the corruption of the Communist Party, and he shows great
kindness to Hang, giving her money, helping to secure her an exit visa, and paying for her air fare to Vietnam.
She knows him too briefly to become romantically involved with him; with his kindness and "his confident,
youthful smile" he seems to represent the possibility of love and happiness that is out of Hang's reach.

Aunt Chinh

Aunt Chinh is Uncle Chinh's wife. Like her husband, she is a Communist Party official and teaches in a
school run by the Communist Youth League. Hang hears through friends that she is neurotic and a bully, often
losing her temper with her students for no reason. She has little education herself, having completed only two
courses designed "for workers and peasants," yet because she serves the party loyally for many years, she
becomes dean of the philosophy department at the school.

Uncle Chinh

Uncle Chinh is Que's brother and Hang's uncle. Chinh is one year younger than Que. When he is young he
joins the Viet Bac, the anti-French resistance movement, in the north. Later he joins the Liberation Army that
drives the French out of Vietnam. After the war, Chinh becomes an official in the Communist Party and
returns to his village to supervise land reform. He shows himself to be a narrow-minded, selfish man who
cannot see beyond the ideology he has adopted. He behaves cruelly to his sister, banning her from even
speaking to her husband and also telling her not to mix with former landowners, including her sister-in-law,
because this will reflect badly on his career prospects in the party. Chinh's real goal is to rise to power in the
communist hierarchy, but he never becomes much more than a party hack. Later, Chinh marries, has two children, and becomes a cadre responsible for ideological education in the northern province of Quang Ninh. He still seeks to control his sister, trying to persuade her to accept a job in a factory. Her occupation as a street trader, which in his eyes makes her a member of the despised bourgeoisie, is an embarrassment to him and a hindrance to his career. Although Que always defends her brother and tries to please him, neighbor Vi speaks the unpalatable truth: “God, he's a real little tyrant, that brother of yours.” Hang also knows the truth about her uncle, and she dislikes him. When she finds out about the illicit black market trading he engages in on his official party trips to Moscow trips and how he manipulated her into visiting by pretending to be ill, she feels ashamed to be associated with him. In Moscow, Chinh is reduced to doing domestic work for a group of Vietnamese students, who have nothing but contempt for him. When Hang first sees her uncle there, he cuts a ridiculous figure, wearing an apron and a pair of women's house slippers.

Madame Dua

Madame Dua is an old woman who is a servant at Aunt Tam's house. She is also a distant relative of Hang and Tam. Although Madame Dua was born into a rich family, she fell on hard times, and Aunt Tam took her in when she found her begging on the street.

Duong

Duong is the vice president of Aunt Tam's village. All the villagers dislike him because he abuses his power. He has people arrested for criticizing him, and he takes a plot of farmland from a widow, leaving her with nothing. The woman later gets her revenge on him, killing him with one blow of a hammer.

Mr. Hai

Mr. Hai is one of the Vietnamese students in Moscow who employ Chinh as domestic help.

Hang

Hang, the daughter of Ton and Que, is the narrator of the story. She is raised by her mother in poverty in Hanoi, and as a child she does not know who her father was, since her mother refuses to tell her. She grows up lonely and miserable, finally learning the story of her father when she is nearly ten. At about the same time she meets her uncle Chinh for the first time. Hang is a sensitive, reflective child, who does not know her place in society. To her, life seems aimless and without purpose. Adding to Hang's confusion is the fact that she is caught up in a difficult family situation that is not of her making. Her Aunt Tam showers her with love and gifts, after which her relationship with her mother, who cannot afford such things, becomes distant. Hang is highly intelligent and does well at school. She passes her college entrance exams, and her aunt ensures that she is able to attend college. But Hang discontinues her studies when her mother loses a leg in a street accident. Hang takes a job in Russia, working in a textile factory, so she can send money back to her mother. She also twice visits her Uncle Chinh, although she resents his attempts to manipulate her into helping his black market activities.

As a young woman Hang must decide how she is going to shape her life. She does not want to play the traditional subservient role allocated to women in Vietnamese culture, which she sees embodied in her mother. Nor does she want to follow the instructions of her late Aunt Tam, and she decides not to live in the house she inherited from her aunt. She wants to forge her own destiny rather than live in the past. At the end of the novel, she plans to return to university and has dreams of foreign travel.

Mr. Khoa
Mr. Khoa is a second-year Vietnamese graduate student in biology at Lomonosov University in Moscow. His apartment is where Chinh works, and where the other Vietnamese students live. Khoa has a reputation for inviting prostitutes to visit his room.

**The Man in Train**

The Man in the Train, who is distinguished by his pug nose and silver-capped teeth, is Hang's traveling companion on the train journey to Moscow. He is a kind, older man, and is very protective of Hang. He chases off two aggressive young men when they board the train and start to bother Hang, and he holds her hand as they make their way through the train station on their arrival in Moscow.

**Nan**

Nan is a huge peasant woman afflicted with the vice of gluttony. Before his death, her husband used to beat her for selling part of their rice supplies so she could buy snacks and sweets. She also used to go around the village pilfering. When Chinh unaccountably puts Nan in charge, along with Bich, of land reform in the village, she abuses the authority given her. She chooses to live in Aunt Tam's confiscated house, sharing it with Bich, but she does not take good care of it. After the Rectification of Errors, Nan ends up living on the edge of the village. According to Tam, "[s]he's just a sack of meat and filthy rags."

**Nhieu**

Nhieu is Hang's grandmother. During the land reform, she is denounced and is forced to kneel in front of the entire village. In the second denunciation session, she is forced, with Hang's Aunt Tam, to squat in a deep pit. As a result of this humiliation, she falls ill and dies.

**Que**

Que is Chinh's sister and the mother of Hang. Because of the hostility generated by her brother, Que leaves her native village and moves to Hanoi, where she raises Hang in a slum, scraping together a living as a street vendor. Her husband is dead. To Hang, her mother's life seems wasted, since she has no one to live for, and her life is filled with sorrow. Que's life is dominated by her brother, who behaves cruelly toward her while pretending to act in her best interests. Que manages to resist Chinh's attempt to get her to work in a factory, but in spite of his selfish behavior she remains emotionally attached to him, since he is the only close family member who is still living. Que resents the efforts of Aunt Tam, her late husband's sister, to win Hang's love, and for a while there is an emotional distance between Que and her daughter. Que finds new purpose in life by trying to win acceptance from Chinh and his family by lavishing gifts on her two young nephews. She even dresses like her sister-in-law in order to win favor. When Chinh is ill with diabetes, Que goes hungry so that she can send money to Chinh for his medicine. After Que is hit by a car and loses a leg, she and Hang are reconciled, but this does not last long. After a quarrel, Que asks her daughter to leave the house, although later, after Hang returns from Russia, they are reconciled once more. They experience estrangement once again when Hang remains in Aunt Tam's village for over three months after her aunt's death instead of returning to her mother in Hanoi, a decision that angers Que.

**Aunt Tam**

Aunt Tam is Hang's aunt, the sister of Ton. She is an educated, proud, aloof, strong-willed, resolute woman. The humiliation of being denounced in front of the entire village, and also having her property confiscated, does not break her spirit. Aunt Tam has great strength, both physical and mental, and she works hard for many years, enduring many hardships, to build up her wealth after her property is restored to her. She never marries, and she harbors a deep and lasting hatred of Chinh, whom she blames for the death of her brother. Tam is a
traditionalist; she likes to observe all the ancient rituals and regards the bonds of family as sacred. For this reason she mourns deeply for her dead brother and lavishes love and gifts on Hang, because Hang is her closest blood relative. She adopts Hang as a surrogate daughter, while at the same time disliking and ultimately hating Que, Hang's mother and the sister of the hated Chinh. Tam blames Que for the fact that Hang goes to Russia to work in order to support her mother. When she dies, Tam leaves her house to Hang, assuming she will live in it to preserve the family tradition and the altar of her ancestors.

Thu

Thu is Hang's playmate when she is little. Thu is a mean little girl who lies shamelessly. One day, the two of them go out to play without the knowledge of Thu's mother. Later, when they are caught, Thu blames Hang, who gets yelled at by Thu's mother.

Ton

Ton, Que's husband, was an educated man who was a schoolteacher. According to his sister, Tam, he could read French fluently by the age of twelve. Ton married Que, but within a year or so of their marriage, Ton was denounced by Chinh merely because his family hired farm labor. Ton could not bear the shame of being denounced in front of the entire village, and he fled. He traveled far and made a new home for himself in a Muong minority region, where he married again, becoming the son-in-law of the village vice president. After six years, he visited Que in Hanoi, and they conceived Hang. But Ton's wife would not allow him to visit Que again. Once more feeling shamed, Ton drowned himself in a river.

Tu

Tu is the younger son of Uncle and Aunt Chinh. He is three years old when Hang first meets him.

