

MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN THE WORKS OF VIETNAMESE AUTHORS LIVING IN GERMANY

Dissertation

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INTRODUCTION

1. Migration in Vietnam

Vietnam, a country with high levels of geographical mobility, has experienced numerous periods of both domestic and international migration. The history of Vietnam means that it has witnessed the expansion of regions and the migration of people in various directions, mainly from the North to the South¹ and from the south-west to the Lower Mekong.² From the early seventeenth century, the Vietnamese migrated to Cambodia. They are political or religious victims, landless people, fishermen, cross-border smugglers, and criminals. Since the late seventeenth century, there have been Vietnamese Catholic villages in Cambodia.³ In addition, the whole coastal region between the Mekong Delta estuaries and the Malay Peninsula witnessed the “frequent movements of people and exchanges of commodities and cultural practices among Viets, Siamese, Mon-Khmer, and Malays with Chinese settlers, sojourners and junk traders”⁴ in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Under the theme of internal migration, a vast number of studies have explored key patterns of domestic migration, especially in the post-war and reform periods, both in the form of forced migration and spontaneous migration. For example, the migratory paths from rural to urban or from rural to rural are discussed by Dang Nguyen Anh⁵, Minh Nguyen⁶ and Luong Van Hy⁷. Andrew Hardy also discusses migration in the other

¹ Li Tana 2004, “The Water Frontier: An Introduction”, 11; K.W.Taylor 1993, “Nguyen Hoang and the Beginning of Viet Nam’s Southward Expansion”, 42-65; Li Tana (trans.) 2007, *Trấn Tây phong thổ ký* [The customs of the Western Commandery]. (c. 1838), 148–156; Nguyễn Đăng Thục 1970, “Nam tiến Việt Nam”, 25-43; Phù Lang Trương Bá Phát 1970, “Lịch sử cuộc Nam tiến của dân tộc Việt Nam”, 45-137.

² Nguyễn Văn Hầu 1970, “Sự thôn thuộc và khai thác đất Tầm Phong Long-Chặng cuối cùng của cuộc Nam Tiến,” 3-24.

³ Also, the establishment of military colonies in Trấn Tây³ (The Western protectorate) resulted in the Vietnamese migration to Cambodia. For further reference of Minh Mạng’s orders to expand the state to the southwestern frontier by setting up population and plantation, see further in Viện Khoa học Xã hội Việt Nam-Viện Sử học 2004, *Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn Đại Nam thực lục Tập 4*.

⁴ Li Tana 2004, “The Water Frontier: An Introduction”, 2.

⁵ Dang Nguyen Anh 2017, “Rural-to-urban migration in Vietnam: Trend and institutions”, 158-170.

⁶ Minh Nguyen, “Fictitious Kinship: Intimacy, Relatedness and Boundaries in the Life of Hanoi’s Migrant Domestic Workers”, 81- 96.

⁷ Hy Van Luong 2012, “Multiple Narratives on Migration in Vietnam and Their Methodological Implications”, 107-124.

direction, i. e. from the Red River Delta to highland areas in the twentieth century.⁸ Internal migration in Vietnam in modern times is also the prominent theme in several other studies, for example in research conducted by Dang Nguyen Anh⁹, Karl Miller¹⁰ and Christopher Goscha¹¹. Research has been long interested in explaining the motives of migration in which both “pull” factors, destination-specific incentives, and “push” factors, those at the places of origin, were counted. Generally, migration is a key response of individuals to political conflicts and difficulties in their lives, as well as the promise of better economic and educational opportunities.¹²

The migration process not only leads to the expansion of national territory and the diversity of ethnic communities within Vietnam but also the formation of Vietnamese community groups in other countries. The first migration cases of Vietnamese people started with small groups studying overseas in France and later in Hong Kong. According to the scholar Phan Khoang, a group of Vietnamese teenagers who were sent to Portugal by the Nguyễn Lord Nguyễn Phúc Khoát to study Portuguese in 1744, were the first Vietnamese people to go overseas to learn a language.¹³ There was a small number of children, mostly from influential families, who were sent to Catholic schools in France in 1865. The number consisted of ninety men studying in France by 1870.¹⁴ In 1878, King Tự Đức issued terms and decrees on studying foreign languages and apprenticeships abroad to create conditions for people who went abroad to serve the court upon their

⁸ His research not only discusses the migration and resettlement campaigns by the state from 1945 to 1954 but also the experiences of the migrants. See further in Andrew Hardy and Red Hills 2003, *Migrants and the State in the Highlands of Vietnam*.

⁹ Dang Nguyen Anh 1999, “Market Reforms and Internal labor migration in Vietnam”, 381-409.

¹⁰ Karl Miller, “From Humanitarian to Economic; The Changing Face of Vietnamese Migration”, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/humanitarian-economic-changing-face-vietnamese-migration>.

¹¹ See further in Christopher Goscha 2016, *Vietnam A New History*.

¹² Ian Coxhead, Nguyen Viet Cuong, Linh Hoang Vu 2015, “Migration in Vietnam: New Evidence from Recent Surveys”, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/969411468197949288/pdf/102310-NWP-Migration-in-Vietnam-Nov-18-clean-Box-394830B-PUBLIC.pdf>; Anh LT, Hoang Vu L, Bonfoh B, Schelling E 2012. “An analysis of interprovincial migration in Vietnam from 1989 to 2009”, 1–12.

¹³ Phan Khoang 1961, *Việt Nam Pháp thuộc sử 1884-1945*, 125.

¹⁴ Scott McConnell 1989, *Leftward Journey The Education of Vietnamese Students in France 1919-1939*, 5.

return.¹⁵ However, the number of Vietnamese people traveling abroad during this period was not large.

The first wave of Vietnamese migration dates back to the nineteenth century during Minh Mạng's reign, when the northern and southern parts of Houaphan, Northeast Laos, became the Vietnamese territories (Trần Ninh).¹⁶ Since the first massive migrations of the Vietnamese to Laos at the end of the nineteenth century, there were "several hundred families and sometimes even whole village communities moved across the Lao-Annamite frontier, crossing the old frontier region."¹⁷ Also, the French began recruiting Vietnamese labour to work for the French government in Laos in the 1890s.¹⁸ The Vietnamese emigrants in the nineteenth century to Asian countries are explained by Priscilla Koh as the result of "the shifting dynastic fortunes, local wars or religious oppression by Vietnamese kings."¹⁹

The second wave of migration took place during the French colonial period (1859-1954) in Vietnam. The late nineteenth century witnessed a large number of Vietnamese people migrating to Laos and Cambodia, which was the result of "the administrative and economic development of French Indochina."²⁰ Besides, a large group of Vietnamese laborers was hired to build the Indochina-Yunnan railway in the Southwest China at the beginning of the twentieth century.²¹ There were also a number of the indentured workers, mostly the Northern Vietnamese, who were mainly hired to work in the nickel mines in New Caledonia in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.²² During World War I, the Vietnamese were recruited to work in "factories, military industrial complexes,

¹⁵ Phan Khoang 1961, *Việt Nam Pháp thuộc sử 1884-1945*, 125.

¹⁶ Oliver Tappe 2015, "A Frontier in the Frontier: Socio-political Dynamics and Colonial Administration in the Lao-Vietnamese Borderlands", 371.

¹⁷ Oliver Tappe 2015, "A Frontier in the Frontier: Socio-political Dynamics and Colonial Administration in the Lao-Vietnamese Borderlands", 378.

¹⁸ Ian G. Baird et al 2019, "Land Grabs and Labour: Vietnamese Workers on Rubber Plantations in Southern Laos", 50-70.

¹⁹ Priscilla Koh 2015, "You Can Come Home Again: Narratives of Home and Belonging among Second-Generation Việt Kiều in Vietnam", 175.

²⁰ Thomas Engelbert 2004, "From Hunters to Revolutionaries. The Mobilisation of Ethnic Minorities in Southern Laos and North-Eastern Cambodia during the First Indochina War 1945-1954", 227.

²¹ The Indochina-Yunnan railway is initiated by French colonial authorities, connected ports of Hải Phòng to Hanoi, Vietnam and Kunming in Yunnan Province of China. See further in Jean-Francois Rousseau, "An imperial railway failure: the Indochina-Yunnan railway, 1898-1941", 10. See also in Virginia Thompson 1937, *French Indo-China*, 207-212.

²² Virginia Thompson 1937, *French Indo-China*, 163.

chemical plants, hospitals, military camps, offices, shops and stores” and other agricultural sectors.²³ By 1915, a total number of 140,000 soldiers and labourers were sent to Europe.²⁴

The Vietnamese did not only migrate for employment opportunities but they also went to France to study, both during and after World War I. There were about 3000 students sent to France to study during the World War I period, which is not as many as those who came to France after World War II. France is where the contingents of students learnt not only intellectual skills but also discovered how “communism and fascism were vital, growing and dynamic faiths - a circumstance that could not help but have an enduring influence on the political attitudes of the students and, eventually, on the societies to which they returned.”²⁵ Besides France, a large number of Vietnamese people, mostly from the provinces of Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh, were exiled to Japan to search for a new way to expel the French in Vietnam or they went to China to join anti-French groups in the 1920s.²⁶ By 1907, there were over one hundred Vietnamese, mostly from Cochinchina, who went to study overseas in Japan.²⁷ Through migration, the Vietnamese established patriotic and political organizations in the twentieth century. Many anti-colonial nationalists organizations were based in Asian countries, such as Japan, Thailand, Laos, or China.²⁸

France is once again the most favoured destination for the Vietnamese immigrants after World War I, which marked the third wave of Vietnamese migration. Like in World War I, the influx of Vietnamese mostly consisted of laborers and a small number of soldiers. During the peak of the migration during the period from 1940 to 1946, the Vietnamese people who migrated to France numbered nearly 25,000 people, including both workers and intellectuals.²⁹ From 1947 onwards, there was also the arrival of

²³ Vu-Hill Kimloan, “Indochinese Workers in France (Indochina)”, DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10373](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10373); Vu-Hill, Kimloan, “Coolies into Rebels. Impact of World War I on French Indochina”, 121-25.

²⁴ Virginia Thompson 1937, *French Indo-China*, 90.

²⁵ Scott McConnell 1989, *Leftward Journey The Education of Vietnamese Students in France 1919-1939*, xiv; Virginia Thompson 1937, *French Indo-China*, 285-6.

²⁶ K.W. Taylor 2013, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 485-6.

²⁷ K.W. Taylor 2013, *A History of the Vietnamese*, 488. See further in Scott McConnell 1989, *Leftward Journey The Education of Vietnamese Students in France 1919-1939*.

²⁸ Priscilla Koh 2015, “You Can Come Home Again: Narratives of Home and Belonging among Second-Generation Việt Kiều in Vietnam”, 175.

²⁹ Virginia Thompson 1952, “The Vietnamese Community in France”, 49.

Vietnamese businessmen and refugees who had close relations with the colonial government and those who married French colonists³⁰ and a large number of Vietnamese, especially those holding French citizenship, who repatriated to France during this period.³¹

Although there were several motives provoking the Vietnamese emigration from the nineteenth to the mid of the twentieth century, including war, poverty, power fluctuations and the search for better lives, most of the Vietnamese diaspora were formed chiefly in the context of Vietnam War. This is the fourth wave of migration in Vietnam. The year of 1975 could be seen as the time during which many were uprooted and led to the Vietnamese refugee crisis, which happened after the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam in South Vietnam. The collapse of the Republic of Vietnam in 1975 caused a large number of Vietnamese to flee to many foreign countries, chiefly because of their close ties to the US and other Western countries. This event resulted in the greatest ever traumatic journey of Vietnamese (approximately one million people) and the formation of the current overseas Vietnamese community all over the world, which exists in the USA, Australia, France, West Germany, and other Western countries.³²

The last wave of the Vietnamese migration, mostly in Central and Eastern Europe, started in the 1980s and is ongoing today. It is worth noting that the transnational movements of the Vietnamese to these countries took place from the 1950s when there were tens of thousands of the Vietnamese coming to these places to study and work.³³ Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese migrants went to East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and the USSR to work in factories under contract-based employment in the 1980s.³⁴ These Vietnamese contract workers not only filled the shortage of labor, especially low-

³⁰ Ibid., 49.

³¹ Louis-Jacques Dorais 1998, "Vietnamese Communities in Canada, France and Denmark, 113.

³² See further in Nghia M. Vo 2006, *The Vietnamese boat people, 1954 and 1975-1992*; Karl Miller, "From Humanitarian to Economic: The Changing Face of Vietnamese Migration", *Migration Information Source*, April 29, 2015, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/humanitarian-economic-changing-face-vietnamese-migration>.

³³ Grażyna Szymańska-Matusiewicz, "The Vietnamese Communities in Central and Eastern Europe as Part of the Global Vietnamese Diaspora", June 2015, <http://ceemr.uw.edu.pl/vol-4-no-1-june-2015/editorial/vietnamese-communities-central-and-eastern-europe-part-global>, 5-10.

³⁴ Alamgir A. 2014, *Socialist Internationalism at Work*. Ph.D. dissertation. Rutgers University, Graduate School-New Brunswick. Online: <https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/43944> (accessed: 15 June 2015).

cost labor, in their receiving countries but also provided financial support to Vietnam by sending remittances.³⁵

Contributing to the fifth wave of Vietnamese migrants are Vietnamese students studying abroad.³⁶ The majority of the Vietnamese students are self-funded, which make up 90 percent of the group compared to 10 percent who are state-sponsored students.³⁷ Therefore, the self-funded students aim to maintain themselves in the host countries by finding well-paid jobs and working in a competitive environment after their graduation.³⁸ Aside from students, the migration through transnational marriage generates a considerable outward migratory flow from Vietnam. Although Vietnamese women have married or registered for marriage with foreigners from some 50 different countries, most of them marry South Korean and Taiwanese men. The marriages in these cases are mostly due to difficult economic conditions, especially for Vietnamese brides living in rural areas.³⁹ Last but not least, human trafficking, especially of women and children, was alarmingly also recorded in Vietnam. According to the Trafficking in Persons Report 2010, “Vietnam is a source and destination country for men, women, and children subjected to trafficking in persons, specifically conditions of forced prostitution and forced labor.”⁴⁰ These victims, mostly poorly educated and unemployed women and children, were transferred across the borders, mainly Vietnam-China and Vietnam-Cambodia borders, and sold to criminal organizations abroad.

2. Purpose of the research

In the case of the Vietnamese community in Germany, the formation of the largest Vietnamese groups is explained by the political context of the Vietnam War and the end of the Cold War. Germany was one of the European countries that the Vietnamese refugees went to after 1975. Ten years later, groups of Vietnamese, mostly in the Northern provinces, emigrated voluntarily to Germany as contract workers under the bilateral

³⁵ Schwenkel C. 2014, “Rethinking Asian Mobilities: Socialist Migration and Postsocialist Repatriation of Vietnamese Contract Workers in East Germany”, 235–258.

³⁶ See further in Ministry of Education and Training 2009, *The Legal Regulations on the Organization and Operation of Schools*.

³⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Viet Nam 2012, *Review of Vietnamese Migration Abroad*, 17.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of State, “Trafficking in Persons Report 2010”, 349. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/142984.pdf>.

agreement between the Vietnamese and German governments. The end of the Cold War, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and especially the reunification of East and West Germany transformed the residence status for these former contract workers, both voluntarily and involuntarily. The controversial debates surrounding these historic events display conflicting discourses and multi-dimensional understanding of how the histories of warring parties were perceived and interpreted by both insiders and outsiders. For the boat people, their memories were closely associated with their trauma, the war, and their loss. These identities were not only created through the individual's experiences but among those who considered themselves having "the same boat". For them, they and their "comrades" had fought for human fashion while their enemies, whoever they were, were perceived as inhuman.⁴¹ For the former contract workers, memories and identities were formed from a different perspective. Their migration was provoked mostly by economic motivations, though it was greatly affected by political changes that occurred later on. Their starting points had less to do with trauma. Therefore, their memory and identity revealed less of how they perceived the past but more of how they dealt with their livelihood in daily lives. Apart from the two main groups of the Vietnamese diaspora in Germany, there are waves of Vietnamese arriving in Germany for family reunification or as students. For these groups, memories and identities vary greatly, as they depended on the individuals and their circumstances. Therefore, the narratives of the Vietnamese diaspora were not only set against the backdrop of the trauma in former South Vietnam but also the mass migration provoked by the search for a higher standard of living, better job, and educational opportunities.⁴²

Vietnamese diaspora literature has been formed in the context of historical and social changes in both places of origin and settlement. The ups and downs of history have become vivid facts that are reflected in literature, which contributes to the formation of diaspora literature with its variety of topics and richness of genres. Since 1979, with the creation of the first compositions written by Venerable Thích Như Điển (published by Viên Giác Center-the Buddhist Socio-cultural Center in the Federal Republic of Germany), the Vietnamese diaspora literature in Germany has experienced forty years of

⁴¹ Viet Thanh Nguyen 2016, "A Novel Intervention: Remembering the Vietnam War", 69.

