The Feminist Artistry of Vietnam’s Duong thu Huong
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Notice of the three translated novels by the contemporary Vietnamese writer Duong Thu Huong appears to be largely restricted to favorable reviews focusing on her political message or sociological context. For example, Herbert Mitgang in the New York Times admires how her first novel to be translated into English, Paradise of the Blind (orig. 1988; transl. 1993), “humanizes a Vietnamese family . . . instead of lumping them together as the once faceless enemy.” Heather Stephenson in the New England Review praises how Duong’s “realistic portrait of Vietnam’s daily tragedies conveys a deep, disturbing sense of pain and injustice” and presents “a devastating indictment of conditions in contemporary Vietnam” (172, 174), even as Terry McCarthy in Time International finds that she “has become the most poignant chronicler of the country’s disillusionment” (48).

Duong herself has declared her refusal to stop nipping at Hanoi’s heels as “a solitary female wolf” (“Enemy,” 99); if she was not an enemy of her government in 1993, as Dan Duffy has declared in The Nation (494), she was and remains an enemy to establishment corruption.

But while Duong’s considerable disillusionment with the moral bankruptcy of communist Vietnam, evident in all her novels, has predictably found a very appreciative audience in the Western world, her feminist sympathies have been ignored. A short 1994 review in Belles Lettres by Xueping Zhong, a professor of Chinese language and literature, suggests where more emphasis should have come from reviewers when it says quite simply: “Although Paradise of the Blind describes the condition of women in a revolutionary climate, it is not just a political novel. . . . It is a novel about people’s lives, specifically women’s lives, in contemporary Vietnam” (64). To be concerned with women’s lives is feminism at its most valuable and its most characteristic. Political awareness and historical truth have been inspi-
rational rather than definitive for Duong and have energized her imagination but not constrained it within their limits.

Looking beyond the lost Vietnamese illusions and the informational qualities Duong provides, she is a consummate artist, skilled in the resources of the novel, especially the communicative value of imagery, which she uses to moralistic ends: to address how life should be lived. In *Paradise of the Blind*, her themes are not only Vietnamese; they are also familiar humanist and feminist ones. Because we focus so much on cultural plurality nowadays as to forget the possibility of some universality too, and on context rather than text, it is worth demonstrating how Duong Thu Huong’s thematic concerns and her artistry transcend the political truths and facts of the moment.

Since Duong (b. 1947) is not widely known in the United States, it is also worth pointing out that her political antipathies and much of her subject matter come out of her own life as a North Vietnamese. The daughter of a teacher mother and a tailor father (Nguyễn, 410), she knew that her father fought with Ho Chi Minh’s guerrillas against the French colonial regime and received a hero’s welcome home in the communist North. She herself as a child was filled with patriotic fervor, though the truth of the disastrous land reforms of the 1950s provided her as an adult with a sobering background for the characterization and action of *Paradise of the Blind*. After attending an arts college in Hanoi, where she studied music, dance, and painting — her imagery has a very painterly quality — although not a party member, she volunteered in 1968 to lead a Communist Youth Brigade of musicians. Its mission, as she recalled in an interview, was to “sing louder than the bombs” and give theatrical, morale-boosting performances — but also to tend the wounded and bury the dead. She served for seven years and was one of only three women in her troupe to survive the manifold horrors the group endured (Eads, 160). Her *Novel Without a Name* (orig. 1990; Eng. 1995), told from the point of view of a soldier ten years after he enlisted as a naïvely patriotic eighteen-year-old, draws on her profound disillusionment with war. Her experiences as a touring artist, meanwhile, occasioned her most recently available novel, *Memories of a Pure Spring* (orig. 1997; Eng. 2000), which treats of the postwar fortunes of two members of an artists’ troupe, principally a composer whose career is destroyed by a political rival and who finally commits suicide in despair of what his life has become, and his wife, a singer whose life is destroyed by his decline.

After the “American War,” while working as a screenwriter at a Hanoi film studio, Duong began writing and distributing critical pamphlets expressing her disillusionment with the corruption and elitism of the
ruling group. Only her exemplary war record saved her from punishment more severe than being fired from her job. Feeling that she could better fight for human rights from within the establishment, she joined the Communist Party in the 1980s, but her outspoken criticisms resulted in her expulsion in 1989 (Eads, 162-63; “A Note,” 269). Paradise of the Blind so scandalized party authorities in 1988 by its denunciation of the Maoist-type land reforms of 1953-56 that the book was withdrawn from publication. In 1991, after sending the manuscript of Novel Without a Name abroad, Duong was arrested and held without trial for seven months on charges of “sending state secrets abroad” (McPherson, 340) and subsequently had her passport revoked. Her novels can no longer be published in North Vietnam, though she continues to live there. In her first novel, “Beyond Illusions” (1987) — like her third novel, “Fragments of a Lost Life” (1989), as yet untranslated — she presented a heroine confronted everywhere by cynicism and dishonesty but convinced that morality, liberty, and personal dignity remain the goals worth striving for (Eads, 162). That defines her life story and has remained her creed, evident in all her novels, especially in Paradise of the Blind.

Both Novel Without a Name in its portrayal of a soldier and Memories of a Pure Spring in its portrait of a composer protagonist show Duong’s skill at impersonating male characters; she is reputed to have said in a 1990 interview that as a writer she does not think of herself as a woman. But Duong is most moving when she speaks from the female point of view, as she does in Paradise of the Blind, originally published in Vietnamese by the Women’s Publishing House in Hanoi, with the English translation by arrangement with the Parisian publisher Des Femmes (the U.S. translation is a collaborative effort between Phan Huy Duong, translator of the French edition, and Nina McPherson, an American resident in Paris [Duffy, 494]). Paradise reflects Duong’s passionate concern with women’s imprisoned lives in Vietnamese culture, “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. . . . My country, in the 1980s,” as her narrator Hang bitterly observes (130). This is not, however, a consciousness-raising text, except for its heroine; its space is not expended on showing patriarchal male mistreatment of females, but rather on the more subtle issue of how destructive loyalties may be and how one must have the courage to recognize their threat and forgo ease for the sake of autonomy. Like many feminist novels, it highlights female relationships as definitive, paying very close attention to power relations between women and their implications for gendering. There is also an implied message. As Buchi Emecheta’s Nigerian Nnu Ego says in The Joys of Motherhood (1979), “It is still a man’s world, which women will always help to build” (187).

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” (139-40). Both are fools’ paradies, 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” (248). 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” (257).

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” (17), 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” (74). 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” (101), 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” (87). 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 brother — her only brother — had asked for my help. He was sick, and here I was, preparing to abandon him. (14)

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” (34).

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” (*PB*, 115) to engage in self-sacrifice — and hence how doubly dangerous and binding. 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” (109). 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” (172). 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. (70)

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” (72). 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” (70).

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” (43, 90). 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” (127). 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” (39). 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” (39). 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 promises” (130). But when she is older, they are seen against the reality that nourishes them and thus become at once “the purest balm and the most overpowering poison” (131). 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” (131). 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” (83) — or the universal beauty of snow in Russia — “light sparked off . . . in blinding shards, frail and luminous as a childhood dream” (82) — for “Beauty knows no frontiers, seduces without discrimination. The snow spilled onto the earth as if the sky had welled over with flowers” (83). 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” (85-86). 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” (85).

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 (41-42); 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 (9), 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, ex-

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.

plaits 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" (140). 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" (143). 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" (143). 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” (111). 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 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” (27); “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” (68), 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 (viii). 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 fiction, 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” (148). Memories of a Pure Spring, as its title suggests, concurs by contrastingly depicting 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.

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