Tuan

Tuan is the son of Uncle and Aunt Chinh. He is seven years old when Hang first meets him.

Madame Vera

Madame Vera is the caretaker of the dormitory where Hang lives in Russia. She is an old Russian war widow. She can be nasty sometimes, Hang says, but she is kind and affectionate to Hang, lending her one of her hand-made shawls to keep her warm on the trip to Moscow.

Neighbor Vi

Neighbor Vi is the neighbor of Que and Hang in Hanoi. She is the only person Que can really call a friend. She is a matronly kind of woman, full of common sense and good advice.

Critical Essays: Paradise of the Blind

PARADISE OF THE BLIND provides Western readers with our first fictional glimpse into the internal political struggles of Vietnam from the 1950’s through the 1980’s from the very human perspective of those who suffered most, the working-class people caught in the chaos of changing ideologies and socioeconomic experimentation.
Hang, the central character, represents many of those victimized by the circumstances of the times. Daughter of a schoolteacher and small village property owner from a respected family who is branded by the communists “an exploiter of the people,” Hang is raised by her mother alone after her father is forced to abandon his family, village, and position, escaping into the anonymity of the northern hinterlands rather than face execution or a labor camp. In Hanoi, Hang’s formerly middle-class mother makes a living as a street vendor, supporting not only her daughter but also—in good Confucian fashion—her petty Communist cadre leader brother and his family. The fruits of capitalist entrepreneurship allow Communism to survive.

Amidst the politics and economics is the story of a young woman’s coming of age. Shamed by her fatherlessness and poverty, Hang nevertheless thrives in the back alleys of Hanoi, making friends, attending school, and delighting in life as she finds it. At ten, she learns of her parents’ past, visits their home village, and is introduced to the family matriarch, her father’s sister Tam, who becomes Hang’s benefactor and role model—an independent woman who survives and succeeds despite the circumstances the communists, fellow villagers, and family members confront her with. Through Aunt Tam’s hard work, Hang attends university, eats well, and wears fashionable clothing. But her mother’s poverty sends Hang to a Soviet factory, where she works with thousands of fellow emigres for the little money they can send home. When her mother is injured and can no longer support herself, Hang returns to Hanoi. Only then does she fully realize that her fulfillment cannot come through politics, economic or social theory, or even Confucian family loyalties. Hang chooses, instead, her self, her independence.

Le Ly Hayslip’s autobiography, WHEN HEAVEN AND EARTH CHANGED PLACES, provided American readers with a perspective on events that occurred in North Vietnam that we had not yet seen. Duong Thu Huong’s PARADISE OF THE BLIND can now be placed alongside it in a growing body of literature that will allow us insight into a people and a country only now being revealed to most Americans. Duong’s novel is a wonderful entree into that world and its literary tradition.

**Sources for Further Study**


Criticism: Bryan Aubrey

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth century literature. In this essay, he discusses the novel as a coming-of-age story.

*Paradise of the Blind* is a bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story. Although it is set in a society that is probably unfamiliar to American readers, the story of a young girl growing up in an impoverished single-parent family, pulled in different directions by various family ties and obligations, feeling lonely and out of place, disillusioned with society and longing to get away so she can forge her own destiny and realize her own dreams, will be recognized by many a young American.

Hang, a highly sensitive, reflective, intelligent girl, has few role models to emulate as she grows up. Like many teenage girls, she refuses to contemplate a life that resembles the one lived by her mother. Even when she is only nine years old, she shudders at the thought that in ten years time, she might be living a life similar to that of her mother. Her mother accepts the traditional role accorded to women in Vietnamese society, of being subservient to men. She never seeks to question it, and she never really thinks for herself. According to Hang, her mother lived by "proverbs and duties." Her aim is simply to endure misfortune, believing that unhappiness makes a woman selfless and compassionate, and she hopes her daughter grows up to display the same selflessness. During Hang's early childhood, the natural love between mother and daughter prevails, but as Hang grows older a distance springs up between them. Hang loses respect for her mother because of the way Que always seeks the approval of Chinh, even after all the grief he has caused her. Hang thinks her mother is putting herself in a humiliating position, since she is acutely aware of how Chinh has divided the family. Aunt Tam will not let her (or Que) forget it.

As the disillusionment between mother and daughter grows, their relationship takes on a rhythm of bitter quarrels followed by increasingly temporary reconciliations. However, Hang does make one huge sacrifice for her mother. After Que loses her leg in a street accident, Hang abandons the college career at which she excels and takes a soul-destroying job at a textile factory in Russia so that she can send money back to her mother. At no point does Hang give any insight into how hard it was for her to make this decision, and not once does she complain about it. She probably regards it as simply doing her filial duty. But this act of loyalty and self-sacrifice cannot save their relationship for long, and their slow estrangement continues. The final communication between them comes after Tam's death, when Hang notifies her mother that she intends to remain at Aunt Tam's house for over three months, until the last memorial ceremony is completed. Que is furious and replies that Hang can stay there three years if she wants to. Hang chooses not to respond: "Life had taught me the value of silence." This is a symbolic moment showing that Hang has now permanently left her mother's orbit. The gap between them is too great, and Hang has decided that she must live life in her own way, which is not the way of her mother.

Aunt Tam presents another possible role model for Hang. She is a formidable, independent, wealthy woman who has succeeded by sheer hard work, and she lavishes her love on Hang as her closest surviving blood relative. Hang is therefore pulled in two different directions, by mother and by aunt, a struggle made more acute by the fact that Que and Tam are at loggerheads over Que's loyalty to her brother Chinh, whom Tam regards as a murderer.

Hang's relationship with Aunt Tam is a complex one. As a young girl of nearly ten, she cannot understand how she could possibly be so important to her aunt. Later, she comes to feel a genuine love for her, but it is not a simple feeling:

No one was closer to me; yet no one could have been stranger. It was through her that I knew the tenderness of this world, and through her too that I was linked to the chains of my past, to
the pain of existence.

Hang eventually throws off these chains of the past. As a young woman, she becomes the voice of a new generation that believes in change and modernity, while in their different ways her mother and her aunt represent stability and tradition.

Hang is never comfortable with the traditional family rituals that her mother is so careful to observe. As a young girl she feels awkward at family gatherings; all the rules of etiquette she is instructed to follow make her feel on edge. A few years later, at Aunt Tam's house, the traditional, elaborate celebrations of Tet, the Lunar New Year, bore her, seeming to be no more than "an extravagant, postponed form of regret, a yearning for their lost paradise."

It is Aunt Tam who preeminently represents tradition to Hang. On Hang's very first visit to her aunt, when she is nine, Aunt Tam tells her she should pray to the ancestors and to the spirit of her father. She instructs Hang to remember and fulfill her duties in this regard, to which Hang dutifully assents. But in her heart Hang cares nothing for these old rituals. Many years later, at Aunt Tam's funeral, as she follows the custom of carrying a cane and walking backward to the grave, she comments, "I was indifferent to the sacred in all this, and I still don't believe in the cults and rites. But the affection between two human beings is something that I will always hold sacred." This shows that Hang has developed her own values and has adopted a humanist approach to life. The most important thing for her is not the human relationship with the divine or the supernatural—transcendental concepts that mean nothing to her—but people's relations with each other.

It is after Aunt Tam's death that Hang makes her most decisive break with everything that her aunt represents. She knows that she cannot live her life in Aunt Tam's house, honoring the ancestors as her aunt wanted her to do. That would mean "a life deprived of youth and love, a victory born of the renunciation of existence." Thus Hang rejects the past in favor of the future. She must make her own way, based on her own talents and her own values, and it will be different from the way trodden by her mother and her aunt, who have been the two most significant people in her life. Hang's way will also be very different from the corrupt, selfish values embodied in Uncle Chinh, the third major figure in her life, which fill her with contempt.

Although she is only in her early twenties, Hang has no illusions about life. Her own life has been hard, and she has observed with a keen eye and ear the sufferings of others. She has already become a social critic and knows that her experience is representative of an entire generation of young Vietnamese. When she is in Russia she thinks of the faces of her friends, the people of her generation: "faces gnawed with worry, shattered faces, twisted, ravaged, sooty, frantic faces." Facing the future means facing pain. And yet Hang does not lose the capacity to savor the beauty of life, which she refers to as "this strange muddle, this flower plucked from a swamp." She also knows that hope, however many times it is crushed, must always be reinvented, for life must go on.