⁴² See further in Andrew Hardy 2002, "From a Floating World: Emigration to Europe from Post-War Vietnam", 463-84.

formation and development. Still, there has not been any in-depth research on this field of Vietnamese literature in Germany so far. Given the fluctuations of historical and social circumstances, what kind of realities did Vietnamese immigrants to Germany face? How did they reflect these through their writing? What can be concluded about memory and identity from their literature? These questions have inspired my curiosity to research the memory and identity of the Vietnamese diaspora as explored in their writings through this dissertation *Memory and Identity in the Works of Vietnamese Authors living in Germany*. This is my first reason for conducting this research.

Centred on the two key concepts of memory and identity, this study focuses on works written in Vietnamese by Vietnamese writers living in the Federal Republic of Germany. Let us imagine the destiny of the literature composed by a foreign community and in this community's native language. Diaspora literature is itself minority literature. And to call literature as the "minor" implies that it is different from the major work, its temporary existence as compared to the major and even its problems can be only solved in and through the major.⁴³ Writing from within a minority group is like falling into a persistent dilemma of both defining your own voices and mediating your own values to the world of which you are both a part and alien to. My second purpose, therefore, is to record the literary perspective of the marginalized people, whose voices have been either ignored or misrepresented in the conventional mainstream.

Although Vietnamese diaspora literature established its presence more than forty years ago, there have been very few full length-studies of Vietnamese authors living in Germany. The restraints of geographic distance and political censorship can be taken into account for this limitation. As a result of Vietnamese innovation of culture and education in 1986, now it is the time for Vietnamese literature to be seriously and officially studied to (1) eliminate misunderstandings or distortions of the Vietnamese diaspora literature in particular; (2) make a positive impact on the progress of global interaction and integration of Vietnamese literature in general. This is my third purpose in pursuit of the project.

⁴³ Timothy Laurie and Rimi Khan 2017, "The Concept of Minority for the Study of Culture", 2.

3. Theoretical framework

The study of diaspora literature is an interdisciplinary study in which literary works are analyzed and compared in relation to historical and social circumstances. To clarify the issues of memory and identity in Vietnamese diaspora literature, the theoretical system used in this study is compiled from the theories of diaspora studies, memory studies and cultural studies. Various interpretations of the diaspora studies will be presented earlier in this section, followed by my applying of memory, identity, and nostalgia.

3.1. Diaspora studies

The Greek word *diasporá*, stems from the verb *diaspeirein*, a combination of “dia” (over or through) and “speirein” (to scatter or sow). Basically, diaspora refers to scattering and dispersal. In its original Greek sense, diaspora focused on the process of destruction, the “decomposition of matter and its dissolution into smaller parts.”⁴⁴ It was even used to refer to the colonization of the Greek to Asia Minor and the Mediterranean in the Archaic period (800-600 BC). From the outset, the term implied a positive connotation.⁴⁵ When it appears in the Hebrew scriptures Septuagint to apply to Jewish history, diaspora describes “the spiritual dimension of divinely imposed exile.”⁴⁶ In this case, this conception of diaspora closely associates with the theory of human salvation. The scattering of the Jewish people was explained as their being obedient to God’s law in the hope of being rewarded one day by the return to the land of Israel. This sense of return, therefore, evokes the spiritual rather than a geographical journey: “The Jewish conception - which decisively influenced all others - was therefore forward-looking, anticipating eventual redemption, rather than a simple lament over exile.”⁴⁷

As shown in the case of the Jews, the very early concept of diaspora is closely associated with the dispersal from original geographical places, the longing and return for home. The Jewish classical case, in which the dispersal was usually forced and the return was denied, emphasizes the importance of home with “roots, soil and kinship”⁴⁸,

⁴⁴ Kevin Kenny 2013, *Diaspora. A Very Short Introduction*, 2.

⁴⁵ Robin Cohen 1995, “Rethinking ‘Babylon’: Iconoclastic Conceptions of the Diasporic Experience”, 6.

⁴⁶ Kevin Kenny 2013, *Diaspora. A Very Short Introduction*, 5.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Andreas Huyssen 2003, “Diaspora and Nation: Migration into Other Pasts”, 151.

nostalgia and loss. The Jewish case proposes the understanding of diaspora, which is very close to that of the exiled: “Exile per definition is characterised by compulsion [...] the enforced place/space remote from a place/space of origin.”⁴⁹ However, from the very early connotation of the Jews, the notion of diaspora has been expanding over time along with the global migration of people to explain their experiences within the framework of exile, connectivity and return. Though being partly overlapped with several disciplinary studies interested in social movements, such as migration and refugee studies, postcolonial studies and globalization studies, diaspora differentiates itself by “the connections between homeland and host land generated by mobile subjects, including the perspectives of long-term residents both at home and abroad.”⁵⁰ The connection to the homeland is interpreted as “a strong or renewed tie to the past,” which is also stated by Robin Cohen as a condition to emerge a diasporic consciousness.⁵¹ Home and the connection to the homeland by the dispersal communities have been confirmed as key features by several scholars, although they choose to approach diaspora from different angles and perspectives.

John Armstrong was one of the first scholars to theorize about diaspora in his research. In his classification of diasporas, including situational diaspora and archetypal diaspora, the myth of homeland plays a significant role.⁵² The contact with the homeland was also accounted to form diasporic groups according to Gabriel Sheffer. However, Sheffer emphasizes the existence of collective identity and the international organization of countrymen in other countries. So, the emergence and development of collective identity are defined by how the diasporic group contacts with the homeland: real contacts (i.e. travel remittances) or symbolic contacts.⁵³

In the first volume of the influential journal *Diaspora - A Journal of Transnational Studies* published in 1991, William Safran listed six characteristics to define diasporic communities. The expatriate minority communities should share the following features:

- (1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original ‘center’ to two or more ‘peripheral’, or foreign, regions; (2) they retain a

⁴⁹ Joanna Witkowska and Uwe Zagratzki 2016, *Exile and Migration: New Reflections on an Old Practise*, 7.

⁵⁰ Klaus Stierstorfer and Janet Wilson 2018, *The Routledge Diaspora Studies Reader*, xviii.

⁵¹ Robin Cohen 2018, “Four Phases of Diaspora Studies”, 18.

⁵² Armstrong 1976, “Mobilized and Proletarian Diasporas”, 395.

⁵³ Gabriel Sheffer 1986, “Modern diasporas in international politics”, 116.

collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland-its physical location, history and achievements; (3) they believe that they are not-and perhaps cannot be-fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; (4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return-when conditions are appropriate ; (5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and (6) they continue to relate, personally, or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.⁵⁴

Like Cohen, Armstrong and Sheffer, Safran concerns the orientation to a homeland and implies continuous cultural connections to a “[single] source” and a teleology of return in his definition. Along with the above-mentioned scholars, Safran proposed rejection as opposed to assimilation into a new land by the diasporic community. In addition to the dispersion in space and the orientation to a homeland, Rogers Brubaker’s definition of diaspora involves the preservation of a distinctive identity vis-à-vis a host society (or societies), which could display through the deliberate resistance to assimilation through self-enforced endogamy or other forms of self-segregation.⁵⁵

While the above-mentioned scholars focused on the point of origin, primarily the locus of departure, of the dispersal community and the diaspora’s connection to a homeland, James Clifford viewed the de-centered, lateral connections as important as those which formed a teleology of origin/return.⁵⁶ Instead of featuring diaspora, Clifford defines what is not, or, specifies its borders. He juxtaposed diaspora with the norms of the nation-state and the ideas of indigenous’ people. Clifford viewed national narratives designated by nation-state policymakers, which offered prospects of a new home in a new place for immigrants, as ineffective for assimilating diaspora groups, as they “maintain important allegiances and practical connections to a homeland or a dispersed community

⁵⁴ William Safran 1991, “Diasporas in Modern Societies Myths of Homeland and Return”, 83-84.

⁵⁵ Rogers Brubaker 2005, “The ‘Diaspora’ Diaspora”, 6.

⁵⁶ James Clifford 1994, “Diasporas”, 305-6

located elsewhere. Diaspora are those who defined their identities by collective histories of displacement and violent loss; hence they could not be completely merged into a new national community.”⁵⁷

It is worth noting that diaspora still have their own national aspiration, but the national longing and nostalgic visions are not necessarily included the actual nation-building. Clifford even used the example of Israel’s homecoming to their nation-state as “the negation of diaspora.”⁵⁸ Diasporic cultural forms are featured by their multiple attachments, accommodation, and resistance between host countries and home countries. Based both on roots and routes, diaspora constructs alternate public spheres, which are “forms of communities’ consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference.”⁵⁹ The maintenance of collective homes away from home by the diasporas distinguishes them from exiles, which are mostly individualistic focuses. Clifford proposed to understand the term diaspora as a signifier, which is “not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles to define the local, as a distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement.”⁶⁰

In summary, the essential characteristics of diaspora could be drawn out from the above-mentioned definitions as follows. The first and foremost characteristic of diaspora is the people’s mobility from the original place to another place. This feature of diaspora shares its connotation with all types of moving abroad, such as migration/immigration, exile, expatriation or asylum-seeking. However, the above-mentioned definitions regard the homeland as a distinguishing characteristic of both diaspora and exile compared to migrant/immigrant. While the two formers consider the original lands as their homes and retain their sense of longing to return to the homeland, the latter intends to join a new country permanently as residents or citizens. The intention of permanent residence of the migrants even distinguishes them from expatriates, who usually stay abroad temporarily or for an undetermined period.⁶¹ Within the two types of migration, i.e. exile and diaspora,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 307.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 308.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Yvonne McNulty and Chris Brewster 2017, “Theorizing the Meaning(s) of ‘Expatriate’: Establishing Boundary Conditions for Business Expatriates”, 31.

whereas the former emphasizes the forced nature of the migration,⁶² the latter is not necessarily coerced into moving. To put it in clearer terms, diaspora puts an emphasis on the spreading out or the dispersion of its members. For them, leaving the homeland is an act of necessity. There are additional features, centering around the concept of the homeland, which characterizes diaspora with other types of migration. The longing for home by the members of diasporic communities leads to their retaining a collective memory and identity of their original homeland. The sense of shared identity also features in diaspora with other types of migrations, in which diasporic community preserves their homeland's cultures and customs, rejects assimilation into a new land and maintains contacts with the homeland in various ways.⁶³ However, it is worth noting that the various degrees of relating to a homeland differ among generations of diasporic communities. The first generation maintains a relationship with a home in a far-away place, and identifies more strongly with a cultural identity attached to a homeland compared to the next generations. Therefore, while the first generation could be defined as diaspora community, the second generation could define themselves as having a mixed identity between the country of origin and of settlement.

However, the essence of the homeland is put into question in the later development phase of diaspora. On the one hand, home is still a lived experience of a locality:

Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day ... all this, as mediated by the historically specific every day of social relations.⁶⁴

On the other hand, "home" is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no-return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of "origin".⁶⁵

Away from earlier theories of diaspora, which viewed diaspora as a social form linked to geographical dispersion, there is an upsurge of research which engages critically

⁶² Daniel H. Weiss and Yaron Peleg 2016, "Introduction to Shofar Special Issue: Rethinking Exile, Center, and Diaspora in Modern Jewish Culture", 1.

⁶³ Robin Cohen 2008, *Diasporas: An Introduction*, 4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

with experiences of individuals under the pressure of diasporic movements. The new expanding approach to diaspora focuses on the formation of distinctive subjectivities based on the experience of displacement. Diaspora is understood both as a condition of subjectivity and a state of mind. Homeland and the idea of returning to the homeland are thereby both literal and metaphorical.⁶⁶

Diaspora as a condition of subjectivity was firmly made by Lily Cho who implied that the meaning of diaspora could not be understood out of subjectivity and subject formation. She stated that diaspora is attained from “deeply subjective processes of racial memory, of grieving for losses which cannot always be articulated and longings which hang at the edge of possibility.”⁶⁷ Diaspora is comprised “in the spectrality and the pleasure of obscure miracles of connection.”⁶⁸ Cho also features the role of traumatic dislocation as a condition of diasporas. However, diaspora does not necessarily include traveling across national boundaries. Instead, the subjective experiences depend more on experience and memory of becoming unhomely:

To live in diaspora is to be haunted by histories that sit uncomfortably out of joint, ambivalently ahead of their time and yet behind it too. It is to feel a small tingle on the skin at the back of your neck and to know that something is not quite right about where you are now, but to know also that you cannot leave. To be unhomed is a process. To be unhomely is a state of diasporic consciousness.⁶⁹

The experiences of being diasporic by individuals are also mentioned by Paul Gilroy. Diasporic identity, which reproduced through these coerced experiences of displacements, is “focused less on common territory and more on memory, or, more accurately, on the social dynamics of remembrance and commemoration.”⁷⁰ The consciousness of being in-between in a location of residence and a location of belonging also causes tension “between the consciousness of diaspora-dispersal and affiliation and the distinctive modern structures and modes of power orchestrated by the institutional

⁶⁶ James Procter 2007, “Diaspora”; Kevin Kenny 2013, *Diaspora. A Very Short Introduction* 13; Colin Davis 2018, “Diasporic Subjectivities”, 119.

⁶⁷ Lily Cho 2018, “The Turn to Diaspora”, 109.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 112.

⁷⁰ Paul Gilroy 1994, “Diaspora”, 207.

complexity of nation-states.”⁷¹ Here Gilroy’s concept of diaspora meets with Clifford’s in his view of the nation-state as the means to terminate diaspora. When there is a possibility of reconciliation with either host land or homeland, respectively through assimilation or return, the longing of the diaspora will be transformed into “a simple unambiguous exile”.⁷² Individual subjectivity was also included in Dibyesh Anand’s definition of diaspora. Diaspora refers to “those collectivities within which individual subjectivity is marked by an ambiguity, a confusion, a productive anxiety, an affective pull from a different direction, all of which creates a hyper-awareness and not a predominant sense of regret.”⁷³

Detached from its association with the original territory, diaspora as a type of consciousness is currently approached through the focus on the state of mind and a sense of identity. Scholars paid much attention to describing how the experience of diasporic subjects is excluded here and now while included there and some time ago. Diasporic consciousness was featured by its dual and paradoxical nature and its awareness of multi-locality. As for the first characteristic, the diasporic subjects had negative experiences in the form of a sense of discrimination and exclusion while positively felt feelings of inclusion in historical heritage.⁷⁴ Also, Paul Gilroy describes a kind of duality of consciousness with regard to diasporic individuals’ awareness of decentred attachments, of being simultaneously “home away from home” or “here and there”.⁷⁵ Similarly, Clifford proposes that: “The empowering paradox of diaspora is that dwelling here assumes a solidarity and connection there. ... [It is] the connection (elsewhere) that makes a difference (here).”⁷⁶

Another highlight of diasporic consciousness is the awareness of multi-locality, which “stimulates the need to conceptually connect oneself with others, both here and there, who share the same “routes” and “roots.”⁷⁷ Diaspora is understood here as the synthesis of “ever-changing representations which provide an ‘imaginary coherence’ for

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 208.

⁷³ Dibyesh Anand 2018, “Diasporic Subjectivity as an Ethical Position”, 114.

⁷⁴ Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen 1999, *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*, xviii.

⁷⁵ Paul Gilroy 1993, *The Black Atlantic Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 73-111.

⁷⁶ James Clifford 1994, “Diasporas”, 322.

⁷⁷ Steven Vertovec 1999, *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*, 8.

a set of malleable identities.”⁷⁸ This point was developed by Robin Cohen that “transnational bonds no longer have to be cemented by migration or by exclusive territorial claims. In the age of cyberspace, a diaspora can, to some degree, be held together or re-created through the mind, through cultural artefacts and through a shared imagination.”⁷⁹

In addition to the awareness of multi-spirituality and imagined association, some authors describe the awareness of migration through other functions of the mind. For example, Appadurai and Breckenridge claim that “diasporas always leave a trail of collective memory about another place and time and create new maps of desire and attachment.”⁸⁰ However, the memory is fragmented instead of entire and complete. Combined with the awareness of multi-locality, the fragmented memory creates a diversity of history, community, and individuals. And this diversity is perceived as the source of adaptive strength.⁸¹

In my analysis of Vietnamese diaspora works, I will not re-define what the diaspora is. Instead, I will clarify how this concept is expressed through character’s representations. Rather than creating typologies of diaspora, which might risk being arbitrary, too specific or abstract, I put an emphasis on how diasporic protagonists restore their past through fragmented memories, how they go through many journeys to constitute their new cultural identities, how they open up new cultural spaces formed by double consciousness between homeland and host land through their awareness of multi-locality and duality. Here, through the protagonists’ process of migration, I argue diasporic consciousness can be conceptualized through imaginary connections that diasporic characters create overseas as well as the forms of culture they produce.

3.2. Memory and identity

As an all-encompassing sociocultural phenomenon, memory has been a key concept not only of social practices but also of academic fields. Memory booms in academia and social practices do not occur without reason. Instead, it reflects the new social demand in

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Robin Cohen 1996, “Diasporas and the Nation-state: from Victims to Challengers”, 516.

⁸⁰ A. Appadurai and C. Breckenridge 1989, “On Moving Targets: Editors’ Introduction”, i-iv.