This resilience, the persistence of hope in the face of all the things that would destroy it, characterizes Hang's attitude after the death of her aunt. Her strongest desire is to return to university and resume her studies. This might strike an American reader as an unexceptional desire, but it is a rather significant decision for a young Vietnamese woman in the 1980s. Hang is aware that her Aunt Tam was an educated woman and that that was part of the reason—together with Tam's aloof personality—why she was unable to attract a husband. In this traditional, male-dominated society, it appears that an educated woman is not perceived by men as desirable. But Hang does not seem concerned by this; the desire for romance and marriage is not what motivates her. Indeed, other than Uncle Chinh, men play a small role in her life, and she has no model on which to base a successful relationship. There are only two occasions when she briefly accepts male friendship, from the man on the train and from the Bohemian, both of whom treat her in a fatherly, protective way. Hang, the fatherless young woman, recognizes in the protective look of the man on the train something for which she has yearned all her life. But he is soon gone, causing her to express the somber, pessimistic view of life she has developed:
"No happiness can hold; every life, every dream, has its unraveling." Thus does Hang arm herself for the world she must now enter as an adult. Depending on no one but herself, she clutches the flower of hope, knowing that in this world, such a flower is a precarious but necessary thing.


Criticism: Pamela S. Saur

In the following essay, Saur examines the portrayal of daily life in Paradise of the Blind and how Huong "depicts both the beauty and oppression of life permeated by culture and ideology."

Paradise of the Blind (1991), by Duong Thu Huong, was the first novel from Vietnam published in the United States. Through a first-person account of a young woman named Han, the reader learns much about contemporary Vietnamese culture, which is still steeped in ancient tradition as well as shaped by recent history. The book presents the characters' appreciation of life, dedication to work, political ideology, and family obligations. The novel also includes the protagonist's ambivalence and mixed emotions. The title, which labels the Vietnamese homeland a "paradise" and at the same time calls its unquestioning traditional residents "blind," captures this ambivalence. Alongside much suffering and struggle, the novel abounds with cherished moments filled with beauty or pleasure, whether a moment of love, a taste of traditional food, a vision of nature's beauty or the sound of music. The narrator recalls her reaction to one such moment, "[…] this was life, this strange muddle, this flower plucked from a swamp." Han expresses affection and admiration for the land and people, but she also adds negative comments, as in this description of her homeland: "A place where young women bend like slaves at their husbands' feet. A place where a man whips his wife with a flail if she dares lend a few baskets of grain or a few bricks to relatives in need. A strip of land somewhere in my country, in the 1980s […]"

Paradise of the Blind depicts daily life in a third world economy, whose people often display extraordinary perseverance and a powerful work ethic. Han's aunt, for example, survives and eventually prospers after being evicted by communist land reformers and left with no buffalo, cow, or wagon. Forced to sleep outdoors, protected by a knife under her neck, she sells her two dresses for food, labors to turn a few acres of barren wasteland into a rice paddy, and even invents a machine to grind duckweed into flour. The novel demonstrates the devastating effects of imposing Marxist economic concepts on a primitive rural economy. Han comments, "No one understands why my grandma Nhieu had suddenly become an 'enemy of the people,' 'a member of the reactionary class of exploiters,' just because she had inherited a few acres of rice paddy."

Strong ideals surrounding family bonds, no doubt reflecting Confucian principles, are dominant in the book. They result in conflict between Han and two powerful women, her mother and her aunt. Han recalls her mother's words, "To live with dignity, the important thing is never to despair. You give up once, and everything gives way. They say ginger root becomes stringy, but pungent with age. Unhappiness forges a woman, makes her selfless, compassionate." Han thinks, "My mother had lived like this, according to proverbs and duties." She admires her selflessness.

As a young girl, Han becomes painfully aware of weighty family bonds when she and her mother visit their ancestral village. She recalls her thoughts on meeting her Aunt Tan, her father's sister. "I knew she was my blood, my link to my father. This was the love that had been buried, impossible to imagine. I stood very still, letting her touch me, caress me." The woman is ecstatic, even reverent, at meeting the little girl. She says, "She's a drop of his blood, my niece." Aunt Tan sets a fine table in honor of Han, and proclaims, offering a toast, "Today, because you have brought the child back to this house, I have prepared offerings to the ancestors." Han recalls, "I had never imagined that I could have such importance to others." She continues, "I felt as if I were drinking to some solemn, merciless vow, some sacred, primitive rite." Of her aunt's passionate
traditionalism, Han says, "She was a lost replica of my father. The past had poisoned life for her, taking with it all joy, all warmth, all maternal feeling, all the happiness the world might have offered." Her aunt tells her that all her hard-earned wealth will be left to her. For years, she sends the girl food and gifts, including jewelry inappropriate to her age, and requires her to write and tell about her studies. Aunt Tan's extreme self-sacrifice and ardor over her as a representative of her father seem unnatural and sinister to Han, "like throwing flower petals on an abandoned grave."

As Han's life unfolds, her aunt continues to show her extraordinary devotion, while her own mother becomes more distant. Out of pride, Han's mother refuses to sell the jewelry given her daughter by Aunt Tan, despite Han's entreaties, and nearly starves herself and her daughter. Meanwhile, she also finds a reason of her own for extreme self-sacrifice: familial objects representing her bloodline in the form of Uncle Chinh's two children. Han recalls, "I realized she had a mission now, a new source of happiness: to serve the needs of my little cousins. How intoxicating it can be, self-sacrifice."

When her aunt is dying, Han dutifully travels to her village. Although she has mixed feelings about the "ceremonies and superstitions" prevailing there, she respectfully performs the funeral rites asked of her. She doubts the sacredness of the ceremonies, yet adds, "But the affection between two human beings is something I will always hold sacred." As the book concludes, Han says, "Forgive me, my aunt: I am going to sell this house and leave all this behind. We can honor the wishes of the dead with a few flowers on a grave somewhere. I can't squander my life tending these faded flowers, these shadows, the legacy of past crimes." The young woman has performed her last duties as an ancient symbol and is ready to turn to other roles befitting her rebirth as a modern young adult. The Paradise of the Blind depicts both the beauty and oppression of life permeated by culture and ideology and shows in its hopeful ending that it is possible for determined individuals to resist and transcend these powerful forces.


Criticism: Harriet Blodgett

In the following essay excerpt, Blodgett identifies "an intricate embroidery of thematic images" in the text of Paradise of the Blind.

Structured as a bildungsroman, Paradise of the Blind is the densely textured first-person narrative of a young North Vietnamese woman's growth into personal freedom in the 1980s. We first meet Hang, the intelligent narrator, in her early twenties, as an exported worker in a Russian textile factory after she has left university to support her recently crippled mother because she is the docile and dutiful daughter trained to self-sacrifice. Even though her mother threw her out, Hang remains filial. Besides her personal reminiscences of growing up, we learn the harrowing past history of her family via her account of the stupidities and agonies caused by the land-reform program of the 1950s, before her birth. We finally resume her story as she moves from the present into a more promising, self-aware future.

The novel's title has a double resonance, for it refers both to the deluded state of those who believe in the communist paradise on earth and to the bliss of youthful ignorance. Hence Hang's reflections, as the book is nearing its conclusion, on "my own paradise, etched into the final evening of my childhood … the magical, unique paradise of childhood." Both are fools' paradises, of course, the first encompassing those who will not face reality, whereas the second takes in those who cannot face it because they do not yet know it. The humanistic theme of the book is the need to engage reality, not indulge in illusions; only those who face the truth of reality are free. Duong reminds us how much harder this universal task may be for a female in a staunchly patriarchal world. Not only does traditionalist Vietnamese culture encourage nostalgic illusions
about the past; it especially precludes thinking for oneself if one is a woman. Nevertheless, to refuse tradition is prerequisite for Hang's freedom.

In this tightly woven, ever-symmetrical novel, two women, mother and aunt, each with a significant brother, control the direction of Hang's life by commanding her loyalty and affection. For her family, the personal is the political. Hang's father Ton, a country schoolteacher, was forced to flee the village when Uncle Chinh, a Communist Party cadre and the brother of Hang's mother-to-be, Que, denounced him and his sister, Aunt Tam, as small landowners; after a brief return to his wife, he committed suicide. (Like many feminist novelists, Duong dispenses with the father in order to strengthen maternal influence.) Ton's mother dies from the strain of events, his sister becomes a farm laborer until the eventual restoration of family property, and his wife Que is driven off to become a food vendor in a Hanoi slum. Uncle Chinh controls Hang's immediate life through his tight and abusive hold on Hang's mother's loyalties, one that not only affects the course of Hang's life but even threatens it. Mother Que channels their slender resources into providing food for Chinh's family because he has two sons, almost starving her own daughter to do so, for in a patriarchy, sons, like brothers, are more important than daughters. (The use of food to make thematic points proves characteristic of this novel.) Traditionalist Que's persistent blind devotion to her morally bankrupt, preying brother, simply because he is her younger sibling, for whom she feels a maternal responsibility, alienates the equally traditionalist Aunt Tam, who is devoted to the continuance of the blood line and hates Chinh for destroying her brother Ton. By cultivating Hang as her father's heir, Aunt Tam divides Hang from her mother and almost from her (Hang's) own self.