⁸¹ Vertovec’s term. See further in Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen 1999, *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*.

perceiving, recording and exploring history in an ever-changing era of information and knowledge.⁸² For individuals, memories and identities have an intimate relationship in which the act of remembering plays an important role in locating and restructuring the individual. In this thesis, I do not intend to query concepts or define memory and identity, which is the work of sociological researchers. Instead, I will discuss how these two key concepts are expressed through a body of diaspora literature written by Vietnamese authors in Germany. Memory and identity will be analyzed as the two recurring themes of Vietnamese writers' works. But the degree of expressing these two topics in each of the different Vietnamese groups will be different. Also, it is worth noting that the terms of Vietnamese and the matters of memory and identity reflected in the Vietnamese literature used in this dissertation refer to the Kinh and those of the Kinh, the most populous ethnic group in Vietnam. Within the scope of this doctoral thesis, I cannot study the issues of memory and identity of the fifty-three remaining ethnic minorities in Vietnam in detail, which promises to be a fertile land for research projects in the future.

Memory in literature written by Vietnamese authors living in Germany

I do not follow a consistent and specific theory of memory throughout my research. For each character in each work, my understanding of memory is different. In other words, the flexibility in using different interpretations of memory is my theoretical framework. First of all, memory is generally understood as the process of maintaining information over time, which is featured by the function of encoding, storing and retrieving information of the brain.⁸³ The way information is processed in the brain not only reveals the self's perception of an event in the past but also determines their future actions. If we could not remember past events, we could not learn or develop language, relationships or personal identity.⁸⁴

In each analysis of the chapter, this basic definition of memory includes a new meaning. In the second chapter, memory is understood in terms of the basic understanding, referring to the character's remembrance for past events and how the characters face reality based on fragments of memory. In the third chapter, memory is

⁸² Astrid Erll 2011, *Memory in Culture*, 4.

⁸³ See further in M. W. Matlin 2005, *Cognition*; R. J. Sternberg 1999, *Cognitive Psychology*; S. A McLeod 2013, "Stages of Memory - Encoding Storage and Retrieval".

⁸⁴ Michael Eysenck 2012, *Attention and Arousal: Cognition and Performance*.

expressed both as the main topic in literary work and as a narrative method through which the fiction is built. Therefore, memory, in this case, is not only exploited through the analysis of the characters' actions and psychology but also through the way the author uses literary devices to create fiction about memory and fiction of memory. In the fourth chapter, traumatic memory is clarified to support the analysis of the characters' dark experiences. Here, memory takes the form of physical pain and emotional trauma for the characters. Dark memories of Vietnamese boat people while crossing the borders after 1975 were recreated simultaneously with the beautiful and bitter memories of the Republic of Vietnam, creating obsessive pages of how the migrants were aware of the past of themselves and their communities. In the fifth chapter, the memory of the diasporic characters is described as the process of recalling, reoccurrence and reconceptualizing the ruptured past to build up the new self. The memories in these cases are described as broken facts and ruins, which contain not only the facts but also the character's understanding of the truth. However, fragmented memory filled with uncertainties are triggers that help the characters to define themselves. Especially, memory along with identity is proved to be an ongoing and interactive process in which characters trace their memories based on those belonging to others and find themselves through the others' selves.

Identity in literature written by Vietnamese authors living in Germany

While my perception of memory is influenced by different ways of understanding memory, my perception of identity is theorized primarily by Stuart Hall's notion of cultural identity. His conception of identity positioned the view of self from a different angle. This way of viewing cultural identity helps to clarify the formation and transformation of identity not as a fixed essence but as "the subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power":⁸⁵ "cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture [...] it is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return."⁸⁶ Instead, cultural identities are "the unstable points of identification" which were constructed "through memory, fantasy,

⁸⁵ Stuart Hall 1990, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", 225.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 226.

narrative and myth and [...] within the discourse of history and culture.”⁸⁷ Cultural identity is not an essence, but a *positioning*. We are not what we are but what we are becoming.

The Vietnamese in Germany are a community of many different Vietnamese groups, which are diverse in terms of backgrounds, purposes of migration and of residence. Their diverse identities are, therefore, constantly blending and colliding.⁸⁸ Under the effects of diasporic experiences, the new forms of selves are continually produced and reproduced. Thus, we cannot claim to have a fixed and single identity with a single set of values. Any notion of the overseas Vietnamese cultural identity as a whole, hegemonic and defined by certain boundaries, could be considered as the underestimation and neglect of the complexities of diasporic experiences. Applying Hall’s conception of cultural identity helps me to recognize the existence of various forms of identities and to examine the discourses of its construction in selected works of Vietnamese authors in Germany.

3.3 Memory, identity and more than that: Nostalgia, urban ecology and different interpretations of diaspora

Thus, memory and identity are both the core theoretical system and reoccurring themes in this dissertation. However, to clarify how memory and identity are expressed through literary works, I apply supporting theories in each chapter to support for the analysis of memory and identity.

Specifically, in chapter two, which focuses on books of the former contract workers *Thế Dũng* and *Nguyễn Văn Thọ*, identity is a centralized issue. The vast majority

⁸⁷ Ibid., 226.

⁸⁸ It is said that the first-generation Vietnamese are likely perceived themselves with Vietnamese identity than the second-generation Vietnamese. The roles of languages, cultures, and religions determine the perception of their identities in the former case. For the first-generation, Germany rarely becomes their home country although they might have a sense of belonging. In contrast, the second-generation Vietnamese experience both a feeling of belonging and exclusion in Germany. They have knowledge of both cultures and languages, speaking with family members in Vietnamese while using German in society. However, the intellectual and economic success they achieve in Germany might affect their defining of themselves. The successful Vietnamese are usually better integrated and feel “fit” in German society. On the contrary, the not-so-successful ones might consider to go to Vietnam and realize that they are not fully Vietnamese anymore. In other words, they are hybrids there.

of the migration of Vietnamese contract workers is voluntary. Their grip on the host country is largely due to economic reasons. The narratives also emphasized the characters' effort to earn livelihoods. I focus on two opposite narratives, which are the narratives of departing and of return. The two acts of leaving and returning to Vietnam are mostly decided by the characters' awareness of themselves in relation to the others. Hence, Hall's notion of cultural identity is used here to analyze the transformative manifestations of the characters in collision with other cultures and identities.

In chapter three, two novels by Lê Minh Hà are analyzed in terms of narratology and the perspective of urban ecology. In the first novel *Gió tự thời khuất mặt* (Wind from the Unseen Time), the heroine is portrayed with the constant regret about the old Hanoi and a disappointment about Hanoi in present. The frequent recurrence of a flashback by the characters and the flexible transformation of literary time are viewed as Lê Minh Hà's artistic tactics to create memory-like narratives, or the fiction of memory in Birgit Neumann's ⁸⁹ term. In the second novel *Phố vẫn gió* (Street is still windy), theories of urban ecology are applied to demonstrate the relationship between the city, human and nature. I argue that the spontaneous expansion of living space not only reveals the individual's desire for personal space toward his neighbours but also the human's articulation towards the natural environment. The study of urban expansion is the premise for me to come up with the analyses of the two representations of identity in the work. First, it is the self of the individual in asserting his power over others. Second, identity is not only viewed exclusively as the human being's consciousness but also as the awareness of the city.

In the fourth chapter, nostalgia is analyzed as the motive, which governs the diverse manifestations of diaspora characters such as their obsession with memory, violent behaviour, ambivalence, and hybridity, causing the characters' search for identity. More than that, while the fragments and the ruins of memory expressed in Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's works are closely associated with reflective nostalgia in Boym's term ⁹⁰, the writing of nostalgia is itself perceived as the restorative literary product to reconstruct the lost homeland. Nostalgia, memory, and identity are intertwined to reflect how diasporic characters constantly posited themselves in a globalized era.

⁸⁹ Birgit Neumann 2010, "The Literary Representation of Memory, 334.

⁹⁰ Svetlana Boym 2002, *The Future of Nostalgia*.

In the final chapter, I use different interpretations of migration to analyze memory and identity in Đoàn Minh Phượng's novels. The female characters all experienced external or internal migration. However, their senses of exclusion and discrimination, their awareness of multi-locality and their in-between-ness opened a new way of understanding diaspora. Diaspora was analyzed both as a social form and a type of consciousness. Through the protagonists' migration, I show how the diaspora constituted their cultural identity through the fragmented memories, how they created cultural spaces for their own by double consciousness of here and there.

4. Literature review

My research is one of the first researches specializing in Vietnamese diaspora literature in the Federal Republic of Germany. Except for some articles, books, essays and very few books on diaspora literature in Germany, which I will mention later in this section, there has never been the research focused entirely on Vietnamese literature in Germany, not to mention the two core issues of memory and identity. Among the rare times appearing in academia, Vietnamese diaspora literature in Germany was mentioned as a part of overseas Vietnamese literature, which was too wide and unreasonably unified; or represented by very few authors, which was too narrow and potentially subjective assessment of the writers. This dissertation *Memory and Identity in the Works of Vietnamese Authors living in Germany* can be considered as the first research to both provide an overview of Vietnamese diaspora literature in Germany and analyze the typical works in depth.

However, the study of diaspora literature of minority communities concerning the host and home country is not an uncommon phenomenon. Hence this doctoral thesis is inspired by numerous multidisciplinary social, cultural and literary studies about the Vietnamese community by scholars. The researches listed below are the most inspiring works for me in my research of Vietnamese diaspora literature in Germany. These studies also show many gaps in the study of the immigrant community and its literature, which motivated me to undertake this research.

The review of Vietnamese diaspora literature goes from studies on overseas Vietnamese in general to its representation in overseas Vietnamese literature, specifically in works in America, Australia, and Germany where overseas Vietnamese literature has strongly developed. First of all, it is necessary to take the following books for an

understanding of research on Vietnamese immigrants in general. There is research on the overseas Vietnamese community, which primarily approached the research subject from a cultural perspective, such as Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde's *Transnationalizing Viet Nam: Community, Culture and Politics in the Diaspora* and Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen's *Memory Is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora*.

Regarding the overseas Vietnamese community

Having taken into consideration the connections between Vietnamese and *Việt Kiều* (overseas Vietnamese) community, despite of the distance between of them caused by geographical distance and political opinions, Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde in her book *Transnationalizing Viet Nam: Community, Culture and Politics in the Diaspora* explored what transnationality meant to Vietnamese people in general and Vietnamese Americans in particular. Through 250 interviews and nearly two decades of research, what was shown in Kieu Linh's research was the formation of a virtual community of Vietnamese immigrants in cyberspace, their social movements and their engagement in dissent ⁹¹. Although the Vietnamese American community showed their demand to support Vietnam economically and politically, the tensions based on generation, gender, class and especially, politics were considered reasons for not doing so. In general, Kieu Linh's findings explored the cause-effect relations between overseas Vietnamese and events in Vietnam, conveying a nuanced understanding of this transnational community.

Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen has also conducted forty-two interviews with overseas Vietnamese women in her historical and literary book titled *Memory Is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora*. This book sheds some light on Vietnamese Australian women's destinies. Being organized into thematic chapters about loss, sisterhood, female soldiers, war, marriage to foreigners and return to Vietnam, the theoretical focus of this book is the construction of memory after traumatic experiences and the emotional cultural and gendered aspects of making memory. The book's title serves two meanings: (1) memory as firstly understood as another country, the lost homeland of South Vietnam (2) memory as also seen as a country itself, where the "memory scape" is peopled with living and dead relatives and contoured with villages

⁹¹ See further in Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde 2012, *Transnationalizing Viet Nam: Community, Culture and Politics in the Diaspora*.

and city boulevards frozen in the past.⁹² Having paid much attention to Vietnamese women's voices, Nguyen also explains the women's absence from the Vietnamese diaspora narratives as a result of cultural constraints, the pressure to provide for their families in countries of resettlement, the lack of public fora and the impulse to bury their past sorrows under silence. Therefore, Nguyen's recording of women's stories is very valuable not only to substantiate historical facts but also to honor the memories, thereby the lives and losses of Vietnamese diaspora women.

Regarding overseas Vietnamese literature

As for research focusing entirely on overseas Vietnamese literature, there are notable books from Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, titled *This is all I choose to tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American literature*, and Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, titled *Vietnamese literature in Australia: Politics and Poetics of Diaspora*.

Considered as the first full length-study of Vietnamese American literature, Isabelle Thuy Pelaud's studies approached the term of identity in relation to politics and literature. In this way, she explores how overseas Vietnamese communities and authors craft a new sense of home and question the interaction of Vietnamese Americans towards Vietnamese culture and Anglo-Saxon culture.⁹³ Pelaud subverts the assumption of Vietnamese diaspora's need to assimilate in the more advanced or even "superior" the host land, explaining that the changes of Vietnamese diaspora's identity occurred even before their arrival in the US. The colonized-experiences under the French and American colonization and the forcible dispersal of Vietnamese diaspora after the fall of Saigon are argued as the reasons for Vietnamese diaspora's differences from other immigrant communities in terms of their inherent hybridity, their longing for their homeland and even their traumatic war experiences.

Nguyễn Hưng Quốc's studies can be seen as the scholar's work approaching the same perspective as mine, viewing Vietnamese Australian writing through the lens of

⁹² Cited in Laura Chirot, *Review of Memory is Another Country* <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2011/02/21/review-of-memory-is-another-country-tlcnmrev-xviii/>, accessed in 12th Sept 2014.

⁹³ See further in Isabelle Thuy Pelaud 2011, *This is all I choose to tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American literature*.

diaspora studies.⁹⁴ He surveyed Vietnamese Australia literature from 1975 up to now as in-between literature, always in a state of going beyond cultural and lingual boundaries where writers have continued to re-structure their collective memory and imagined community to build up diasporic narratives and transnational hybridity identity. Such literature cannot be bounded in one traditional criticism but needs to be read and paraphrased differently. And finding such differences in Vietnamese Australian literature was the main purpose of Nguyễn Hưng Quốc's book. I will also apply notions of diaspora studies to read Vietnamese diaspora literature. However, my research will go deeper into the matter of memory and the transformation of cultural identity in the works of Vietnamese authors living in Germany.

Regarding Vietnamese-German communities and their literature

The Vietnamese community in Germany and their writings have recently been main topics in studies such as *Asiatische Deutsche – Vietnamese Diaspora & Beyond* by Kien Nghi Ha and *Envisioning Vietnamese Migrants in Germany: Ethnic Stigma, Immigrant Origin Narratives and Partial Masking* by Pipo Bui. In Kien Nghi Ha's book, the matter of identity of the Vietnamese German diaspora was explored as complex forms attached to different historical experiences with exile, gender-based exploitation or racism.⁹⁵ While this book gave us an insight into the diversity of the Vietnamese presence in Germany, the analysis of the Vietnamese writings focuses on social and cultural practices, media representation policies, community care or transcultural interaction.

Dealing with Vietnamese migrants in Germany through an ethnographic perspective, Pipo Bui contributed greatly to the interesting image of Vietnamese migrants in Germany. I find this research "interesting" because unlike other anthropology studies, the result of Bui's dissertation was not to inform policy, which could allow governors to control study subjects. Instead, the goals of the study are to show how Vietnamese migrants in Germany have been portrayed through German-language media, how they have been discussed by German politicians and political advocates and how they present

⁹⁴ See further in Nguyễn Hưng Quốc 2013, *Vietnamese Literature in Australia: Politics and Poetics of Diaspora*.

⁹⁵ Kien Nghi Ha 2012, *Asiatische Deutsche Vietnamesische Diaspora and Beyond*.

themselves in Germany's public sphere.⁹⁶

Bui's five-chapter book portrays a unique picture of the Vietnamese community through the lens of German media, in which the author plays a role as a "reporter" to tell stories of Vietnamese migrants in Germany. Her primary ethnographic corpuses used for the research are newspaper articles in the mainstream press, a booklet and an exhibit presented by a Vietnamese organization. Through the analysis of narratives of various Vietnamese groups in Germany, such as Vietnamese cigarette-smugglers, criminal gangs, and boat people, Bui considers how the narratives of Vietnamese immigrants were used not only to define the relationship between Vietnamese immigrants and their surrounding society but also to legitimize the existence of Vietnamese ethnic in Germany. Of particular interest for my research is chapter 4, where I found the analogy between the narratives of former contract workers and refugees. By interviewing Vietnamese migrants in Germany, mostly in Berlin, Bui revealed how Vietnamese people perceived the borders between groups of Vietnamese and how this border was presented to a German-speaking audience.

Besides the general research works, some doctoral dissertations mention a few works belonging to my research subjects. It can be mentioned here two dissertations including *Văn xuôi tiếng Việt ở nước ngoài từ 1975 đến nay*⁹⁷ (Overseas Vietnamese prose from 1975 until now) by Nguyễn Thị Tuyết Nhung and *Writing Exile: Vietnamese Literature in the Diaspora* by Anh Thang Dao. In the former, Nguyễn Thị Tuyết Nhung mentioned a number of Vietnamese writers in Germany based on the main themes of their composition. The authors are mentioned including Nguyễn Văn Thọ with the subject of war in literature, Đoàn Minh Phượng with the figures of the post-war traumatic characters or Lê Minh Hà with the characters' nostalgia of the homeland. The latter approaches Vietnamese literature in Germany through a typical case of the novel *Quyên* by Nguyễn Văn Thọ. The long journey of the protagonist from Vietnam to Germany, which ends with Quyên's return to the homeland, was argued by Anh Thang Dao as "the former guest workers efforts to counter the discriminatory legal and cultural practices they faced in Germany through the marginalization of another group of Vietnamese immigrants."⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Pipo Bui 2004, *Envisioning Vietnamese Migrants in Germany: Ethnic Stigma, Immigrant Origin Narratives and Partial Masking*.