Hang must free herself from the demands made upon her by both paternal aunt and maternal uncle. Although much of the book is flashback, two significant parallel events in present time advance her toward freedom. While still convalescing from illness, Hang makes a physically exhausting trip to Moscow when called upon to visit her presumably dying uncle Chinh, only to find that she is actually summoned to help him with his black-market deals. This proves to be the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back, and, already detesting him, she divests herself of all responsibility for him thereafter. Hang next returns to Vietnam to visit her actually dying aunt. However, she refuses Aunt Tam's legacy, which would tie her to the ancestral estate, the more attractive good and a renunciation much harder to make. Although Tam's deathbed wish is that Hang stay in the ancestral house and honor her ancestors, the price, Hang reflects, is "a life deprived of youth and love, a victory born of the renunciation of existence." Even if she were to become wealthy and honored, instead of remaining bound to the past with its legacy of wrongdoings and restrictions, she determines to sell the place and depart for a distant port. It has taken all her growing-up years to accomplish this freedom, which leaves her, at the end of the book, dreaming of return to university, convinced that "we can honor the wishes of the dead with a few flowers on a grave somewhere. I can't squander my life tending … shadows, the legacy of past crimes."

It is a familiar outcome. A young woman opting for the life of the mind in place of her conventional duties and her cultural norms has been a common story since the early days of the contemporary women's movement. When Margaret Drabble's academic Rosamund Stacey, with a promising career before her in The Millstone (1965), for example, refused to take on a mate even though she had a child (Drabble, 188-91), and Angela Carter's Marianne in Heroes and Villains (1969), standing on the seashore, chose the lighthouse of the mind over the fleshly woman bound to time (Carter, 138-39), they were but anticipating a trend whose variable might be the particular cultural expectations of the setting depicted but whose premise would always be the right to individual self-development. Even closer in type is Maxine Hong Kingston's book The Woman Warrior (1976), tracing a girl's determination to grow into a free and powerful individual; she must therefore struggle to free herself from the misogyny of her Chinese heritage and her ties to her mother while simultaneously retaining her attachment to what she values in both her mother and her Chinese past. Nor is the need for self-determination limited to the young in feminist fiction. Ramatoulaye in the Senegalese author Mariama Bâ's So Long a Letter (1979; Eng. 1981), having known "thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment" (57-58), discovers and articulates her selfhood only in middle-aged widowhood when she
progresses from being no more than a wife—legally defined in relation to a man according to a rigid traditional code of behavior—to a free and opinionated individual, self-defined.

Hang's grandfather's home is described early on as "a traditional house, solidly built, but dimly lit and sinister," and when Hang is welcomed by her aunt as the family heir, she feels "as if I were drinking to some solemn, merciless vow, some sacred, primitive rite." Valuable in the loyalty it requires of family members (as Duong acknowledges), cultural traditionalism also is unenlightened and threatens oppression for women because it subjects them to patriarchal devaluation and rule. When Hang moves under Aunt Tam's aegis, she submits to the authority of "the glory of the Tran family, my father and grandfather," not any female glory. If Aunt Tam will support Hang's university education, it is not for Tam's sake but because her grandfather and father were learned men, and "You must study conscientiously so you will never dishonor their memory." But there is a female tradition too, valorized through mother-daughter relations. Que teaches Hang to practice self-abnegation, especially toward family—or know guilt:

"They say ginger root becomes stringy, but pungent with age. Unhappiness forges a woman, makes her selfless, compassionate."

My mother had lived like this, according to proverbs and duties. She wanted me to show the same selflessness. And what had I done? My uncle, her younger brotherly—her only brother—had asked for my help. He was sick, and here I was, preparing to abandon him.

This threat to female autonomy through mothers' gendering their daughters to passivity and subjection is also a familiar feminist theme. Fay Weldon even begins her Female Friends (1974) with a warning against maternal indoctrination in self-subordination: "Understand, and forgive. It is what my mother taught me to do, poor patient gentle Christian soul, and the discipline she herself practiced, and the reason she died in poverty, alone and neglected. The soles of her poor slippers, which I took out from under the bed and threw away so as not to shame her in front of the undertaker, were quite worn through by dutiful shuffling" (Weldon, 5). Even more resentful of the costs of such training, the late Japanese author Fumiko Enchi shows the potential ugliness of maternal indoctrination in self-sacrifice in The Waiting Years (Eng. 1971), when respectable fifteen-year-old Suga is sold unawares into service as a concubine, to help out following the decline in the family's fortunes (she thinks she goes as a maid): "The one thing she dreaded above all was a reprimand [from her master], being resolved all her days to observe her mother's solemn injunction that she look after her master well and never disobey his wishes whatever might happen."

The excessive sense of importance it gives Que to serve Chinh's sons with gifts of food and money shows Hang "how intoxicating it can be" to engage in self-sacrifice—and hence how doubly dangerous and blinding. A rift grows between mother and daughter during Hang's teen years as the mother seeks only recognition from Chinh's family by what she can do for them, even stealing Hang's gift jewelry to do so, buying their love as Aunt Tam does Hang's, while the daughter wants only her mother's love. Though Chinh may trample on her with his commands, insults, and rudeness, the mother's simple perspective remains, "He's my brother. You can't deny blood ties." If Hang recognizes the flaws in her mother's perspective, "In spite of everything she stood for, everything I was trying to escape, she was still my mother…. I loved her." Duong is credible about the resiliency of filial love when a mother is all that the growing child has ever had.

Even while young, Hang is entrusted with the author's perception that peasant women have long been trapped in traditions which exact extremely hard work and great suffering from them, and are handed down from mother to daughter—the daughter, so to speak, following in the mother's footsteps. Hang's encounter at nine years of age with a woman vending barley sugar—one detail in an extensive pattern of food imagery—is worth reproducing in full, because it shows how dexterously the novel's overall imagery is selected.

As she trudged past us, a straw hat hiding her face, I stared at her blackened, dusty feet.
"Mother, when you were little, was there always someone like this?"

"Mmh. She's dead now. This one is her daughter."

I was mesmerized by her huge, splayed feet. They were scored with tiny cracks, encrusted with gray patches of dead skin. Decades before her, another woman, just like her, had crisscrossed the same village, plodded along with the same feet.

Here, Hang is en route to meet Aunt Tam, her blood link to a father, for the first time; meeting her, two pages later, she is struck by how Tam's feet are elegant and thin but is also "fascinated by the thick calluses and cracks that scored the skin of her feet. Horrible, deep, ugly furrows separated the soles of her feet into flaky layers. Time and backbreaking work in the fields had ravaged them." The task for Hang is to refuse to follow in her birth mother's self-sacrificing steps of devotion to her brother or her foster mother Aunt Tam's bitterness based on loyalty to her wronged family and brother. The description of the barley sugar woman thus concludes with Tam "too frightened to speak…. I didn't dare ask [my mother] if, in another ten years, I would live her life, this life. The thought made me shiver."

Music also serves Duong in constructing her patterns of themes. The progress of Hang's loss of innocence, growing up into increasingly disillusioned female maturity, with disappointments, poverty, and confused loyalties, is punctuated by a refrain that emphasizes how time brings sorrow rather than joy. The slum where Hang and her mother live includes also a crippled man who sings of the universal passage of the seasons: "Hail autumn and its procession of dead leaves." We are reminded of that burden of time passing as Hang struggles to understand how her mother can accept the humiliations meted out to her by Chinh and his family: "Why did she love people who enslaved her? The cripple had started to howl again, his chant a sinister echo amid the joy and the bustle of those festival days." Yet a more elaborate use of music tied to Hang's maturing perceptions not only shows how Duong's images typically are intertwined (in this case, music with flowers), but also indicates that the overall perspective of the book is positive. A visit to Kiev with a girlfriend subjects Hang, in the friend's absence, to the foiled attempt of the friend's uncle to rape her. Safety for women is ever precarious; we have already witnessed the attempted rape that Aunt Tam bravely fended off in her field-laborer days. After Hang's escape from bodily harm when her friend chances to return, as Hang listens to records she thinks about the woman singing, who must herself have suffered, "must have known this weariness, this despair. Like us, she must have had to reinvent hope and a yearning for life." More important, Hang reflects, "The music had come from that bastard's room. So this was life, this strange muddle, this flower plucked from a swamp." In the present, as she is traveling to Moscow at Chinh's behest, she chances to hear the music again on radio and understands even more "why the voice had enchanted me. Like a call, it beckoned me to a kind of love—to revolt, the most essential force in human existence…. If only my mother could feel this revolt." Hang's strengthening sense of self-love induces her exaggeration about human motivation; evidently, she herself has begun to see the possibility of revolting. Faith in the possibility of good coming out of evil, a flower from a swamp, is, moreover, very much Duong's perspective in this novel, with the proviso that one grant the reality of the evil.

That perspective is elsewhere made concrete through Hang's fascination with purple duckweed flowers. For the naïve child, these are only beautiful anticipations: "Purple flowers [that] bloomed out of this blanket of green, just as the face of a loving woman blooms into mysterious, laughing promise." But when she is older, they are seen against the reality that nourishes them and thus become at once "both the purest balm and the most overpowering poison." For they are testimonials to beauty flourishing over corruption and destruction, floating on murky, rotting ponds surrounded by miserable hovels: "At the center of these stifling landscapes, on a green carpet of weed, those purple flowers always glistened, radiant in the middle of the filth: the atrocious ornament of a life snuffed out." The task is to admire the beauty and retain faith in life as possibility without ignoring the realities that menace them.
It has taken time for Hang to reach so mature and equable a perspective. Hitherto she had thought of beauty only as an essential source of esthetic delight, until it helped occasion her disillusionment with life. This we learn through juxtapositions of ideas and images. Hang first tells us how sensitive she is to natural beauty, whether the painfully transitory green beauty of Along Bay—"an exquisite green that would only exist once, in one place in the universe"—or the universal beauty of snow in Russia—"light sparked off … in blinding shards, frail and luminous as a childhood dream"—for "Beauty knows no frontiers, seduces without discrimination. The snow spilled onto the earth as if the sky had welled over with flowers." Such beauty gives her a sense of something perfect, as a part of life. She then, without transition, recounts an ugly incident with a sewing machine. One of Hang's roommates in her Russian apartment, when she cannot find her sewing machine, accuses her mates of stealing it. Although the machine is soon found where its forgetful owner had hidden it, the discovery comes only after recriminations that crush the girl's sense of self-worth and of importance to her comrades. That Hang herself really sees the accusing girl "for the first time," though she has lived with her for two years, is a revelation to Hang of her own blindness. More, for Hang, the incident proves epiphanic, since she comprehends fully "perhaps for the first time" that every life is subject to the experience of deep disillusionment such as the girl has had, and "the values we have honored and cherished reveal themselves in all their poverty and vulgarity." For Hang personally, however, what the incident proves on the pulses is the discrepancy between the human real and the natural ideal. For "the storm, this torrent of pure beauty, continued to flood the earth. Outside my window, a sense of perfection still permeated the air. But I felt lost."

The most encompassing imagery of the book involves not nature but food, so sustained and frequent that the published translation includes after the text a supplementary eight-page glossary of Vietnamese food and related cultural terms. Two whole pages in sequence in the text are even given to descriptions of food; elsewhere too, there are menus, recipes, cooking instructions, extensive food rituals provided, in addition to the many descriptions of food throughout. In her introduction, the translator Nina McPherson points out the Vietnamese "reverence" for food; she remarks that in predominantly rural cultures like Vietnam, food is often a powerful form of human expression, a currency that, like money, is used to quantify one's love, respect, or hatred for another person, and certainly there are plentiful examples of such human interactions in the book. However, so much emphasis on food is not a characteristic of Duong's style, as her other novels set in Vietnam show: the food imagery here is a device for the statement and embellishment of themes. This is not so unusual. Women writers worldwide have found food imagery a powerful thematic resource for both short and long writings. The Mexican author Laura Esquivel's novel Like Water for Chocolate (1989), for example, exploits such imagery to the point of providing recipes, as does the Indian writer Arundhati Roy in The God of Small Things (1997). The Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo's Our Sister Killjoy (1977) makes food the central image for the African heroine's experience of European temptations; the Egyptian Neamat El-Biheiri's "Dreaming of Dishes" makes food a testimonial to female self-denial. Even Virginia Woolf (a frequent user of food imagery, as I have shown elsewhere) contrasts the dining resources of male and female universities to enhance her attack on gender inequities in A Room of One's Own (1929).

Duong has many uses for food. It serves her, for one thing, to concretize status. Thus, Chinh, whose values in time do not prevail, ultimately sinks so low as a party cadre that he becomes a cook/servant to wealthier Vietnamese studying in Russia. He is even subjected to retributive justice in becoming a diabetic on a restricted diet. That the days of unchallenged communist control which put him in power are over is thus graphically clear. More important, Duong gives food special meaning by using it to show the hold of particular traditional rituals. Most significantly, this occurs when Hang, invited to Aunt Tam's for an elaborate celebration of Hang's secondary-school graduation, observes in great detail how blood pudding is made by a father and his sons. This particular ritual is obviously chosen because blood ties as established in this patriarchy are such a central thematic issue. Although the ritual is described dispassionately, it is also made ugly from the outset when Hang hears the squealing of the pig waiting to be butchered, until "a sharp screeching, a few rasping grunts, and then it was all over." After three consecutive pages of description of the ritual, Hang has an epiphanic moment: "It was that evening that I felt for the first time the emptiness here,
silence, and loneliness of the countryside. Everywhere, an indescribable backwardness hung in the air, immaterial yet terrifyingly present: It would be like this for eternity. This backwardness seeped into the stillness here, like the brackish waters of the past… a sluggish, liquid sweetness … ready at any moment to drown those unable to rise to its surface." The association with destructive sweetness is to recur. Suffice it to say now that Hang follows up her perceptions of backwardness with a perception of her aunt and how "I finally understood" that, through her, she is "linked to the chains of my past, to the pain of existence." That way happiness does not lie. But since it is her aunt who is to fund her at university, Hang represses the fact.

Important also is that Duong gives Hang a nostalgic attraction to the time-honored foods of her country, because if she is drawn to their smells, textures, and tastes, it will be difficult for her to pull herself away from her native land and traditions. And being what one ingests, food readily symbolizes personal values, thus is the perfect concretion for the issues the book raises. Hang's mother and aunt, who represent the opposing loyalties threatening Hang's being, are emphasized as sources of food, hence values: the aunt through her copious gifts of food to Hang; the mother through the food that she sells as a street vendor to support herself and her child, or, equally as important, the food she gives to her brother Chinh's boys—"my two little drops of Do blood"—instead of her own child, so that, as Hang perceives, "At bottom she was just like Aunt Tam." We have food as necessity and food as luxury; we also have bribery by each of the sisters-in-law for personal gratification: Que to become more important to Chinh as much as to honor her blood, and Tam to secure the heritage of the house she has painstakingly rebuilt. The lavish banquets and generous gifts of food (and some money and jewelry) that mark Aunt Tam's relations with Hang do carry the price that she forever remember Chinh's injustice to her father and his house and disassociate herself from her mother's support of Chinh, hence from her mother as well. When relations between her mother and Aunt Tam are reaching a breaking point, Que, in a symbolic gesture of recognizing her antagonist as such, refuses to eat any of Tam's food. Significantly, food is shown not only as a necessity but, thematically more important, as a pleasure, a means to make life agreeable through gratifying the senses. Like beauty, it is seductive. It can serve as the immediate bit of paradise that lets one forget ugly realities. The corollary, food as cover-up, is forced upon our attention in the description of the Hanoi working-class slum where Hang and Que live, with its street vendors who "hawk their homemade snacks: sticky rice, fried dumplings, steamed rice cakes, spring rolls, snail and crab soups, and other delicacies…. The aroma of onions, crispy dumplings, and red chilies fried in oil filled the air, their fragrances overpowering the stench of the garbage, the open sewers, the walls reeking of rancid urine." The point is made early and repeated later through juxtaposition in another description of the slum, where "food stalls sprung up selling dog-meat dishes, grilled sausage, dried squid and fish, beef marinated in vinegar and red-hot chilies. The street reeled with these tantalizing aromas. Drunks lurched and staggered, relieving themselves against the walls. The buildings were streaked with streams of rancid urine. On hot days, the stench was overpowering." As with the flower in the swamp, the attractive and appealing must be known to have its baser side. However, it is also to be comprehended as what life is: a mix neither base nor ideal.

Sweetness, like the purple duckweed flowers, may also be both balm or delight and threat. Hang's youth is clouded by the stigma of her lack of a father in a very, patriarchal world. When young Hang cries bitterly over not knowing even his name, her mother buys her two sticks of barley sugar to comfort her. Because the fidelity to blood required by Aunt Tam is a threat in its destructive sweetness, when nine-year-old Hang is first brought to the ancestral home, Tam has her drink wine to the ancestors with the prayer "May these deceased souls taste this sweetness," and Hang feels "a dense sugary perfume … intoxicating" in it. Such sweetened gratification of the senses may be tolerable for children; it becomes reprehensible for adults. Food is probably most important to Paradise of the Blind as a medium for the transmission of themes, because it connotes the immediate gratification of the senses. But it is blindness to live only for that. In the days of land reforms, Chinh sets up two ignorant peasants, Bich and Nan, to run the village. Cleverly tied to the story, they anticipate something of the personal conflicts to come, although they also serve for a general statement. They differ in the focus of their immorality. The man Bich is a lazy and filthy-minded drunk, corrupt in spirit (hence a parallel to Chinh); even more pertinent here, the woman Nan, who has a lone daughter, is a glutton,
an abuser of her bodily appetites who cannot stop eating (hence a parallel to Aunt Tam and Que with their food excesses). "When she squatted down in front of a food vendor, she forgot everything"; "incapable of controlling her sweet tooth" and obsessed with food, she destroys her family and her inheritance. The two are Duong's indictment of a nation that debased itself body and soul during the time of land reform and must guard against such corruption again. Fortunately, Hang learns to beware of immediate gratification. She brings home a refrigerator from Russia for her mother but goes on to divest herself of Aunt Tam's legacy. At the outset she had a vision of "a past to which each of us is linked, inextricably, by the ties of blood and race," but in the event it proves possible to extricate oneself by recognizing the link rather as shackles.