⁹⁷ Nguyễn Thị Tuyết Nhung 2015, *Văn xuôi tiếng Việt ở nước ngoài từ 1975 đến nay*.

⁹⁸ Anh Thang Dao 2012, *Writing exile: Vietnamese Literature in the Diaspora*, 160.

To summarize, the research on the Vietnamese diaspora community and literature is not an undiscovered field of academia. However, there are still gaps that I expect to explore. For instance, the dissertations that I mentioned are either too wide due to their consideration of overseas migration literature instead of focused on Germany, as in the case of Nguyễn Thị Tuyết Nhung's thesis, or too narrow because of its attention to a single novel by a Vietnamese author in Germany, as in the case of Anh Thang Dao's doctoral thesis. These two approaches overlook the complexity and diversity of the population groups of the immigrant community, thereby ignoring subtle changes in the way the migrants reconstructed identities based on conflicting discourses about the past and history. Therefore, the expressions of memories and the identity of immigrant characters in these dissertations have not been analyzed comprehensively and profoundly. The originality of my dissertation is its entire devotion to Vietnamese literature, which makes a great contribution to sketching out the appearance of the Vietnamese literature abroad.

Regarding Kieu Linh's and Huynh Chau Nguyen's books, albeit considered as the valuable research on the Vietnamese diaspora community, they have not approached Vietnamese immigrant identity through literary representations. The same is true for Kien Nghi Ha's and Pipo Bui's books which focused on the Vietnamese community generally. Those which paid attention to Vietnamese overseas literature, like Nguyễn Hưng Quốc's book, just grasped Vietnamese literature regionally based on the researchers' current residences (in Australia). The same is true for Isabelle Thuy Pelaud's books which took into account a very intriguing matter of hybridity but is limited as it only applies to the Vietnamese American community. I have noticed that although America and Australia are places where there have been a large number of Vietnamese refugees settling after 1975, these settlers mostly came from the South of Vietnam; conversely Vietnamese flow into Eastern European countries also consisted of the Northern people of Vietnam. Diaspora routines, in the case of Vietnamese people, reveal a lot of things for not only exploring differentiate in subject matters discussed in their writing but also discovering their regionally socio-politics views. This issue is my inspiration for doing the research.

5. Research questions and scope of the research

5.1. Research questions and expected outcomes

1. What representations of memories are reflected through Vietnamese diaspora literature in Germany?
2. How have various forms of identities been shaped and represented through Vietnamese diaspora literature in Germany?

Expected outcome

1. The analysis of the representation of memories in Vietnamese diaspora literature.
2. The representation of diasporic identities through writings: the construction and reconstruction of cultural identities in in-between spaces.

5.2. Scope of the research

Based on the purpose of the study and the research question proposed above, the scope of the research will be literary works written by Vietnamese authors living in Germany. I focus on fictional works published after 1975 and composed in Vietnamese. The historic year of 1975 marked the formation of the Vietnamese migration community in general and in Germany in particular. Vietnamese literary works in Germany were also published after 1975. The books written in Vietnamese are chosen because I believe that Vietnamese plays a role as a means for dealing with the continuing traumas and discomforts caused by the diaspora's longing for the other lands. Therefore, memory and identity will be clearly shown in these works.

The authors and selected works for the study are summarized in the table below. There are the writers selected for in-depth analyses in four chapters two, three, four and five. Besides the aforementioned authors, this dissertation mentions a series of authors and works in the overview chapter to generalize the Vietnamese literary in Germany. These authors and their works will be summarized in Table 2 in the Appendix.

| Authors | Publications | Chapters |
|--|--|-----------------|
| Thế Dũng (1954, Hải Dương) | <i>Hộ chiếu buồn</i> (Sad Passport), Nhà xuất bản Lao động, 2011 <i>Một nửa lá số</i> (Half of Horoscope), Nhà xuất bản Lao động, 2011 | Chapter 2 |
| Nguyễn Văn Thọ (1948, Thái Bình) | <i>Quyên</i> , Nhà xuất bản Hội nhà văn, 2009 | Chapter 2 |
| Lê Xuân Quang (1942, Nam Định) | <i>Những mảnh đời phiêu bạt</i> (Fragile Lives), Nhà xuất bản Thanh niên, 2002 <i>Dòng xoáy cuộc đời</i> (The Vortex of Life), Nhà xuất bản Hội nhà văn, 2003 <i>Những số phận không định trước</i> (Unfair Fates), Nhà xuất bản Văn học, 2003 <i>Đùa với lửa</i> (Joke with Fire), Nhà xuất bản Thanh niên, 2005 | Chapter 2 |
| Nguyễn Công Tiến (1952, Phú Thọ) | <i>Đất khách</i> (Host land), Nhà xuất bản Dân Trí, 2018 | Chapter 2 |
| Đỗ Trường (1960, Nam Định) | <i>Không bao giờ thành sẹo</i> (Never become a scar), VIPEN, 2013 | Chapter 2 |
| Lê Minh Hà (1962, Hà Nội) | <i>Gió từ thời khuất mặt</i> (Wind from the Unseen Time), Nhà xuất bản Hội nhà văn, 2005 | Chapter 3 |

| | | |
|--|---|-----------|
| | <i>Phố vẫn gió</i> (Street is still windy), Nhà xuất bản Lao động, 2014 | |
| Ngô Nguyên Dũng (1951, Sài Gòn) | <i>Dòng chữ tâm tình</i> (Words of Sentiments), Văn Nghệ, 1988 <i>Mười hai hoa cúc</i> (The Twelve Chrysanthemums) Văn Lang, 1988 <i>Tiếng núi</i> (The Sound of the Mountain), Làng Văn, 1992 <i>Âm bản</i> (The Negative Version), Minh Văn, 1994 <i>Chuông đêm</i> (The Night Bell), Làng Văn 1992 <i>Ngôn ngữ tuyết</i> (The Language of Snow), Quyen Book, 2006 <i>Núi đoạn sông lìa</i> (Broken Mountain, Separated River), Nhân Ảnh 2017 Some short stories published online in damau.org | Chapter 4 |
| Đoàn Minh Phượng (1956, Sài Gòn) | <i>Và khi tro bụi</i> (And when this Dust), Nhà xuất bản Văn học, 2016 <i>Mưa ở kiếp sau</i> (Rain in Life after Death), Nhà xuất bản văn học, 2007 | Chapter 5 |

Table 1: Vietnamese authors and their works used for in-depth analyses in four chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5.

The authors selected for this research are all first-generation migrants, currently living or lived in the Federal Republic of Germany. Migration is the first feature these authors share. Each author is a representative, understood in terms of their backgrounds, of the community group they came from. As the first researcher on Vietnamese literature in Germany, I would like to introduce each representative of each Vietnamese community group to portray an overview of Vietnamese literature in Germany.

More importantly, their works dwell on the problems of Vietnamese memory and identity. The diasporic characters are built in the tensions between cultures and struggle with locating their own identity in the midst of globalization. How characters recreated their memories and cultural identity is argued as vivid cultural and literary documents to help me answer two ontological questions in this dissertation: (1) What is diaspora literature? (2) And what do the narratives of memory and identity in Vietnamese literature tell us about individuals and groups within its community? These questions will be reflected in the contents chapters and answered in the conclusion of this dissertation.

6. Structure of the dissertation

As one of the first works to study Vietnamese literature in Germany, the first chapter of the dissertation will be devoted to a general introduction to the Vietnamese community in Germany; focusing on the formation and development of diaspora literature. The formation of Vietnamese immigrant literature was marked by the works written by Venerable Thích Như Điển and continued by the contributions of numerous authors with different backgrounds. The general introduction of the Vietnamese community and its literature helps me to approach the research subjects as widely as possible. Accordingly, the authors have been categorized by their backgrounds and classified according to the topics they express in their works. In particular, I will introduce the formation of each community group in Germany, including the boat people, the former contract workers, the immigrants who moved to be reunited with their families and students.

The second, third, fourth and fifth chapters will focus on typical authors and works. Specifically, I will analyze the fictions of Thế Dũng and Nguyễn Văn Thọ and some short stories by Lê Xuân Quang, Nguyễn Công Tiến and Đỗ Trường. The third chapter is devoted to analyzing the works of Lê Minh Hà, who came to Germany for family reunion. The fourth chapter will analyze the works of Ngô Nguyên Dũng, a

Vietnamese student studying in Germany in 1969. Last but not least, the fictions of Đoàn Minh Phượng, who migrated to Germany in 1977, will be studied in the final chapter.

The authors are not randomly selected. First, they are authors who represent the groups they came from. Their works contribute to creating a complete view of Vietnamese literature in Germany. This approach to the works helps me to understand the Vietnamese literature in Germany in width and depth. However, even when considering the group that the author came from, are there not other authors within their groups I could have chosen to analyze? The reason I chose these authors is for the topics reflected in their works. In particular, memory and identity are two core themes that are expressed throughout the writers' writings. For each author, memories are recreated and reflected variously, both reflecting similarities of "members within the same groups" in the way of looking at both the history and past; at the same time revealing uniqueness caused by the writer's personalities and creative abilities. Identity in relation to memory is therefore proved to be a continuous process of formation and transformation. By conducting research both in width and in depth, I expect this dissertation will be an intensive multidisciplinary study of Vietnamese diaspora literature in Germany.

CHAPTER 1: VIETNAMESE AND VIETNAMESE LITERATURE IN GERMANY

1. Vietnamese in Germany⁹⁹

On 27th April 2017, the first conference “Invisible-Vietnamese-German Realities” took place thanks to the Documentation Center and Museum of Migration in Germany (DOMid eV) and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. The conference was a chance for the organizers to present a book, which was the result of the “Unsichtbar” research project which explored the realities of the Vietnamese communities in Germany. I am not going to recount this book’s content here, as readers can easily read this for themselves.¹⁰⁰ Instead, what I noticed was a number of different speakers who attended the conference. The people who were invited to take part in the event included one representative of contract workers, one representative of the boat people, along with several representatives of the so-called 1.5 and second generations and repatriates. While the contract worker shared his experience of working in factories in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) before 1990, the representative of the boat-people talked about her struggle to survive in Germany after 1975 and demanded freedom and democracy for Vietnam. However, their voices were overshadowed by several “success stories” from the 1.5 and second generations. These people are now journalists, doctors, masters of ceremonies or writers. They speak German fluently and have integrated into the German society successfully. They represent a new Vietnamese-German generation in Germany and, as such, make judgments about the Vietnamese community in Germany, encapsulated by two main immigrant groups consisting of boat people and former co-workers, obsolete and potentially prejudiced.

Within the current classification of immigrants to Germany,¹⁰¹ the Vietnamese immigrant falls into more than two categories: asylum seekers (i.e. the boat people) and contract workers. In the late 1960s, when the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) heard

⁹⁹ Some parts of the section about the Vietnamese community in Germany are first published in Tran Tinh Vy 2018, “From Diaspora Community to Diaspora Literature: The Case of Vietnamese Boat People in Germany”, *Diaspora Studies*.

¹⁰⁰ Kocatürk-Schuster, Kolb, Thanh Long, Schultze, Wölck 2017, *UnSICHTBAR. Vietnamesisch-Deutsche Wirklichkeiten*.

¹⁰¹ Federal Ministry of the Interior Federal Ministry of the Interior, Division M I 2011, *Migration and Integration. Residence Law and Policy on Migration and Integration in Germany*, 12.

about Vietnam as a part of the movement against the United States involvement in the Vietnam War, the GDR gathered donations and supplies to actively support the northern Vietnamese government.¹⁰² The period between the 1960s and 1970s witnessed the arrival of northern and southern Vietnamese students in the FRG. Similarly, the GDR committed to providing training to 10,000 Vietnamese in 1973. However, the presence of the Vietnamese dates back even further with the arrival of the “Moritzburger” group.¹⁰³ In 1955, in a symbolic act to express East German solidarity for Vietnam, a group of Vietnamese children was sent to the GDR by train to live there for 3 years. They were the children of the Vietnam Workers Party (VWP) cadres, aged between ten and fourteen. They were educated there and worked in the schools and factories in the Saxon cities of Dresden and Moritzburg. The “Moritzburger” group acted as lobbyists for the education and training of the Vietnamese in East Germany.¹⁰⁴ They were even considered early pioneers of educational training and further contract worker programs which were implemented for Vietnamese immigrants in the 1980s. Therefore, the arrival of the boat people and contract workers should be considered later on, as the students and training workers were the first Vietnamese who arrived in both the FRG and GDR.

However, the two sub-communities, including the boat people and the contract workers, remain the two largest populations. This is why this thesis will begin with an introduction to these Vietnamese communities in Germany. The community of boat people will be introduced first, based on the time of their arrival in 1978. Following this, the arrival of the Vietnamese community of former contract workers will be discussed as these people arrived in the mid-1980s. Finally, I will briefly mention the composition of

¹⁰² There was an establishment of the “Vietnam Committee” within the state-run solidarity framework of the East German mass organization “National Front”. The committee solicited and collected donations, organized transportations and sent donations to Vietnam. There were, indeed, several donation campaigns towards Vietnam like “Bicycles for Vietnam,” “Blood for Vietnam,” “Sewing Machines for Vietnam,” “Kali for Vietnam”. Even children at elementary schools were engaged in special programs, such as ‘Notepads for Vietnam’s Children’ or “Fly Red Butterfly”. See further in Pipo Bui 2003, *Envisioning Vietnamese Migrants in Germany Ethnic Stigma, Immigrant Origin Narratives and Partial Masking*.

¹⁰³ Bernd Schaefer 2015, “Socialist Modernization in Vietnam: The East German Approach, 1976-89,” in Quinn Slobodian, 95-116.

¹⁰⁴ Among the former Moritzburg students, many become important officials such as Dr. Lê Đăng Doanh, the former head of the Central Institute for Economic Management; Trần Thị Kim Hoàng, former deputy general director of Saigontourist Company. See further in <http://www.tienphong.vn/xa-hoi-phong-su/ve-lai-co-huong-o-troi-tay-27770.tpo> (last accessed May 15, 2017).

Vietnamese people coming to Germany for the purpose of family reunification and for their studies which are both growing in recent times. The second section focuses on the formation of literary traditions among the Vietnamese boat people community. It is worth noting that apart from the work of the boat people-authors, Vietnamese literature in Germany is written by authors who are both contract workers and free immigrants. However, the characteristics of the diaspora community are best seen in the literary products of the boat people. There are two examples of the formation of literary organizations shown in this paper, which demonstrates the cultural connection among the boat people in Germany.

1.1. The boat people

The catalyst for the first wave of refugees from Vietnam can be traced from North Vietnam's forced move of over one million people, often those associated with the former government of South Vietnam, into "re-education camps" and "New Economic Zones", i.e. agricultural collectives. Following the first wave of refugees, which started in the mid of 1975, the second large-scale wave of refugees began in 1978 and lasted until the mid-1980s. The migrants mostly fled by sea on fishing boats which gave rise to their name "The Boat People". They were wide-ranging in social backgrounds, including members of the South Vietnamese elite, Chinese minorities, religious groups, non-partisan individuals and fishermen. The reasons for their leaving are varied, which were motivated by both pull and push factors. On the one hand, the US's program of accepting refugees brought hope to the Vietnamese about the opportunity of living abroad. Moreover, the conference on refugees and displaced persons in South-East Asia convened by UNHCR¹⁰⁵ at Geneva in 1979 established "quotas" for the Western countries to accept Vietnamese refugees, which made the refugees' decision to go overseas become more widely accepted¹⁰⁶. Also, it is worth noting that there was the refugee "industry" in Vietnam after 1975 when several ships accepted refugees to gain money and gold. On the other hand, the massive economic crisis spreading throughout the whole country caused

¹⁰⁵ UNHCR stands for The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

¹⁰⁶ UN General Assembly, Meeting on Refugees and Displaced Persons in South-East Asia, convened by the Secretary-General of the United Nations at Geneva, on 20 and 21 July 1979, and subsequent development: Report of the Secretary-General, 7 November 1979, A/34/627, available at <https://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?page=printdoc&docid=3ae68f420> [accessed 9 May 2019]

poverty and famine for the Vietnamese after 1975. The campaigns against small business (especially the Chinese), land-owners and former intellectuals in the forms of the relocation of city people to “re-education camps” and “New Economic Zones” pushed the Vietnamese into misery. All these factors led to the mass emigration of the Vietnamese to foreign countries after 1975. In Germany, the boat Hai Hong, which carried 644 people, arrived on December 3, 1978.¹⁰⁷ Since then, the FRG took 38,000 boat people in total.