What Frank Stewart has said about the short story "Pantomime" by another important Vietnamese woman writer, Phan Thi Vang Anh, is wonderfully applicable to Duong as well, even though the details may differ: this story can be read as indicative of current societal problems, but its central theme can also be understood as a "universal" clash of values between generations "complicated by" Vietnam's past. Duong's Paradise of the Blind likewise reaches across national borders to depict a universal problem without losing its contextual national identity as the site for this particular version of the problem. Nor, although it has analogies to other feminist fictions, does it lose its originality. Undoubtedly, one learns from Paradise of the Blind about the horrors of land reform and about the customs and mores of Vietnam, including its contemporary materialistic corruption and predatory officials. But the novel is just as significant as a quietly emphatic feminist statement about a universal situation: the need for women to choose to control their lives in order to develop their individual potential instead of settling for traditional norms or easy gratification—at least if they are young intellectuals such as Hang. The text is an intricate embroidery of thematic images, and much of the success of the book lies in the concreteness and shapeliness with which its tale of female maturation into freedom of mind is told.

Duong's Novel Without a Name is a eulogy for lost innocence whose soldier protagonist Quan laments, "There is no way back to the source, to the place where the pure, clear water once gushed forth." Memories of a Pure Spring, as its title suggests, concurs by contrasting the debasements of the present with the beauty and promise of the past. Paradise of the Blind, however, devotes itself rather to the need for a woman to grow up avoiding illusions of paradise and, less despairingly, accepts a world that is necessarily neither ideally perfect nor completely corrupt. Its universal themes succeed because they are sustained by credible particulars.


Critical Essays: Critical Overview

Paradise of the Blind was a huge success in Vietnam when first published in 1988. Forty thousand copies were sold before the authorities banned the novel for its critical attitude toward the communist government and its revelations of the disillusionment felt by ordinary Vietnamese with the system under which they lived.

In 1993, as the first novel by a Vietnamese writer to be published in the United States, Paradise of the Blind received respectful and enthusiastic reviews. For a New Yorker reviewer, Duong "fashions a vivid portrait that details unfamiliar vistas of Vietnamese life as finely as it evokes the dilemmas of adolescence." In similar vein, Publishers Weekly noted: "Contrasts between young, old, urban and rural, help to convey the full variety of Vietnamese lifestyles."

Several reviewers commented on the strong characterization of the two female characters, Que and Aunt Tam. Jonathan Mirsky, in the New York Review of Books, thought the novel was the best Vietnamese novel he had read "mainly because of its portrait of the heroine's Aunt Tam." This judgment was supported by Xueping Zhong, in Belles Lettres: A Review of Books by Women, who commented on the strength and self-reliance of
the two women. But Zhong also saw two sides to this resilience in the face of tragedy: "The novel, however, also conveys a strong sense of ambivalence toward the two women's willingness to endure hardship. The desire to preserve family lineage gives the two women strength, yet also debilitates them." Peggie Partello, in *Library Journal*, also commented on the author's depiction of women, writing that "we feel the pain of women living in a male-dominated society where they are on equal footing only with servants."

**Analysis: Paradise of the Blind**

*Paradise of the Blind* by Duong Thu Huong, originally published in 1988, is the first Vietnamese novel translated into English and published in North America. Part of a very popular fictional trilogy about the difficulties and disappointments of average Vietnamese working people, this novel sold forty thousand copies in Vietnam before the government abruptly banned it. Duong’s previous book, published in Vietnam, sold more than one hundred thousand copies. Clearly, this former leader of a Communist youth brigade fighting the South Vietnamese in 1967 and among the first women to join the battle on the northern frontier against China’s 1979 attack upon Vietnam became a dangerous voice in the late 1980’s, as she expressed the people’s growing disillusionment with the government’s inhumanity and inability to lead them politically and spiritually. Arrested in April of 1991 on unsubstantiated charges, Duong was defended by PEN, Amnesty International, and other human rights organizations. She was released from prison seven months later. Undaunted, she continued to write. *Paradise of the Blind* is a story of one family’s survival during the years of chaos as Vietnam fought not only its enemies but its own people as well.

Surprisingly, the novel opens in the 1980’s in the provinces of the Soviet Union, where the central character, Hang, has been sent as an “exported worker” to live in a dormitory among thousands of other emigre’s from Communist satellite countries, crowded four to a room, freezing, hungry, homesick, and bored when they are not engaged in the drudgery of factory work. The events of Hang’s life leading to this place and time are recounted as she rides countless hours on a train to Moscow in deference to her uncle, a corrupt Communist party cadre who has been the cause of her mother’s dislocation from her native village and separation from her husband and who, with his family, has survived ironically only through his sister’s capitalist entrepreneurial efforts which he vehemently and hypocritically condemns.

Duong’s novel depicts a Vietnam caught up from the 1950’s through the 1980’s in turmoil and chaos. When not fighting the French, the Americans, and one another, the people of the northern provinces are victimized by Communist land reform. Villager “landlords” such as Hang’s father, a schoolteacher who inherited his family’s modest home and small amount of land, had to flee to the more remote northern provinces or were sentenced to forced labor camps, while others such as Aunt Tam, a landowner who at harvest time hired a few neighbors to work alongside her in her tiny rice paddy, were dispossessed of their houses and property, which were then occupied by village good-for-nothings subsequently appointed party leaders. Only when the Viet Minh government recognized the anger and misery such actions caused was “reform” abandoned, followed by a national “Rectification of Errors”: Peasant landholders were given back their property, and the Maoist government moved on to the next in its series of ideological campaigns. Duong’s novel personalizes the misery of the working class during these times of political confusion.

*Paradise of the Blind* is essentially a coming-of-age novel set against a backdrop of Southeast Asian politics and culture. Only through the process of confronting her social and economic circumstances—directly resulting from her uncle’s Communist ideology and authority—as well as her family is the protagonist, Hang, able to declare her independence from it all to claim her true self. Acknowledging the influence her family, her class, her ancestors’ village, and her tradition have had upon her, yet distancing herself from them, Hang comes to self-knowledge and fulfillment.
Not until she is ten years old does Hang learn the circumstances that brought her and her mother to the back-alley shanty in Hanoi where they live with other street vendors, all making their paltry livings selling rice, vermicelli, noodles, tea, and sweets. She has suffered the shame of her fatherlessness but cannot penetrate her mother’s silence about it until they return to her mother’s native village. There Hang discovers just how much politics has shaped her life.

The history of Hang’s family reflects the history of Communist ideology in Southeast Asia from the 1950’s to the 1980’s. Orphaned while still a teenager, Hang’s mother maintained the family home as a street vendor while her younger brother, Chinh, was schooled by the new Communist government to assume a party leadership position. While he was away, his sister married a well-regarded schoolteacher from a respectable family. When Chinh returned, he condemned his sister’s husband and hardworking sister-in-law, Tam, as “exploiters of the people.” The schoolteacher escaped to the northern hinterlands, the sister’s beautiful house was confiscated to be occupied by corrupt cadre leaders, and Hang’s mother; forbidden to participate further in capitalist ventures, became not only impoverished but also the object of the villagers’ hatred and resentment because of Chinh’s actions. When the government restored the villagers’ land and houses and Chinh was reassigned, Hang’s mother was forced to leave her village. She escaped to the anonymity of Hanoi. Though her husband was able to make a new life in the north as a teacher with a new wife and children, for ten years his first wife lived alone—until her husband reunited with her only long enough to father a child. She was left to rear their daughter by herself.

When Chinh searches out his sister after many years and sees her poverty and her daily struggle, he offers neither sympathy nor a living, only Communist dogma. He tells her, “In our society, there are only two respectable types of people: the proletariat… and the peasantry. … The rest is nothing. The merchants, the petty tradespeople, they’re only exploiters. You cannot remain with these parasites.” He will not accept a “lousy street vendor for a sister,” though he wants the money from their parents’ middle-class estate (business his sister must attend to) and will later grow fat from the food his sister dearly purchases through her capitalist labor.