As the first group of immigrants to come from outside of Europe, the boat people received a mixed reception in the FRG. On the one hand, there were concerns about the boat people’s integration into a western society, especially when not one of the new arrivals spoke any German. Not to mention the fact that the Hai Hong boat was initially portrayed in the media coverage as carrying “rich ethnic Chinese fleeing Vietnam with enormous stocks of gold bars abetted by boat smugglers”.¹⁰⁸ On the other hand, some organizations were willing to help. There were two companies in Cologne, which donated 1,000 air flights to bring the refugees to Germany. Even some German families agreed to accommodate the Vietnamese in their homes. The boat people’s rescue even led to the foundation of one of the most German well-known relief organizations, Cap Anamur. In 1979, Rupert Neudeck and his fellow volunteers established a committee “Ein Schiff für Vietnam” (A ship for Vietnam), which was not just a simplified solution for the drowning boat people. Indeed, the idea of a rescue ship emerged from the more profound concept of a humanitarian act, which was summarized under the term “radical humanism”. In essence, the radical humanism was based on the idea that “people in need should get aid by all means”: “As people all over the world were in imminent danger, setting out to save lives should be enough of a motive, justification, and objective.”¹⁰⁹ Neudeck’s motto for his relief action arose from his reading of Albert Camus’s *La Peste* (The Plague), “Il faut choisir: savoir ou guérir” (You must choose: either knowing or curing). Neudeck adopted

¹⁰⁷ See <http://www.dw.com/en/remembering-the-first-wave-of-boat-people-in-germany/a-1047447> (last accessed 21 May 2017).

¹⁰⁸ See Howard Adelman, <https://howardadelman.com/2015/05/20/indochinese-refugee-resettlement-causes-of-the-exodus-part-i-of-iv-1975-1978-refugees-from-vietnam/> (last accessed 21 May 2017).

¹⁰⁹ Patrick Merziger 2016, “The ‘Radical Humanism’ of ‘Cap Anamur’/‘German Emergency Doctors’ in the 1980s: a Turning Point for the Idea, Practice and Policy of Humanitarian Aid”, 173.

this motto as “too much knowledge endangers aid”. This led to the foundation of the above-mentioned committee along with the cargo ship Cap Anamur, which was a result of Neudeck and his fellow relief workers overriding any concerns related to the complicated political situation in either Vietnam or Germany.¹¹⁰ The first rescue tour in 1978 and all subsequent tours were a great success as more than 10,000 boat people were rescued and around 35,000 others received medical care on board.¹¹¹ This is the beginning of the association of “German Emergency Doctors” (Cap Anamur-Deutsche Not-Ärzte e.V.), which is currently working on providing sustainable aid for people in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

The history of the Vietnamese boat people recorded several instances of refugees being refused by receiving governments in the first wave of immigration, even if the receiving country was the first place to grant asylum to the refugees.¹¹² The governments were afraid of overloading themselves both in terms of providing shelters for refugees and by taking on potential problems related to illegal trafficking. Even the boat Hai Hong, which carried mostly ethnic Chinese people from Vietnam, was denied permission to dock in Port Klang, Malaysia and was towed to sea by the Malaysian authorities, until it was saved by the FRG government.¹¹³ In this context, the Cap Anamur rescue mission, indeed, stood out against other humanitarian aids in terms of the pursuit of a pure humanitarian need without any political or economic interests.

Later, the image of the boat Cap Anamur was reminisced about and reappeared affectionately and gratefully in literature written by the boat people. For them, it is a symbol of German humanitarianism, which brought them to the shore of freedom as they were stranded between life and death in the South China Sea. It is worth noting here how

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ See <http://www.cap-anamur.org/service/über-uns> (last accessed 24 May 2017).

¹¹² There was a Burmese vessel, the Ava, which had picked up 99 Vietnamese off the Vietnamese coast and sailed for Hong Kong in July 1976. If this month had not fallen within a typhoon season, the vessel would not have allowed landing. Similarly, a Panamanian vessel the Huey Fong carried 3318 passengers was refused to enter Hong Kong in December 1978. See further in Henry Litton 2001, “The Vietnamese boat people story: 1975-1999” The impact of mass migration on an established legal system in Hong Kong”, <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AltLawJl/2001/68.html>, accessed on 03 August 2019.

¹¹³ Howard Adelman 2017, <https://howardadelman.com/2015/05/20/indochinese-refugee-resettlement-causes-of-the-exodus-part-i-of-iv-1975-1978-refugees-from-vietnam/> (last accessed 21 May 2017).

the narrative of the Vietnamese boat people was manipulated by the German media to reconstruct them as a good model of immigrants compared to their fellow countrymen, i.e. the contract worker. In her study on a booklet about Vietnamese migrants in Münster, Pipo Bui discovered that the authors of the booklets consciously emphasized the harsh situations of the boat people, i.e. their boats were sinking; thereby making the act of saving their lives as a humanitarian act. Also, the focus on their fleeing by boats, which were poorly equipped with minimal provisions and inadequate hygiene, attracted a lot of attention. In addition, the creation of an emotional atmosphere surrounding the refugee crisis by the authors of the booklets and the refugees' effort to integrate into the host land was used as a stick to beat their fellow countrymen with and also attracted plenty of public attention in Germany.¹¹⁴ For the Vietnamese refugees in Germany, the government's integration policy offered them a chance to take part in social and economic life, which helped them to gain a realistic hope of becoming a part of German society.¹¹⁵ For example:

They were granted residence and work permits; they were able to take a German language course free of charge; they received financial assistance to allow them to undertake basic and further vocational training or to retrain; they were eligible for student loans; social counselling and advisory were available to them.¹¹⁶

Thanks to these offers, the Vietnamese boat people showed a high level of willingness to integrate and, as a result, they integrated well into the Germany society.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Germany was not the only country where the boat people were treated with preference. In fact, accepting many refugees used to be a part of the former US president Jimmy Carter's campaign to both support for human rights and against Eastern bloc. See further in Pipo Bui 2003, *Envisioning Vietnamese Migrants in Germany Ethnic Stigma, Immigrant Origin Narratives and Partial Masking*. See also in

https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1979/06/29/us-doubles-quota-of-asian-refugees/00c8fdae-115d-41af-a812-f210e5321839/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.71552a315904.

¹¹⁵ Federal Ministry of the Interior Federal Ministry of the Interior, Division M I 1 2011, *Migration and Integration. Residence Law and Policy on Migration and Integration in Germany*, 54.

¹¹⁶ Bernd Wolf 2007, *The Vietnamese Diaspora in Germany: Structure and Potentials for Cooperation with a Focus on Berlin and Hesse*, 4.

¹¹⁷ Felicitas Hillmann 2005, "Riders on the Storm. Vietnamese in Germany's two Migration Systems", 86.

1.2. The contract workers

Compared to the boat people, the community of former contract workers is distinguished in terms of the context in which they emigrated. Whilst the community of boat people, i.e. refugees, found themselves in Germany after the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam in 1975, the community of contract workers was shaped by Cold War era politics. There were hundreds of thousands of workers working in factories in Eastern European countries such as the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia in the 1980s. However, the reunification of Germany in 1990, which triggered the swift collapse of the other East European countries and the dissolution of Soviet bloc, greatly affected the Vietnamese people who were living and working in these countries. The Vietnamese workers, who were already working in the factories within the GDR, made up most of the Vietnamese former contract workers in Germany, but there were workers who emigrated illegally to Germany after the Fall of Berlin Wall, who formed a group of undocumented workers living in Germany until they got residence permits. For the most part, these former contract workers ran their own businesses to earn a living and to secure residence permits. The formation of the group of Vietnamese contract workers will be introduced in more detail in this next part.

1.2.1 Before 1990

The history of Vietnamese contract workers, who mostly lived in the former GDR in the early 1990s, is completely different. It was no coincidence that the contract workers were called “labor export workers” (*công nhân xuất khẩu lao động*) in Vietnam. It is worth mentioning that the rethinking of conducting bilateral economic relations between the GDR and other Third World countries accounts for the arrival of the contract workers in Germany. Indeed, there were extensive humanitarian programs and other types of assistance, under the banner “*Solidarität hilft Siegen*” (Solidarity brings victory), extended by the GDR towards the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) in the 1960s and 70s¹¹⁸. Nevertheless, since the 1970s, “international aid” was no longer viewed as “the solidarity obligation of a rich socialist country to give freely and generously to the poorer

¹¹⁸ Christina Schwenkel 2014, “Rethinking Asian mobilities Socialist Migration and Post-Socialist Repatriation of Vietnamese Contract Workers in East Germany”, 242.

fraternal socialists of the Third World.”¹¹⁹ Domestic economic strains and the widening economic gap with the capitalist countries of Western Europe required East Germany to create innovative forms of internationalist cooperation with its socialist partners. By the end of the 1980s, Vietnam was calculated to be approximately USD 150 million in debt to the GDR. In the case of Vietnam, the new concept of “mutual benefit” broadly meant enabling the SRV to export indigenous products to the GDR, thereby potentially repaying the SRV’s accumulated external debt to East Germany. In a sense, the contract workers were also exported by the SRV as temporary workers to indirectly repay the debt.

Nevertheless, it would be humiliating for the Vietnamese contract workers to be viewed just as “export products”. There was still a feeling of concern for the developing country and a desire to create solidarity. Thus, a bilateral agreement for Vietnam laborers working and receiving professional training in GDR enterprises was established for this reason. Having implemented one of the largest mutual interest programs in the 1980s, this program intended to “deepen the fraternal cooperation between the countries by establishing a regular flow of Vietnamese labor to industrial centers in East Germany.”¹²⁰ Ironically, the recruitment of contract workers from Vietnam took place in the second phase of the labor recruitment program (1987-1989), which reflected the shift from “resulted-oriented, vocational training to a larger and lower-skilled, production-oriented labor force.”¹²¹ At that time, there was a huge need in the GDR for an unskilled workforce to keep up the standard of production.¹²² By sending laborers, the SRV could also reduce the high unemployment rate and postwar poverty. So, the bilateral agreement on contract workers was a mutually beneficial program for both parties.

Since the workers came to the GDR in bilateral collective contracts, the preparation for working overseas positioned them as temporary migrants. For instance, they were offered only three-months of language training, which also prevented them from being able to integrate fully into German society. They lived in enterprise-owned

¹¹⁹ Bernd Schaefer 2015, “Socialist Modernization in Vietnam: The East German Approach, 1976-89”, 104.

¹²⁰ Christina Schwenkel 2014, “Rethinking Asian mobilities Socialist Migration and Post-Socialist Repatriation of Vietnamese Contract Workers in East Germany”, 243.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² See further in Doris Cornelsen 1987, “The GDR Economy in the Eighties: Economic Strategy and Structural Adjustments, Studies in Comparative Communism”, 39-53.

hostels and were under the surveillance of group leaders and interpreters as well as organizations run by the Vietnamese government. There was no possibility for them to get individual working permits. When their five-year contract expired, they had to return to Vietnam. Their labor agreements were described by Bernd Wolf as follows:

All social insurance contributions had to be paid although contract workers were not entitled to make use of the social services network. 12% of wages were to be deducted and transferred to the Vietnamese government. Contract workers should be subject to strict controls by the GDR trade union confederation (FDGB) and would pay membership contributions. Should they become politically active they would be deported. They would not be permitted to join a political party in the GDR.¹²³

The remittance of 12 percent of their income was mandatory, which was understood as the contribution by the workers towards rebuilding Vietnam. Similarly, although the Vietnamese were paid the same wages for the same jobs as the East Germans, the former were usually assigned less complex tasks and paid at a lower wage level. Their monthly wages averaged between 800 and 900 East German marks before taxes while the highest income could be up to 1200 Eastern marks for translators and group leaders.¹²⁴ Next, the contract workers were controlled by the GDR and Vietnamese embassy. This was to ensure that the workers strictly followed the Communist Party.¹²⁵ Last but not least, although most contract workers were around the age of thirty, there was no possibility of family reunification for them in the GDR. Female workers who became pregnant whilst working in the GDR could choose to either abort or be sent home. In general, the contract workers were controlled in every aspect of their lives, which led to their isolation from colleagues and the rest of society.

¹²³ Bernd Wolf 2007, *The Vietnamese Diaspora in Germany: Structure and Potentials for Cooperation with a Focus on Berlin and Hesse*, 7.

¹²⁴ Christina Schwenkel 2014, "Rethinking Asian Mobilities Socialist Migration and Post-Socialist Repatriation of Vietnamese Contract Workers in East Germany", 245.

¹²⁵ In my next chapter, I will analyze how being a Communist Party member in Vietnam could be a decisive factor for a protagonist in *Thế Dũng's* novel to be selected to work overseas.

Interestingly, the GDR was still viewed as a “socialist paradise” for the contract workers. As Schaefer claims:

Propelled by East Berlin’s propagated self-image, the GDR was seen as a highly industrialized, technologically sophisticated showcase of socialism with high living standards by the socialist countries of the Second and Third World.¹²⁶

In general, the living standards in the GDR were much higher than those in Vietnam. The existence of the advanced infrastructure and the abundance of desired commodities were driving forces for the workers choosing to work in the GDR. The fact that there were plenty of material commodities also gave the workers a chance to run their own private businesses. They bought products in the GDR, such as Simson motorbikes, bicycles, radios, cameras, Camay perfumed soap and sugar that they then sent back to Vietnam. They did this because their relatives at home could sell these on the black market. Not only did they send consumer goods to Vietnam but they also manufactured their own clothing, especially imitation jeans, and sold these to the Germans.¹²⁷ Being contract workers did not only bring economic benefits but it also allowed them to climb the social ladder. In their view, they distinguished themselves from the guest worker (*Gastarbeiter*), which referred to the Turkish or Greek workers who were working in West Germany, and considered this connotation as the capitalist exploitation of foreign workers. They thought of themselves as the contract worker (*Vertragsarbeiter*) or the general worker (*Werkstätiger*), receiving the same social rights as their German counterparts. However, as mentioned before, discrimination worked so sophisticatedly that the workers only recognized this when they worked inside the system.

1.2.2 After 1990

After the collapse of the GDR and the accession of East Germany into West Germany on 3 October 1990, the destinies of the former contract workers changed dramatically.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Bernd Schaefer 2015, “Socialist Modernization in Vietnam: The East German Approach, 1976-89,” 98.

¹²⁷ Felicitas Hillmann 2005, “Riders on the Storm. Vietnamese in Germany’s Two Migration Systems”, 90.

¹²⁸ See further in Bernd Wolf 2007, *The Vietnamese Diaspora in Germany: Structure and Potentials for Cooperation with a Focus on Berlin and Hesse*, 8-9; Pipo Bui 2003, *Envisioning*

First, they lost their jobs and free accommodation; but worse than that, they lost their legal residence status after their GDR contracts expired. Since most of them refused to return home (with the severance pay of DM 3,000) or asked for asylum while the Vietnam government refused to issue citizens who had sought asylum in other countries, many Vietnamese migrants in Germany were granted a de facto temporary stay of deportation. While most of them ran their own businesses, some earned their living by smuggling cigarettes or getting involved in criminal gangs. There was also a considerable flow of Vietnamese contract workers from the USSR, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria entering Germany illegally during the early 1990s, which created a negative image of Vietnamese migrants amongst the German public. Ironically, the criminal activities, which took place amongst the groups of Vietnamese people, affected mainly the Vietnamese migrants themselves as they were both the perpetrators and the victims.

The residence status of the former contract workers changed thanks to the decision made by the Conference of Ministers of the Interior on 14 May 1993. Those who produced pieces of evidence that they had worked until 1994 could receive limited residence certificates. But to get this residence certificate, they had to withdraw their application for asylum by 17 April 1994. Also, they had to have clean criminal records and must not have received any form of social welfare assistance, have arrived in the GDR prior 13 June 1990 and have been in residence without interruption since then. This 1993 regulation at least allowed the contract workers to work legally. At this time, most of them started to run their own businesses, such as opening restaurants and snack bars or selling flowers or fruits and vegetables.

In contrast, the Readmission Agreement signed by the FRG and the SRV in July 1995 was applied to all of the former contract workers who did not meet the requirements to gain the residence certificate, whose temporary stay of deportation expired on 17 April 1994 and who had criminal records. This regulation was issued to send around 40,000 Vietnamese back to their home. However, neither the Vietnamese socialist government nor the former contract workers were keen on the regulation. This caused the movement of the workers from Germany to other European countries, while they were still included

Vietnamese Migrants in Germany Ethnic stigma, Immigrant Origin Narratives and Partial Masking, 16-18.

in the resident statistics in Germany. The Revision of the Immigration Act on 4 July 1997 contributed to change their situation in Germany. For those who were employed and had clean criminal records, they were granted an unlimited residence permit. But now, the entire period spent in the GDR for the contract workers was counted. At least, this helped to end the struggle of the former contract workers to gain a residence permit and to give them a chance to build their new home in Germany.