In the village Hang meets Aunt Tam, her father’s sister, the embodiment of Vietnamese working-class values and tradition, a symbol of what has been sacrificed to social, political, and economic ideology. Her house, the best furnished and most beautiful in the village, is a tribute to Tam’s ancestors and a result of her hard work and business acumen. When not planting or harvesting rice, Aunt Tam produces and sells noodles. Upon meeting her brother’s daughter, she knows for whom this labor has been spent. In the Confucian tradition of honoring male family members, Tam honors her brother by giving clothes, money, and food to Hang, his daughter. That same tradition compels Hang’s mother to sacrifice everything—food, money, a new roof, her health, and her daughter’s education—for her ungrateful brother, his wife, and sons.

The pages of this novel are filled with food. Every occasion calls for special dishes. The better the delicacy, the greater the honor. The translators provide a glossary of terms primarily defining the dishes Duong describes in her novel. Nina McPherson notes in her introduction, “The Vietnamese reverence for food… is a recurrent theme in Duong Thu Huong’s writing. In predominantly rural cultures like Vietnam, food is often a powerful form of human expression, a currency that, like money, is used to quantify one’s love, respect, or even hatred for another human being.” The food Aunt Tam prepares for Hang, that Hang’s mother lovingly gathers to take to her brother while she does without, reminds them all of a culture constantly threatened and in part already destroyed by the politicians in power. Only the food remains.

In the Soviet Union, Hang recognizes the emptiness of her country’s politics in the further corruption of her uncle. In him, both communism and Confucian tradition collapse. Under the auspices of party political training, Chinh spends his time as little more than a houseboy for his younger countrymen, earning precious money to purchase black-market goods to sell back home at a tidy profit. Family traditions and relationships are undermined when he claims to be ill, requiring Hang—recently recovered from illness herself—to travel
hundreds of miles by train only to discover that he is not ill but simply wants to use her to ship his goods so that no suspicion will be attached to him. Disgusted, Hang takes the long return trip and learns that her mother has been seriously injured, losing her leg and her livelihood in a street accident.

Returning home to Vietnam, Hang clings to what she values most, her mother’s love. Yet Aunt Tam’s kindness, money, food, clothing-her class—drive a wedge between mother and daughter. Aunt Tam’s legacy, the house in the country village, causes strife between those who love each other and destroys the only value that the government had not yet usurped. Duong Thu Huong shows her readers a young woman’s life nearly ruined by unrelenting external circumstances—politics, class, ideology, and tradition. Only by rejecting them all does Hang find peace. Only in claiming a self independent of those destructive forces that are Vietnam can she be free. *Paradise of the Blind* is clearly a novel dealing with politics, but even more it deals with humanness. While it allows Western readers one of their first glimpses into the internal political struggles of Vietnam, it also allows them to see once again the inner conflicts of human beings as they attempt to find themselves and their place in the world. It is a novel of despair and suffering but also ultimately of hope.

**Sources for Further Study**


**Analysis: Historical Context**

**Vietnam from the 1950s to the 1980s**

Vietnam was under the control of the French from the late nineteenth century until the 1950s. In 1945, communists and Vietnamese nationalists combined under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh (originally Nguyen That Thanh, 1890–1969), who made a declaration of Vietnam's independence. The French opposed independence, and in 1946, a long guerilla war began. It ended when the French, whose war effort had been heavily financed by the United States, were defeated at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. This was the end of French colonialism in Indochina. In a cease-fire agreement at Geneva concluded in July, 1954, Vietnam was divided along the 17th parallel. North Vietnam became a communist state, supported by the Soviet Union, and South Vietnam by a
non-communist, U.S.-backed government. This division was meant to be a temporary arrangement until an election could be held in 1956 that would unite the country. But the election never took place, and the 17th parallel became a firm political boundary between two separate nations.

During 1953, even before the final defeat of the French, and continuing until 1956, the North Vietnamese government undertook its land reform campaign, the effects of which on a small village are described in *Paradise of the Blind*. Privately owned land was redistributed to over 1,500,000 peasants. According to Nina McPherson, in her introduction to the Penguin edition of *Paradise of the Blind*, tens of thousands of villagers were arrested and nearly 100,000 "landlord" farmers were sent to forced labor camps by courts often run by illiterate peasants (as is the case in Que's village, in which Bich and Nan, two good-for-nothings, preside over the proceedings).

Recognizing that the land reform movement had been a mistake and had caused widespread social unrest, the North Vietnamese began a campaign to undo it, which was called "Rectification of Errors." People were sent home from labor camps and allowed to reclaim their land. (This is the campaign described in the novel in which Aunt Tam is restored her house and land.)

Following their success against the French, the North Vietnamese began a guerilla campaign to reunite North and South Vietnam. The United States provided financial support to the South Vietnamese and then, starting in 1961, military support. In 1964, the Gulf of Tonkin resolution authorized the administration of President Lyndon Johnson (1908–73) to greatly expand American forces in South Vietnam, following an alleged attack on U.S. ships in the Gulf of Tonkin by North Vietnamese forces. The United States had committed over half a million troops to Vietnam by 1969 but could not defeat the communist guerillas known as the Viet Cong. A cease-fire agreement was signed in 1973, and American forces withdrew. But in 1975, North Vietnamese forces captured the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon. The country was formally unified in 1976 as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

The Vietnamese government announced a five-year plan to rebuild the war-torn economy, which met with only limited success. In 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia, which resulted in a Western economic blockade, and the following year there were border clashes with China. During this period Vietnam was heavily dependent on foreign aid, and imports were three times the value of exports. In 1982, the International Monetary Fund reported that Vietnam needed radical economic restructuring if it was to be able to meet its debts.

In the mid-1980s, a wave of change began to sweep over communist societies throughout the world, stimulated by President Mikhail Gorbachev's policy in the Soviet Union of *perestroika* (openness) and economic reform. Vietnam had close ties with the Soviet Union and since it was continuing to face economic difficulties, exacerbated by cuts in Soviet aid, it too found itself changing course. In 1986, the Vietnamese government adopted a policy of "renovation" which included free market reforms and cultural liberalization.

**Vietnamese Literature in the 1970s and 1980s**

According to Maurice M. Durand and Nguyen Tran Huan, in *An Introduction to Vietnamese Literature*, Vietnamese novels written in the 1970s fell into three main categories: first, the romantic novel, including works based in myth and history; second (in communist North Vietnam), socialist realism that concerned itself with "the achievements of the Party and the anti-Imperialist struggle"; and third, the scholarly type of novel, that concerned itself with preserving Vietnam's cultural heritage. Durand and Huan single out Khai Hung and Nhat Linh as the outstanding Vietnamese novelists of the twentieth century, although they also comment that no Vietnamese author of world class appeared during this period.
In the 1980s, Vietnamese literature began to change, stimulated by the period of "renovation" that began in 1986, in which the government became more tolerant of free expression among writers and artists. The Communist Party even encouraged writers to become social critics. This invitation resulted in a wave of fiction, drama, and films that satirized clumsy, incompetent government bureaucracies and exposed official corruption. This new work was quite different from the novel of socialist realism, in which working-class heroes were presented as perfect examples of revolutionary ideology in action. The new literature presented life in Vietnamese society more realistically, rather than as that life was supposed to be according to communist propaganda. Writers who made names for themselves in this period included Huong and Ngugen Huy Thiep.

But the new freedom of expression had its limits. As Greg Lockhart reports in his introduction to The General Retires and Other Stories, by Ngugen Huy Thiep, in 1988, the editor of a prominent literary magazine was fired, probably because he published a story by Thiep that questioned the moral character of an eighteenth-century Vietnamese hero who defeated an invading Chinese army. Lockhart further notes that in 1990, alarmed by the pace of change in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the Vietnamese government began once more to restrict freedom of expression for writers. The work of the new renovation writers became suddenly hard to find in Vietnamese bookstores and their names disappeared from public view.

Analysis: Literary Style

Imagery

Although Hang regards life as hard and depressing, disfigured by human greed and stupidity, she still manages to cling to hope. This view of life is conveyed by a key image that occurs in chapter 7, that of purple Japanese duckweed growing in ponds. When she is a young girl, the beauty of the purple flower makes a big impression on Hang, and years later, whenever she travels in the Vietnamese countryside, she always contemplates the beauty of these flowers, contrasting them with the ugliness of the murky pools in which they grow and the squalor of the surroundings: "At the center of these stifling landscapes, on a green carpet of weed, those purple flowers always glistened, radiant in the middle of the filth." The duckweed therefore becomes a symbol of hope and beauty emerging from the misery of life. A similar image occurs in chapter 2, where Hang refers to life as "this flower plucked from a swamp."

Setting and Atmosphere

The narrator creates a reflective, often sad atmosphere through her poetic descriptions of the landscapes she remembers, both in Vietnam and Russia. She emphasizes the emotional effects these landscapes had on her. One example occurs in chapter 5, when she describes the first snowfall she ever witnessed, in Russia. The beauty of it "pierced my soul like sorrow." This thought prompts her to recall a moment when she was a girl and her mother had taken her to visit a beach; the beauty of the scene at dawn was so extreme it was painful to Hang, perhaps because it was such a contrast to the reality of her impoverished and insecure life.

Particularly evocative are the descriptions of the slum in Hanoi where Hang grew up. She recreates the sights, smells, sounds of her childhood in all their sensory details: the brick hut in which she lived, with its leaky roof; the sounds of the street vendors as they set up their stalls in the morning and their characteristics cries as they hawk their wares; the voice of the crippled man who always sings the same mournful song; the sounds and smells of many families cooking. There are numerous descriptions of food in the novel; food is important to Hang because in her childhood she sometimes goes hungry, and even at the best of times her diet lacks variety. On occasions, too, her mother gets sick because of lack of adequate food. Therefore, as Hang grows up she always notices and records in great detail occasions when food is present in abundance and variety, such as the feasts put on by Aunt Tam. Such occasions, suggesting the resilience and goodness of life, act as a
counterweight to the adversity that in general characterizes the lives of the Vietnamese people.

Analysis: Compare and Contrast

- **1950s:** The communists, known as the Viet Minh, fight in Vietnam to throw off French rule. The French do not believe that as a great colonial power they can be vanquished by ill-equipped Vietnamese guerillas. For years the pattern is that the French hold the cities while the Viet Minh grow stronger in the countryside, where they have overwhelming popular support. In 1954, the French are defeated in a decisive battle at the small town of Dien Bien Phu.

1980s: In the early 1980s, the independent, united republic of Vietnam is at a low level of development. The war involving Vietnamese forces in Cambodia has a negative effect on the economy. In the late-1980s, the Vietnamese government begins to take steps toward a free market economy.

Today: Vietnam remains a one-party communist state. However, in the early 2000s, the government has promoted economic liberalization and structural reforms designed to modernize the economy and produce more industries that can compete in the international market. The economy shows continual growth, increasing by 7 percent from 2000 to 2004, although 28.9 percent of the population still live below the official poverty line.

- **1950s:** Global politics is dominated by the cold war between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. The United States pursues a policy known as "containment," in which it seeks to limit communist expansion around the globe. This policy is understood to be the reason why the United States becomes involved in the struggle in Vietnam, supporting South Vietnam against the Soviet-backed North Vietnam.

1980s: In the late 1980s, following the economic and political reforms of Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev, the cold war begins to come to a close. The nations of Eastern Europe throw off over forty years of communist rule. In 1989, the Berlin Wall that has divided the city of Berlin into Western and Eastern (communist) sectors, comes down, and East and West Germany are unified within a year.

Today: The cold war is a relic of the past. The Soviet Union no longer exists, and Russia is no longer a communist state. Many formerly communist Eastern European nations are now members of NATO, the Western defense alliance. The Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland join NATO in 1999 followed in 2005 by Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia (which was part of the former Yugoslavia), and three states formerly under Soviet control, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The focus of NATO shifts from defending the West against communism to fighting international terrorism.

- **1950s:** The United States begins its involvement in Vietnam by financially supporting the French as they battle the communist guerilla army under Ho Chi Minh. After the French are defeated and Vietnam is divided, the goal of the United States is to establish a stable, non-communist South Vietnam.

1980s: The United States maintains its longstanding trade embargo against Vietnam. It also continues to press Vietnam for information and cooperation regarding the fate of American servicemen listed as prisoners of war (POW) or missing in action (MIA) during the Vietnam War. Vietnam begins economic reforms leading to a market economy and withdraws its forces from Cambodia. Both actions help to end Vietnam's isolation in the international community.

Today: In 2005, Vietnamese prime minister Phan Van Khai meets with President George W. Bush at
the White House. He is the first head of Vietnam's communist government to visit the United States. The United States is Vietnam's biggest trading partner, and Vietnam applies to join the World Trade Organization. In July 2005, Vietnam celebrates ten years of relations with the United States at a series of events in Washington, D.C. The United States and Vietnam resumed full diplomatic relations in 1995.

**Analysis: Topics for Further Study**

- Some of the most memorable passages in the novel occur when Hang describes the effect on her of certain landscapes, including her first sight of snow falling in Russia, and her impressions of Along Bay that immediately follow (chapter 5). Write a paragraph describing the effect on you of a particularly striking scene in nature that you had not seen before. How did it make you feel? Why was it so memorable?
- As she grows up, Hang rejects many things in her culture and forms her own values. Describe how you have developed your own moral values. How do you decide what you believe in? To what extent has American culture (as found in television, books, movies and music, etc.) influenced or changed your values? In what ways do your values differ from those of your parents? What experiences have been most influential in the formation of your own value system?
- Research single-parent families in the United States. How many children grow up in single-parent families? Is the head of the household usually the mother or the father? Is the number of such families increasing, when compared to twenty years ago? If it is, why is this so? What are some of the challenges faced by children growing up in single-parent families? What challenges do the parents face?
- Since the Vietnam war ended, over half a million Vietnamese people have immigrated to the United States. What were the political and economic reasons that led them to leave their native country? What has their experience been in the United States? Where have they mostly settled? What professions have they entered? How have they adapted to American culture?

**Analysis: What Do I Read Next?**

- *Duong's Memories of a Pure Spring*, translated by Phan Huy Duong and Nina McPherson (2000), is set in Vietnam after the American war. It chronicles the disillusionment experienced by a composer, Hung, and his wife Suong, a singer, with the political system whose victory they helped to bring about. Hung was formerly enthusiastic about the revolutionary ideology, but he sees his former wartime comrades installed in high-ranking bureaucratic positions which they use to further their own material interests. When Hung is falsely accused of trying to flee Vietnam in a boat, he is "reeducated" in a prison, after which the authorities make it almost impossible for him to earn a living.
- In *Vietnam, Now* (2003), veteran journalist David Lamb returns to Vietnam for the first time since he reported on the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s. His book is a readable, subjective account, rather than a scholarly analysis, of Vietnam as it in the early 2000s. He describes the places he visits and the people he meets and gives historical information about the country.
- *Love after War: Contemporary Fiction from Vietnam* (2003) edited by Wayne Karlin and Ho Anh Thai, is a wide-ranging collection of fifty short stories by contemporary Vietnamese writers. Particularly interesting are the sixteen stories grouped under the heading, "Love in a Time of Renovation," dating from the 1980s to the early 2000s, in which writers examine the failings of the communist system and also of the consumer society created by the free market reforms of the late-1980s, which appears to have undermined traditional Vietnamese cultural ideals.
- *The Sorrow of War* (1994), by Bao Ninh, is a novel about the Vietnam War by a Vietnamese writer who fought on the side of the communists. Reviewers have described it as fierce and emotionally
gripping although sometimes hard to follow. The protagonist is the soldier Kien, who looks back just after the war has ended and relives some of his experiences, interspersing his account with childhood memories, dreams, and scenes from his postwar life.

- *Understanding Vietnam* (1995), by Neil L. Jamieson, provides a portrait of twentieth-century Vietnam. Against the background of traditional Vietnamese culture, Jamieson, who lived and worked for many years in Vietnam, discusses modern Vietnamese history and Western involvement in the country, from the coming of the French in 1858 through the Vietnam War and its aftermath. He allows the Vietnamese to speak for themselves through poetry, fiction, essays, newspaper editorials, and reports of interviews and personal experiences.

- *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family* (2000) by Duong Van Mai Elliott, is a family saga that gives an intimate portrait of the history of twentieth-century Vietnam. Elliott is a Vietnamese woman who studied in the United States and married an American in 1964. The couple moved to Saigon, then the capital of South Vietnam. Elliott was not a communist and at first supported the U.S. intervention, but by 1969, she was advocating American withdrawal. She describes the traditional values of her culture and explains the divisions created in her family by the political turmoil: her eldest sister was a convinced communist, while one of her brothers was imprisoned by the Viet Cong.

**Bibliography: Bibliography and Further Reading**

**Sources**


**Further Reading**

This is a review of *Paradise of the Blind* in which Duffy describes Duong as "a social
panoramist who writes with a tight focus on individual consciousness and personal relations."
He also discusses Duong's work in the broader context of other contemporary Vietnamese
writers and the oppressive political atmosphere in which they write.


Eads traveled to Hanoi to interview Duong, and they met in a hotel room, despite the fact that
Eads did not have permission from the government to speak to her, which is required of
foreign journalists. The article tells the story of her life and pays tribute to the courage she has
shown in standing up to the repressive government in Vietnam.


This is a detailed, sympathetic account of the land reform movement as it affected North
Vietnamese villages in the time span covered by the novel.


In this review, Stephenson praises Duong's realistic Further Reading portrayal of life in
Vietnam. The novel conveys a "deep, disturbing sense of pain and injustice"; it is a
"devastating indictment of conditions in contemporary Vietnam."

**Bibliography**

**Sources for Further Study**