1.3 Family reunification, and Vietnamese students

The Vietnamese arriving in Germany since 1990 mostly arrived for the purpose of family reunification or as asylum seekers. Regarding the former, relatives of the contract workers or boat people were now allowed to enter Germany with a family reunification form. In addition, those who opened Asian or Vietnamese restaurants could bring their relatives to Germany, providing that these “hired people” had professional experience and could not be replaced by the Germans. There was also another unique way for Vietnamese women to get a residence permit, which was to marry or, at least, have babies with a German citizen. However, it was still possible for Vietnamese citizens to get a residence permit by faking the marriage and paying the German citizen a large sum of money in return. Anyway, this became a real option for the Vietnamese people as fewer and fewer asylum applications were granted.

Besides, the number of Vietnamese students is also increasing at present. The free tuition for foreign students and the reputation of German universities are major criteria that attract students to pursue their higher education in Germany. For those who were not bound into contracts with scholarship organizations, which require students to return to their home countries, students normally look for jobs and manage to live in Germany permanently after their studies. In instances such as this, they appear to be able to integrate well.

The statistics of the Vietnamese citizens living in Germany in 2014 showed that there were 5,155 Vietnamese students registered at German higher education institutions, making up 1.8% of all international students in Germany. Also, 3,611 students had been

granted a temporary residence permit to complete their training in 2014.¹²⁹ Those pursuing professions which were expected to be high demand in the future or which were already in demand on the labor market will get more chance to get a blue card and a permanent settlement permit. Most Vietnamese students choose economics, computer science or electrical engineering in their first training degree; or engineering courses in their second training degree. There was also a considerable amount of Vietnamese doctoral candidates registered at German institutions, mostly taking mechanical/process engineering, computer science, electrical engineering and economics programs. Most of these were scholarship holders which were funded by The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) or Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) that were expected to return home to work in the public sector.

2. The divergence of Vietnamese literature in Germany¹³⁰

Corresponding to the formation of Vietnamese community groups, Vietnamese literature in Germany has also a clear distinction. First, the literary sector, which was formed and developed relatively early in the late 1970s and early 1980s, is the literature of the refugees. The subject of literary works mostly focused on memory and nostalgia for the homeland. The emergence of new community groups like contract workers, students and migrants, who were reunited with family members after 1990, enriches the subject of expression and appearance of Vietnamese literature in Germany. In particular, Vietnamese authors emphasize the social contexts in Vietnam that prompt them to leave, which usually links to the representation of the narrative of memory; on the mixed reception they receive in Germany; on the sense of rootlessness and the search for identity caused by displacement and cultural diversity. This section will pay attention to the stages of the formation and development of Vietnamese literature in Germany.

Most Vietnamese scholars share the same viewpoint of the time that Vietnamese diaspora literature emerged: i.e. the year 1975. The fact that more than one million Vietnamese people migrated abroad has marked the formation and prosperity of the

¹²⁹ Ann-Julia/Schmiz Schaland 2015, *The Vietnamese Diaspora in Germany: Migration Background, Structure, Organisation and Transnational Activities*, 11.

¹³⁰ Some parts of the section about Vietnamese literature in Germany are first published in Tran Tinh Vy 2018, "From Diaspora Community to Diaspora Literature: The Case of Vietnamese Boat People in Germany", *Diaspora Studies*.

overseas Vietnamese community, most of whom settled in Western countries such as the United States, Australia, Canada, France, Germany.¹³¹ However, it is also worth noting that most Vietnamese scholars reside in the United States, where there is a great number of refugees (at some early stages of migration in 1975-1985). The scholars' divisions of Vietnamese diaspora literature were based on the works of the Vietnamese refugees, especially those in the USA.¹³²¹³³ The social and political contexts in Germany, which caused the formation of the Vietnamese and their literature, are different. Also, the simultaneous view of 1975 as a milestone marking the formation of Vietnamese literature overseas shows how Vietnamese diaspora literature is understood by most Vietnamese authors. They perceive the Vietnamese diaspora literature as a body of literary works written in Vietnamese. More importantly, the view of 1975 onwards as the time of the formation of Vietnamese literature abroad reveals the dominance of the historical factor in determining the nature of literature by Vietnamese authors living abroad.

While these researchers agree about the time of the formation of Vietnamese diaspora literature, each researcher made a difference, albeit insignificantly, on specific

¹³¹ Among immigrants, it is impossible not to count a part of writers, mainly from South Vietnam, who later become pillars of Vietnamese literature overseas, such as Đoàn Quốc Sỹ, Nguyễn Mộng Giác, Võ Phiến, Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, Duyên Anh, Mai Thảo and Hồ Hữu Tường.

¹³² Regarding the divergence of overseas Vietnamese literature, Nguyễn Mộng Giác has synthesized overseas Vietnamese literature in three phases: 1975-1980, 1981-1988 and 1988 to the present (1991, 1992). Nguyễn Hữu Nghĩa in the review of 15 years of exiled literature also delineated literary periods beginning in 1975; 1980-1985 and from 1986 to 1990. Similarly, Lê Hoài Nguyên claimed the same: the period of formation from 1975-1980; the period of development: 1981-1985, the period of stable development from 1986 to 1990; the period of separation and purification: 1990 to present. See further in Nguyễn Mộng Giác's talk about the divergence of overseas literature in the interview with Nguyễn Mạnh Trinh. See further in Nguyễn Mạnh Trinh, "Phỏng vấn cuối năm", 58, <http://tapchivanhoc.org/?p=221> (last accessed 12 June 2017). Nguyễn Hữu Nghĩa's opinion was cited in Trần Văn Nam, "Trọng điểm những bài tổng kết 15, 20, 25 năm văn học hải ngoại", <http://saigonoccean.com/gocchung/html/trongdiem.htm> (last accessed 13 June 2017). Lê Hoài Nguyên's opinion is cited in Lê Hoài Nguyên, "Một cách nhìn 18 năm văn học Việt ngoài nước", <http://trannhuong.net/tin-tuc-19151/mot-cach-nhin-18-nam-van-hoc-viet-ngoai-nuoc.vhtm?yy=2017&mm=10> (last accessed 13 June 2017).

¹³³ Basing on a number of fundamental factors such as the immigration of Vietnamese people, the time of leaving for the immigrants, the emergence of literary newspapers, and publishers, and the development of the computing industry with character sets of Vietnamese, the France-based researcher Thụy Khuê also viewed 1975 as the starting point to divide 25 years of overseas literature (from 1975-2000) into three periods: from 1975 to 1981; from 1982 to 1990 and from 1991 to 2000. See further in Thụy Khuê, "Thử tìm một lối tiếp cận văn sử học về hai mươi năm văn học Việt Nam hải ngoại 1975-2000", <http://thuykhue.free.fr/tk99/tiepcan.html> (last accessed 13 June 2017).

timelines when defining the phases of literary development. The differences in opinion, which exist among researchers about the stages of the development of the Vietnamese diaspora literature, are understandable, as each researcher uses their own sets of criteria for evaluating and classifying the works. However, these classifications help me to envision the process of forming Vietnamese literature in Germany as a part of Vietnamese literature abroad in general.

As mentioned above, besides the group of Moritzburger students in 1955 and the group of student groups coming in the 1970s, the two most populous Vietnamese communities in Germany are the boat people and the contract workers. The literary compositions of the refugee authors could be considered as the first works of Vietnamese writing in Germany. In fact, in terms of the timing, the boat people were rescued by the Cap Anamur in 1978, and if the formation of Vietnamese literature is taken into consideration along with the formation of the Vietnamese community in Germany, the Vietnamese literature in Germany is established later on. Viên Giác magazine, one of the earliest published periodicals, which was originally a Buddhist magazine, then expanded into the fields of art and culture (including literature), launched its first issue on January 1, 1979. Viên Giác pagoda is itself a Vietnamese Buddhist Socio-Cultural Center (Vietnamesische-Buddhistisches Sozio-Kulturzentrum i. d. BRD), where many of literary works produced by the boat people were later printed and published.

Together with the Viên Giác magazine, the first literary works of Vietnamese expatriate literature in Germany are literary works of Buddhism. The main writer is the Venerable Thích Như Điển, the abbot of Viên Giác Pagoda. Thích Như Điển was born on June 28, 1949 in Quảng Nam province, Vietnam. He studied in Japan before 1975 with a Bachelor of Education and Master of Buddhist Studies at Teikyo University and Risso University in Tokyo. He then arrived in Germany on 22 April 1977, with a tourist visa, but later applied for asylum in Germany. He stayed in Kiel for a year to study German at the University of Kiel, before moving to Hannover to pursue his post-graduate education. He has been living in Germany ever since. Up to now, he has written over 65 works and translations from Vietnamese, English, Chinese and German related to Buddhism. The first two literary works when he came to Germany were *Giọt mưa đầu hạ* (Early Rain Drops) in 1979 and *Ngỡ ngàng* (Perplexity) in 1980. These two works also opened the door to a series of literary works later. From 1979 to 2017 he published books or

translations every year to explain Buddhist issues, to depict the spiritual life of Buddhists in Germany or to record the process of teaching the monks in many countries around the world. The fact that Buddhist literature were the first works of literature is easily explained because religion is one of the major factors that bring the Vietnamese refugee community together. Thus, the existence of Vietnamese Buddhist literature was highly beneficial. At first, it helps to spread the doctrine of Buddhism to guide and respond to the spiritual aspirations of the Vietnamese people living abroad. The second major benefit is that it ensures and promotes Vietnamese Buddhism in the host land. And thirdly, Buddhist literature that is written abroad also creates a sense of solidarity with Vietnamese monks, nuns, and Buddhists in Vietnam.¹³⁴ Viên Giác Pagoda, later a Buddhist Socio-cultural Center in the FRG, is not only the spiritual force for the Buddhist community in Germany but also a cultural organization that directly supports the printing of both Buddhist and non-Buddhist literature.

Besides Buddhist literary writings, some of the books that were published quite early on by the Buddhist Socio-cultural Center in Germany are collections of short stories *Sau ngày tang* (After the Date of the Funeral) by Vũ Nam and a personal essay *Nỗi buồn viễn xứ ai buồn hơn ai* (The sadness of being far-away country worse than anything else) by Hạ Long. These two works, published in 1987 and printed by the Socio-Cultural Center, clearly reflect the nostalgic mournfulness of the refugees. However, Vũ Nam's first collection of short stories clearly displays the author's political views as opposed to his literary abilities because the characters are used for heavy-propaganda. Similarly, the author Hạ Long in his essay recorded the refugees' thoughts and the cultural activities of the overseas Vietnamese community, thereby expressing the regret about the lost homeland and the pain of losing his roots in the Vietnamese community overseas. For example, the author expresses the sentiments of the refugees like this:

I am a stranger, the one who is homeless, unable to live in a native place,
the one in a thousand people who are dependents in this remote area. Day
after day, there is a deep sadness in every skin, muscle, and the humiliation

¹³⁴ Thích Nguyên Siêu, Thích Tâm Hoà, Bùi Ngọc Đường, Huỳnh Kim Quang, Vĩnh Hào, “Văn học Phật giáo Việt Nam hải ngoại Suu khảo”, 2010.
http://66.254.41.11/HieuGiang/Data/PDF/TongTapVanHocPhatGiaoVietNamHaiNgoai_02.pdf, 49 (last accessed on 18 May 2017).

of a loner to the dissipated nation, who lives in the land far from thousands of miles from the homeland.¹³⁵

Many Vietnamese writers published their debut works in the late 1980s. This time can thus be seen as the period of development of Vietnamese literature in Germany when there were cultural exchanges between authors and readers. Typical examples are the cases of Thế Giang and Ngô Nguyên Dũng. Thế Giang is a pen name for the writer Trần Hưng. He was born in 1958 in Hanoi, settled in Germany in the 1980s and now lives in Dortmund, Germany. Apart from writing articles for many Vietnamese literary magazines in the United States., he has only published one collection of short stories entitled *Thằng người có đuôi* (Man with Tail).¹³⁶ However, through his descriptions of the people in the north, Thế Giang shows both his sharp observation and satirical humor. Similarly, Ngô Nguyên Dũng makes significant contributions to overseas Vietnamese literature. He has published numerous books since 1988 (with two collections of short stories *Dòng chữ tâm tình*¹³⁷ (Words of Sentiments) and *Mười hai hoa cúc*¹³⁸ (Twelve Chrysanthemums) to date along with his latest novel, *Núi đoạn sông lìa*¹³⁹ (Broken Mountain Separated River).

Although both authors have different backgrounds, as Ngô Nguyên Dũng was a student studying in Germany in the 1970s and Thế Giang was a contract worker who arrived in Germany more than ten years later, they share a few similarities. Firstly, they are two of a few writers who collaborate on a number of literary journals in the United States and Canada, where overseas Vietnamese literature has flourished and grown relatively strong. For example, they have both published their stories in *Tạp chí Văn học* (Journal of Literature) in the USA; Ngô Nguyên Dũng is on the editorial board of *Làng Văn Magazine* (Village of Literature), Canada. Not to mention, both authors are also

¹³⁵ “Tôi một khách lạ, một kẻ mất quê hương, hay một kẻ không thể sống được trên nơi chôn nhau cắt rốn, một kẻ trong hàng ngàn kẻ đang sống kiếp tầm gỏi trên vùng đất xa xăm nay. Ngày qua ngày trong tôi có một nỗi buồn thấm thía ăn sâu trong từng làn da, thớ thịt và một cái nhục mệnh mang của một kẻ sĩ trước cảnh quốc phá, gia tan và gỏi thân nơi xứ người ngàn dặm.” Hạ Long, *Nỗi buồn viễn xứ ai buồn hơn ai* 1987, 33.

¹³⁶ Thế Giang, *Thằng người có đuôi*, 1988.

¹³⁷ Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Dòng chữ tâm tình*, 1988.

¹³⁸ Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Mười hai hoa cúc*, 1988.

¹³⁹ Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông lìa*, 2017.

members of the European Center of Vietnamese Writers Abroad P.E.N Centre.¹⁴⁰ On the one hand, collaborative exchanges with one of the liveliest overseas literary markets show the writers' willingness to integrate into the overseas literary community. On the other hand, this reflects the creative and even political tendencies expressed in the work of both writers. While both collections of shorts stories *Dòng chữ tâm tình* (Words of Sentiments) and *Mười hai hoa cúc* (Twelve Chrysanthemums), which were published in the United States in 1988 by Ngô Nguyên Dũng, reveal a sense of nostalgia for the lost homeland, Thế Giang's *Man with Tail* has a clear anti-communist tendency.

It should be noted that Thế Giang and Ngô Nguyên Dũng are not the only authors publishing books in foreign countries. Aside from the author Thế Dũng, who owns a publishing company named VIPEN which was founded in 2010, numerous Vietnamese authors in Germany have published and printed books in other countries. For example, Thế Giang and Lê Minh Hà have all published books in the United States; Ngô Nguyên Dũng has published books in the United States and Canada. Lê Minh Hà, Nguyễn Văn Thọ, Lê Xuân Quang have published books in Vietnam and so did Thế Dũng before establishing his own company. However, choosing places to print books is not just a matter of economics. Of course, the cost of printing books in Germany, which is not cheap and accessible to most Vietnamese authors, is also something that writers have to consider. More importantly, choosing where to print books is also a decision about the kind of readers that the authors want to attract to their works, which influences the expression and style of the writers who seek to suit the tastes of said readers. The difference in the representations of memory and identity between groups of works and writers is a key concept that I will discuss in later chapters.

The prolific period of the Vietnamese diasporic press and literature, according to most of the researchers, began in the 1980s. This is also true in the case of Vietnamese literature in Germany. I have divided the 25 years of development into two stages relating to the characteristics of the formation and development of two groups of Vietnamese communities in Germany. The divergence of community-based literature shows the

¹⁴⁰ Details of Vietnamese Writers Abroad P.E.N Center will be introduced in the following section.

interaction between historical events of the time and the cultural identity of each migrant community, even if they share the same origin or nationality.

The initial stage of development started from 1980 to 1990. The developmental milestone of 1980 is closely related to the founding and development of Viên Giác Pagoda and its mouthpiece – the Viên Giác magazine. In addition, this ten-year period was the time when Vietnamese Writers Abroad (VWA) was established, followed by the birth of the European Center under the VWA. These two events are forces that gave rise to the appearance of both professional and amateur writers in Germany.

The VWA is a well-known literary association that chiefly attracted Vietnamese living abroad. The founder of VWA is Minh Đức Hoài Trinh. During her attendance at the 42nd International PEN Congress held in Australia in 1977, Minh Đức Hoài Trinh launched a campaign to create a PEN Centre for Vietnamese diaspora writers. In the following year in 1978, she applied for the establishment of Vietnamese Writers Abroad and succeeded the year after. The General Assembly voted to approve the P.E.N Centre for Vietnamese Abroad at the International P.E.N Congress, Brazil in 1979.

For the first few years, the VWA only had one center in Paris, comprising of a small group of writers living in France. After 8 years of operation, the writers, poets or journalists were scattered all over the world, especially in the United States, which prompted an effort to expand and to establish new centers. Then the VWA branched out to several centers in many regions such as the Northeastern United States, Southeastern United States, Northwestern United States, Southwestern United States, South Central United States, South America, Europe, Australia, Canada. The European Center of the VWA was established in Paris on June 27, 1987. Its members include authors from France, England, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, and Finland. Every two years the European Center has a congressional election. Its contributing newspaper is *Tin Văn* (News of Literature), which is published every 2 months. *Tập san Văn bút Âu châu* (The Journal of European Writers) is the first collection of short stories, essays, and poems which were published in Europe in 1989, bringing together 30 writers, poets, journalists and researchers living in Europe. Germany-based authors Tuỳ Anh, Ngô Nguyên Dũng and Vũ Nam contributed their stories to this

collection. The second and third of the European collection of short stories and poems were both printed and published by Viên Giác.

As a member of the VWA, the European Center operates under regulations set by the VWA. Specifically, as a non-profit organization, the European Center and VWA pursue the following objectives. The first objective is to preserve and promote Vietnamese culture to maintain the national culture and to give the international community a good impression of the Vietnamese culture. The second objective is to create favorable conditions for the creation and dissemination of works by Vietnamese artists around the world. Thirdly, it promotes the spirit of the International PEN. Fourthly, it aims to encourage mutual support between the liberal artists both in and outside the country (Vietnam). The fifth objective is to encourage the young generation overseas to write in Vietnamese. And sixth, it contributes to the building of the Vietnamese community living overseas to help them adapt to a new life but still maintain the national tradition.¹⁴¹

It should be noted that whilst the Vietnamese diaspora overseas was originally formed by exiles, members joining later on were not necessarily all refugees. This is understandable if we consider VWA as a professional organization instead of concentrating on its political tendencies. In the case of the European Center, VWA and other centers, all overseas Vietnamese, who meet the following conditions, may join VWA as active members¹⁴²: writers, poets, screenwriters, commentators, critics, writers, translators, journalists who have published works or newspapers and commit to respect the rules of the International PEN and regulations of VWA. The local VWA Center accepts applications which are dependent on referrals from two members, an approval from the central board and the payment of annual fees.

In Germany, the Vietnamese writers who were members of European Center in 1989 included Ngô Nguyên Dũng, Trần Thế Hưng (Thế Giang), Lê Hoà, Nguyễn Hoà

¹⁴¹ These objectives are from documents exchanged between me and Mr. Nguyễn Hòa, the former secretary of the European Center, VWA.

¹⁴² VWA has 4 types of members: Honorary members, fraternizing members, benefactor members and active members. Honorary members are reserved for those whose reputations are well-known. The fraternizing members are artists of other nations who are oppressed. Benefactor members are for the people, organizations or enterprises who provide financial or other means of support. Finally, active members are the core members of the association.

(Phù Vân, Tuỳ Anh), Trần Phong Lưu, Tăng Vĩnh Lộc, Vũ Ngọc Long, Trần Văn Tích, Từ Ngọc Phong, Sczesny Bích Thu, Vũ Ngọc Yên, Lý Văn Văn (Vũ Nam) and Nguyễn Anh Tuấn. Among them, Ngô Nguyên Dũng, Vũ Nam, Nguyễn Hòa, Vũ Ngọc Long and Trần Văn Tích can be considered the most active members. In particular, Ngô Nguyên Dũng collaborated with the organization regularly to create literary journals. Nguyễn Hoà (his pen names are Phù Vân and Tuỳ Anh) is the editor of *Viên Giác* magazine, and as such contacts writers and poets abroad to source contributions to the magazine. Vũ Ngọc Long specializes in political essays. Trần Phong Lưu collaborates with the *Viên Giác* Magazine. Trần Văn Tích is a Medical Practitioner, contributing regularly to both *Tạp chí Văn học* (Journal of Literature) in the United States and *Làng Văn* (Village of Literature) in Canada. Vũ Ngọc Yên is a journalist, writing articles regularly for the online magazine *Đàn Chim Việt* (Vietnamese Birds) in Poland. In addition to being active in comparison to the other members, these writers all express their love of the homeland and mourning for the country they left (Phù Vân, Ngô Nguyên Dũng), whilst coming to terms with their new identity as a diaspora (Ngô Nguyên Dũng). Their compositions show the real purpose of establishing a society and partly explain the motivations of any individual to join the association. The European Center and its subsidiary centers in VWA specifically aim to create an international forum with a strong voice to promote freedom of expression and protect writers against oppression in many parts of the world.

On the one hand, being involved in a worldwide literary organization creates a community that shares not only professional characteristics (as a writer, specifically members of VWA) but also social characteristics as an immigrant community (as “minority” vs “majority”, “assimilation” vs “integration”). Moreover, in the case of the Vietnamese writers living in Germany, having a publisher like *Viên Giác* helps the authors to become more self-confident during the writing process. The books have a place where they can be printed, which means books can be released and received.¹⁴³ This advantage undoubtedly motivated the Vietnamese authors’ writing. There are quite a number of works by the Vietnamese authors printed from 1979 to 1990. The *Viên Giác* published works such as Vũ Nam’s *Sau ngày tang* (After the Day of the funeral, 1987), *Bên dòng sông Donau* (On the side of Danube River, 1990); and Vũ Ngọc Long’s works

¹⁴³ Noting that authors and readers are mainly the first generations, who mostly write and read in a “traditional way”, i.e printed books or works instead of internet publication.

- *Nỗi buồn viễn xứ ai buồn hơn ai* (The sadness of being far-away country worse than anything else, 1987), *Tìm nẻo đường về* (Finding a way back, 1992), *Quê hương tôi bây giờ là như thế đó* (My hometown is now just like that) (unknown year of publishing). In addition to the Viên Giác printing house, authors also published books in other countries, most commonly the United States, Canada, and France. Among these is Ngô Nguyên Dũng with *Dòng chữ tâm tình* (Words of Sentiments, 1988), published by Văn Nghệ in the United States; *Mười hai hoa cúc* (Twelve Chrysanthemums, 1988) by Văn Lang in the United States, *Đêm* (Night, 1989), published by Làng Văn in Canada.

The second stage of development began in the late 1980s and is ongoing. In particular, in the period from 1990 to 2010s, Vietnamese literature in Germany has witnessed a development in the topics, genres, and styles of writing. In addition to the authors from refugee backgrounds, a group of former contract authors and authors arriving in Germany to be reunited with their families, cannot be ignored. As for the former, the reunification of Germany completely transformed the lives of Vietnamese people throughout the country and laid the foundations for the formation of a second Vietnamese community in Germany. Thus, Vietnamese life in Germany before and after 1990 becomes a major subject for those authors who are former contract workers. Works which reflect this are: *Quyên* (Quyên, 2009) by Nguyễn Văn Thọ; *Những mảnh đời phiêu bạt* (Fragile Lives, 2002), *Những số phận không định trước* (Unfair Fates, 2003), *Dòng xoáy cuộc đời* (The Vortex of Life, 2004), *Đùa với lửa* (Joke with Fire, 2005), *Canh bạc cuộc đời* (The Gamble of Life, 2005) by Lê Xuân Quang and *Một nửa lá số* (Half of Horoscope, 2003) by Thế Dũng. In addition, some female writers arriving Germany to reunite with their families (in the case of Lê Minh Hà) choose Vietnam as inspiration for writing (as in the case of Lê Minh Hà's *Trăng goá* (Last quarter of Moon, 1998), *Gió biếc* (Beloved Wind, 1999), *Những giọt trầm* (Drops of Silence, 2002), *Gió tự thời khuất mặt* (Wind from the Unseen Time, 2005), *Phố vẫn gió* (Street is still windy, 2014). Đoàn Minh Phượng also touches upon human destiny and the meaning of life in *Và khi tro bụi* (And when this dust, 2006), *Mưa ở kiếp sau* (Rain in life after death, 2007). Books by these authors were chiefly published in Vietnam. In addition, Thế Dũng established a private

publishing company in 2010, VIPEN, where the author printed and published his own books and translations.¹⁴⁴

For the group of refugees, Viên Giác is still the most reliable publishing house for those in Germany. In the period from the 1990s onwards, this place continued to print many works written by refugee writers, from old to new authors. For example, Vũ Nam with *Nơi cuối dòng sông* (At the end of the river, 1994), *Câu chuyện từ con tàu Cap Anamur* (The Story of the Cap Anamur Boat, 1997); Phong Hưng Lưu Nhơn Nghĩa with *Như cánh chuồn chuồn* (Like the dragonfly wings, 2001), *Tập san Văn bút châu Âu No. 2 and 3* (Journals of European writers, 1994 and 1996), *Tuyển tập Viết về châu Âu* (The Collection of works about Europe, 2003), *Tuyển tập thơ Viên Giác* (Viên Giác collection of poems, 1990), *Những cây bút nữ 1 and 2* (Female Writers, 2008 and 2014). In addition to Viên Giác, Vietnamese writers in Germany have printed books abroad during the 1990s and later. For example, there is Vũ Nam with *Bên này bức tường Berlin* (On this side of Berlin Wall, 1993), *Một đêm ở Geneva* (One night in Geneva, 2004), *Hoa Liên Kiều* (Forsythia, 2007); Đan Hà with *Tìm trong yêu dấu* (In search of the beloved), Trúc Giang with *Tình yêu nuôi tôi lớn* (Love grows me up, 1999), Huy Giang with *Những nụ hồng* (Rosebuds, 1996), Đan Hà and Huy Giang with *Nỗi nhớ* (Nostalgia, 1995), Ngô Nguyên Dũng with *Tiếng núi* (Voice of Mountain, 1992), *Chuông đêm* (Night bell, 1992), *Gia đình Cún* (The Family of puppy, 1994), *Âm bản* (Negative version, 1994), *Hòn còng lửa* (The Island of fire crabs, 2002), *Ngôn ngữ tuyết* (Language of Snow, 2006) and *Núi đoạn sông là* (Broken Mountain, Separated River, 2017).

Besides the above-mentioned works by individual writers, Viên Giác has also published two collections of works by female writers in 2014, which were preceded by literary magazines Mai Thảo's *Văn* (Literature), Nguyễn Mộng Giác's *Tạp chí Văn học* (Journal of Literature) and Nguyễn Hữu Nghĩa's *Làng Văn* (Village of Literature). In addition, the center has held literary contests such as *Giải thưởng Viên Giác Viết về Âu châu* (Viên Giác Award-Writing about Europe) in 2002 and a collection of Viên Giác poems in 1990. The publication does not only show the literary passion of the Venerable Thích Như Điển. More importantly, the process of printing and circulating literary works is the first step to creating a literary community among refugees, thereby promoting the

¹⁴⁴ See further in <http://www.vipen.de>.

development of literature among the Vietnamese refugees. The authors have a place for printing their books, Viên Giác utilizes the readership belonging to the Viên Giác magazine to promote the books which are printed.

Some authors have been continuing to publish new books until now, such as the case of Ngô Nguyên Dũng with the novel *Núi đoạn sông lìa* (Broken Mountain Separated River) in 2017, even composing in German to reach indigenous readers, thereby joining the mainstream (the case of Thế Dũng and Ngô Nguyên Dũng). However, Vietnamese literature in Germany is at a standstill right now. This applies not only to Vietnamese literature in Germany but also to Vietnamese literature worldwide. With the rise of the internet and media, the immigrant community is generally not dependent on literature to entertain them. On the one hand, the interaction between literature inside and outside of the country gives readers more choices to satisfy their reading needs. On the other hand, this puts great pressure on the Vietnamese authors abroad to write not only well but also timely. However, as the writer Nguyễn Mộng Giác remarked, free access to information is one of the great advantages for writers living abroad:

Things being seen and heard, newspapers or magazines being read, the customs of diverse ethnic groups being received, the diverse and rich stockpiles of all kinds of issues ... have opened the eyes and knowledge of the writers abroad, something that the domestic writers do not have.¹⁴⁵

So, the change in the conditions of the composition is both a challenge and a condition for overseas literature in general, and Vietnamese literature in Germany in particular to change and develop in a new direction.

3. Characteristics of Vietnamese literature in Germany: An approach on literary space¹⁴⁶

With a population of about 125,000 people, the Vietnamese community is the largest Asian migration community in Germany. In general, Vietnamese writers have a diverse background. The two largest groups of writers are boat people and former contract

¹⁴⁵ Nguyễn Mộng Giác, “Góp ý về một cách nhìn”, 9.

¹⁴⁶ This part was first published in Thomas Engelbert (ed.) 2017, *Vietnamese Studies in Vietnam and Germany Vietnam Literature-Past and Present*, 233-258.

workers. In addition, some of the authors are people who emigrated freely (Ngô Nguyên Dũng), or for family reunification purposes (Lê Minh Hà, Đoàn Minh Phượng) and most recently a group of writers who are social activists, such as Võ Thị Hảo and Bùi Thanh Hiếu, has also emerged. The main types of compositions chosen by the authors are short stories, poetry, followed by long stories, fiction, and essays. In the non-fiction category, several authors specialize in economics (Bùi Hạnh Nghi); medical books (Trần Văn Tích), political essays (Vũ Ngọc Long). In addition to printed books, some authors collaborate with online magazines or create their own websites to introduce and archive their works. For example, Lê Xuân Quang with *lexuanquang* blog, Phong Hưng Lưu Nhơn Nghĩa with *thatsonchaudoc*, Phạm Thị Hoài with *talawas*, *pro&contra*, Ngô Nguyên Dũng with *damau*. Besides, authors will submit their writings, mostly short stories, to foreign magazines, primarily the United States before printing into collections of short stories. Ngô Nguyên Dũng, Lê Minh Hà, Thế Giang are typical cases. With the development of the internet, there are authors publishing stories predominantly on social media i.e. *facebook*, as in the case of Văn Tất Thắng.

The familiar approach to classifying migration Vietnamese literature is based on themes or creative tendencies. For example, Nguyễn Mộng Giác, in his commentary on the stages of development of overseas literature, divides the body of literature into two main categories: nostalgia and integration. In the line of nostalgic literature, there are sub-themes of rustic literature (written about the life of the lower classes in the French colonial period), memoirs (writing about the life of individual writers); fighting literature (typified by criticizing the regime), historical literature (writing about historical characters and contexts). The literature of integration includes topics such as the generation gaps between immigrants; the loneliness of the elderly; the integration experience of children; the breakdown of the marriage between husband and wife. While two lines of nostalgia and integration are prominent themes in the realm of migration literature, Nguyễn's sub-categories seem problematic as they mix thematic and stylistic criteria.¹⁴⁷ Bùi Vĩnh Phúc in "Một cách nhìn về mười ba năm văn chương Việt ngoài nước (1975-1988)" (A Look at Thirteen Years of Vietnamese Literature in Foreign Countries 1975-1988) divided the foreign literature into quite detailed and specific branches such as nostalgic literature;

¹⁴⁷ Nguyễn Mộng Giác, "Sơ khảo về các giai đoạn thành hình và phát triển của giọng văn xuôi tại hải ngoại từ 1975 đến nay" 2004, 237-309.

fighting literature; literature of adaptation and sensitive literature.¹⁴⁸ Again, he adopted a thematic approach in his categorization of the works written by Vietnamese authors living in foreign countries.

To generalize the subjects of Vietnamese literature in Germany, we chose to classify works according to the way that they deal with the topic of literary space. The awareness of literary space in the text can be crucial to understanding the authors' encounters with the world. When analyzing the relationship between literary works and the world, David McLaughlin recognizes the research shift in viewing the interrelationship between the world created in the literary work and the historical context in which it was formed. He suggests that it was once common in literary studies to treat the spaces within the works as "necessarily distanced from the space of the world. However, the studies of mobility as a theme in literary representations or histories of travel and writing suggest a new way of seeing the work and the world in which the work is necessarily bound up in the world, making the world a part of literary works."¹⁴⁹ Since the formation of the immigrant community is the result of a transformation of the historical and social context in a certain age, viewing literary space is a way to find inspiration in the time and place in which works were created. There are two primary literary spaces covered in works written by Vietnamese authors in Germany: i.e. writing towards the homeland (Vietnam) and writing towards the host land (Germany). Each literary space, however, shows a different perspective of how writers define their home and where they belong. In addition, the grouping of literary works makes it easy to identify two major themes often mentioned in literature written by the Vietnamese living overseas: nostalgia and integration.

3.1 Towards the host land

Writing about Germany becomes an indispensable topic in the writing of Vietnamese authors in Germany. Most of the authors focus on the life of the Vietnamese community in Germany. Besides, some authors have observed and recorded stories about the Germans. Generally, the depiction of the life of Westerners is influenced by the mindset

¹⁴⁸ Bùi Vĩnh Phúc, "Một cách nhìn về mười ba năm văn chương Việt ngoài nước (1975-1988)", in Nguyễn Mộng Giác 2004, 367-397.

¹⁴⁹ David McLaughlin 2016, "The Work and the World: Mobilities and Literary Space", 123.

and perception of the writer. When studying writing about Vietnamese lives in Germany, I noticed that there are some significant topics, such as the experience of former Vietnamese contract workers or boat people and the psychological change witnessed by non-political immigrants. While in the first case, the authors tend to characterize the character's behaviors, the second category of work focuses instead on psychological development. As a result, works belonging to the second category are considered to have more literary values.

Nguyễn Văn Thọ, Lê Xuân Quang, Đỗ Trường, Văn Tất Thắng, and Thế Dũng are authors whose many works deal with the livelihoods of contract workers. In a study on Turkish *Gastarbeiterliteratur* (Literature written by guest workers), A. Teraoka raised a problem in the study of literature written by and for guest workers. For those who expect to read literature written by guest workers, they could be disappointed because there are very few of the authors who were actually guest workers. In addition, guest workers are not always the target audience of such a literature.¹⁵⁰ Whilst there are not many studies that consider the extent and composition of the readership of the guest worker literature, the possibility of reading works by Vietnamese authors, who were former contract workers, is more likely than in the case of the Turkish literature. In general, the circle of former contract workers is easily recognizable not only by their autobiographical references but also by the themes in their writing. The number of writers is relatively large, including Thế Dũng, Nguyễn Văn Thọ, Lê Xuân Quang, Đỗ Trường, Thế Giang, Mai Lâm, Văn Tất Thắng and Nguyễn Hoài Phương. Apart from being from North Vietnam, the common point of these writers is that most of them write about the life of the contract workers in Germany. Examples are Thế Dũng's *Một nửa lá số* (A half of horoscope), Nguyễn Văn Thọ's *Vàng xưa* (Old gold), Nguyễn Hoài Phương's *Chuyện đồng hương* (Story of countrymen) and Đỗ Trường's *Không bao giờ thành sẹo* (Never become a scar).

Thế Dũng, a former contract worker, describes the journey of a Vietnamese intellectual from Vietnam to Germany to become a contract worker. The author was born in 1954 in Tuyên Quang. He was a driving soldier in the fiercest war years from 1971-1976. After the war, he became a student, majoring in literature at Hanoi's Pedagogy

¹⁵⁰ Arlene Akiko Teraoka 1987, "Gastarbeiterliteratur: The Other Speaks Back", 84.

University. Since 1984, he has been an Executive Board Member and Head of the Research and Theory Committee at the Hải Hưng Arts and Letters Association. In 1989, he went to Germany as a part of a contract worker program. He began writing in 1974 and wrote many genres such as poetry, stories, novels, critical essays. His main writings include five volumes of poems: *Hoa hồng đến muộn* (Rose comes late, 1990), *Người phiêu bạt* (Wanderer, 1992), *Mùa xuân dang dở* (Unfinished Spring, 2003), *Tự vấn* (Self-questioning, 2003), *Từ tâm* (Philanthropic heart, 2005); and 5 novels: *Tiếng người trong đá Giáp Sơn* (The Human Voice in Giáp Sơn Stone, 1993), *Chuyện tình dang dở* (Unfinished Love Story, 2000), *Hộ chiếu buồn* (Sad Passport, 2003), *Tình Cuối* (Cui's Love story, 2006), *Một nửa lá số* (Half of Horoscope, 2009). His novels revolve around the lives of those struggling to find their places between Vietnamese and German societies. For example, *Một nửa lá số* (Half of Horoscope) is inspired by the context of Vietnam and its people, reflecting on the fate of a generation of intellectuals in the 1980s, of which the author is one of them. Recognizing the inadequacies in Vietnamese society, where social status is more respected than personal ability, the protagonists exploit the legal loophole for self-benefit. The benefit here is a trip abroad to Germany. Nevertheless, the fact that the protagonist views East Germany as a “real paradise”, whilst this country is dying, evokes an irony of fate. At the same time, the way the main character uses tricks to go overseas raises the question of recession not only of the national economy but also identity.

One of the authors who mainly focuses on the lives of contract workers in his writing is Lê Xuân Quang. He was born in 1942 in Nam Định province, Vietnam. Arriving in Bulgaria as a contract worker, he moved to Germany after 1990 and has been living in Berlin ever since. He has published 5 books, including *Những mảnh đời phiêu bạt* (Fragile Lives, 2002), *Những số phận không định trước* (Unfair Fates, 2003), *Dòng xoáy cuộc đời* (The Vortex of Life, 2004), *Đùa với lửa* (Joke with Fire, 2005) and *Canh bạc cuộc đời* (The Gamble of Life, 2005). His stories are filled with the harsh realities of life or the challenges that the Vietnamese community faced during a turbulent historical period. For example, in some stories, Lê Xuân Quang shows bloody clashes between criminal gangs for money and describes how victims were murdered in ghettoized

dormitories.¹⁵¹ These literary reports about smuggling or cases of murder among rival Vietnamese gangs partly explain how the stereotype of Vietnamese contract workers being “bad migrants” came to be accepted in the German media.

However, the former contract workers are not only pictured in a negative way. Most of the former contract workers ran their own businesses by opening snack bars or flower shops as a way of making a living in new societies. But the long working day, including the time to travel to the wholesaler to collect merchandise before opening shop, really exposes how much endurance and tenacity the former contract worker had to have to build a business in eastern Germany. For example, Nguyễn Văn Thọ’s short story *Mưa thành phố* (City Rain) tells the story of a former contract worker who sold fruits at the market. The work of selling fruit, though not requiring much technical know-how weighed heavy on the protagonist:

In the early morning, around 4 AM, he drives an ugly Trabant to the Fruit Wholesale Center, about fifteen miles from home. [...] Loading up the car with all the fruit, then he brings them to the fruit-and-vegetable stand and takes them down. The snow is cold, but after completely loading all of the fruits at the opening time of the market, his underclothes are wet through.¹⁵²

It also takes hard work to be successful in this business:

Take a bag, bend down to take vegetables, fruits, give to customers, receive money ... every move, to sell from 1 to 5 tons, even 7, 8 or 9 tons of fruit a day, is enough to paralyze both arms.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ One of the core narrative dominating German media discourse during the mid-1990s was the emergence of cigarette mafia of Vietnamese, usually in Berlin. The freedom of movement that people enjoy in post-cold-war Europe has turned Germany into a paradise for bands of ethnic criminals, including the Vietnamese in the former Soviet Union. When moving to Germany, the main of Vietnamese gangs’ business is cigarette smuggling because of their high profitability in the short term. With so much money generated by this business, Vietnamese gangs put into gambling, pirating of audio and video cassettes or prostitution. However, the most problematic in these Vietnamese gangs was the escalation of criminal gangs. In fact, the Vietnamese cigarette vendors were just pawns in the gang war. They were supplied vendors by gang leaders who kept most of the profits. Most of the killing among gangs resulted from clashes among gangs to take control of lucrative sales spots.

¹⁵² Nguyễn Văn Thọ, *Mưa thành phố* 2010, 128.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

However, the hardship of manual labor is not equal to the hardship of controlling the inherent greed of man. When the business thrives, the protagonist is assigned by his boss to manage a separate stall. Earnings were great, but the monthly salary was meagre, so he got an idea to steal money from the owner. He struggles between taking and not taking the money, or the struggle to determine his identity: “To be a hired worker or a thief? That simple thing is difficult!”¹⁵⁴ Finally, he decides to tell the truth to the owner and receives sympathy and respect from the owner in return. The stories of Vietnamese’s businesses, reflected through the works of Nguyễn Văn Thọ or Lê Xuân Quang, are documentaries which show how difficult a new beginning was for a worker to work legally in Germany.

The greatest strength in writing about contract workers is the truthfulness in describing Vietnamese lives. However, the presence of a Vietnamese community that engages in illicit activities such as the smuggling of cigarettes, the making of counterfeit jeans and living under the domination of the power of money makes enquiring about the identity of the first-generation immigrant community or the assimilation of the second generation seem not as relevant. The formation of a black market within the group of former contract workers could be partly explained due to the unexpected downfall of the GDR, which led to their struggle to make a living by any means. However, it is also worth mentioning here that the contract workers program was established as a form of temporary circular migration in the beginning. Their way of leaving reflects the lack of background as a long-term migrant community which leads to their unwilling integration to host land later on. Expecting that they would return home after staying in Germany for a certain amount of time, the contract workers took Germany as the economically profitable place, hoping to get enough savings after the five-year contract expired.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, the way of depicting the businesses of contract workers honestly, especially as not all activities are legal, creates a stigma for Vietnamese living in Germany.

Germany, in the memory of the Vietnamese, is not just a business area of former contract workers. With the boat people departing from the South, the journey to Germany includes their voyages or time spent in refugee camps before being admitted to West

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Gertrude Huwelmeimer 2008, “Spirits in the Marketplace: Transnational Networks of Vietnamese Migrants in Berlin”, 131-144.

Germany. The experience of boat people living in Germany is also very different from that of the contract workers. Typical authors writing about refugees in Germany include Vũ Nam, Phù Vân (Tuỳ Anh), Huy Giang, Đan Hà, Trần Phong Lữ. Among them, Vũ Nam can be considered as a writer who records the most detail of the social activities of the refugees in Germany.

Vũ Nam is a pen name of Lý Văn Vãn, born in 1954 in Phước Tuy Province.¹⁵⁶ He was a former soldier in the army of the South Vietnam government before 1975. In 1980, he escaped with his family and was rescued by Cap Anamur. He settled in Germany since 1981. Vũ Nam can be considered an active writer among boat people-writers. He started writing in 1985, and collaborated with many magazines in the United States (*Văn, Gió Văn, Cỏ thơm*), Canada (*Làng Văn, Sóng, Lửa Việt, Nắng Mới*), France (*Nhân Bản, Chiến Hữu, Tin Văn*), Norway (*Pháp Âm*) and Germany (*Viên Giác, Độc Lập, Tam Giác*). At the same time, Vũ Nam's short stories appeared in many collections such as *Văn bút Âu Châu 1, 2 and 3* (*Collection of European Writers*, 1989, 1994, 1996). He published works, including *Sau ngày tang* (After the Date of the Funeral, 1987), *Bên dòng sông Donau* (On the side of Danube River, 1990), *Bên này bức tường Bá Linh* (On this side of the Berlin Wall, 1993), *Nơi cuối dòng sông* (At the End of the River, 1994), *Câu chuyện từ con tàu Cap Anamur* (The Story of Cap Anamur Boat, 1997), *Một đêm ở Geneva* (One Night in Geneva, 2004), *Hoa Liên kiều* (Forsythia, 2008) and *Quê người nhớ quê nhà* (Remembering the homeland in the host land, 2016).

If Thế Dũng described the outward journey of those who had departed from the North, Vũ Nam outlines another path of exile, which is equally grim and dangerous, for those who departed from the South. For example, *Nơi cuối dòng sông* (At the end of the river)¹⁵⁷ revolves around the life of Nhân, the main character, a soldier in the military school of the Republic of Vietnam. After the fall of the South in 1975, he deserts the army and returns to live in a new regime. Initially, he is optimistic about his new life. Later, the difficulties of integration, such as being unable to find a job, make him increasingly isolated in the new society as he struggles to make a living. He then becomes depressed

¹⁵⁶ Phước Tuy Province was a province of the former South Vietnam. It now mostly corresponds to Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu province, southeast of Ho Chi Minh City in reunified Vietnam.

¹⁵⁷ Vũ Nam, *Nơi cuối dòng sông*, 1994.

and tries to escape with his girlfriend. From the inability to integrate into the new political system, which leads to people planning to illegally cross borders, Vũ Nam explains the departure as a side effect of the new society which is full of the haunts and prejudices of the old regime. Besides the release from a hard life, the departure of the boat people is also understood as the escape from the mental and psychological oppression. However, the tension between going or staying, obsessions, memories after leaving are the manifestations of unfinished transmission of national identity for the boat people.

Similarly, in *Câu chuyện từ con tàu Cap Anamur* (The story of the boat Cap Anamur),¹⁵⁸ Vũ Nam describes the lives of those who crossed the border to stay at refugee camps as part of the process of finding a new land. Although the book primarily focuses on romantic relationships rather than depicting psychological characters, the story of the refugee's life on an island in the Philippines is worth considering. While attending a tour to the refugee camp at Pulau Galang, L. Peché acknowledges the preservation of the refugee camp as a part of the struggle of the Vietnamese diaspora to combat the (Vietnamese) state's intervention in re-narrating the circumstances of their exile."¹⁵⁹ Especially, narrating or visiting memorials such as refugee camps is the collective effort to re-inscribe the boat people into the popular memory of a war and to "reclaim a new narrative of perseverance, honor, and power".¹⁶⁰ Therefore, I consider the act of telling the story about a refugee camp in Vũ Nam's fiction as the refugee's effort to educate the second generation about the history and to embrace the refugee legacy for those who have no first-hand experience.

Vũ Nam is not a skilled-writer in his early works. However, the more he writes, the better he displays his observation skills and his sensitivity when writing about the lives of refugees. For instance, when writing about settlers in Germany, Vũ Nam is particularly interested in the emotional lives of lonely people. One of the misfortunes of exile life is the lack of love. Vietnamese men in West Germany look forward to the fall of Berlin wall so that they can get married (*Bên này bức tường Bá Linh* (On this side of Berlin Wall)). Another example is in *Bên dòng sông Donau* (On the side of Danube

¹⁵⁸ Vũ Nam, *Câu chuyện từ con tàu Cap Anamur*, 1996.

¹⁵⁹ Linda Ho Peché 2016, "Religious Spaces 'Boat People' Legacy and the American Generation 1.5 and Second Generation", 162.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

River), in which the writer describes the story of a woman living with a man, who already had Vietnamese wives, and accepted being a single mother later on. In the short story *Về những cuộc đời trong một thành phố* (About lives in the same city), he writes about the torment of a group of Vietnamese people when thinking of their homeland.

A group of writers, who moved to Germany to reunite with family members, also select refugee life in Germany as a major theme in their works. The typical authors in this group are Ngô Nguyên Dũng (*Âm bản* (Negative Version), *Dòng chữ tâm tình* (Words of Sentiments), *Mười hai hoa cúc* (Twelve Chrysanthemum), *Ngôn ngữ tuyết* (Language of Snow), *Chuông đêm* (Night Bell)); Lê Minh Hà (*Những gặp gỡ không ngờ* (Unexpected Meetings); Đoàn Minh Phượng (*Và khi tro bụi* (And when this Dust) and *Mưa ở kiếp sau* (Rain in Life Afterdeath). These writers specifically focus on the psychological process of the characters. For example, Ngô Nguyên Dũng in several short stories describes the inner dynamics of exiles living abroad but always obsessed with memories: memories of family, friends or hometowns. Similarly, Lê Minh Hà particularly focused on the status of women who are far away from home country and the gaps they feel in their souls in *Nơi ấy, Trăng* (There, Moon); *Không nhìn một hướng* (Not the same direction). Ngô Nguyên Dũng, Lê Minh Hà and Đoàn Minh Phượng are similar in the way that they use grand narratives in their works such as the perception of the nihilism of the immigrant, of human condition, of love and death. These new narratives take on similar tropes to other migration literature and offer an in-depth look at human psychology under the influence of space and time. The work of these authors will be analyzed in detail in the following chapters.

3.2 Towards the homeland

Whilst writing about a host land shows a sense of exploration, observation, and understanding of the place of settlement, writing about the homeland becomes an impulse, a need to retrieve the identity whilst facing the dilemma of whether to put down roots in a new place or not for the Vietnamese writers. In other words, Vietnam is both a place of passion and a trigger for memories in which the immigrants re-create their homelands. Vietnam, the home country, becomes the creative space for most Vietnamese authors in Germany. Depending on the degree of cohesion between the author and a specific region in Vietnam, the homeland is described as a place that contains a lot of

love, memory, anger, and obsession. Normally, the context of the South or North is related to the origin of the writer. For example, Hanoi became a literary space in the works of northern authors such as Lê Minh Hà, Nguyễn Văn Thọ, Thế Giang, Phạm Thị Hoài and Mai Lâm. Meanwhile, the characters in the stories of the South Vietnamese writers such as Ngô Nguyên Dũng, Vũ Nam, Huy Giang and Phong Hưng Lưu Nhơn Nghĩa live, behave and think in Saigon, Nha Trang or Southwest Vietnam. In short, the first characteristic of Vietnamese literature in Germany is localization.

Except for writing about the homeland as a native place, the reappearance of Vietnam is influenced by geo-political factors. In particular, the authors point to Vietnam not as a general entity but instead in terms of what it was like during certain historical periods. The most popular period described by most writers is the period of postwar Vietnam, which coincides with the departure of the authors from both North and South Vietnam. However, while Lê Minh Hà, Nguyễn Văn Thọ, Đỗ Trường and Mai Lâm express many sentiments of the memory of a faraway country, Phạm Thị Hoài or Thế Giang expose a picture of an ugly Hanoi, revealing a pessimistic and critical view of the future of the country. Within the group of authors who departed from the South, the year 1975 was seen as a historic landmark that marked a shift in political views, followed by a change in the perception of the writer. In this direction, it is predictable that South Vietnam before 1975 is mentioned with a lot of regret in the works. In contrast, Vietnam after 1975 is often referred to with some criticism and condemnation. Thus, the second characteristic of Vietnamese literature when writing about the homeland is politics.

Politics is most evident through the themes of war shown in some works. For example, Nguyễn Văn Thọ used the lens of the communist soldiers fighting for a cause to write about the Vietnam War. The depictions of Vietnamese soldiers in the short stories *Ngọn lửa* (Flame) and *Ám ảnh* (Obsession) in the collection of *Vàng xưa* (Old Gold); *Phố cũ* (Old street) and *Vô danh trận mạc* (Anonymous in Battle) in the collection of *Thất huyền cầm* (The guqin); *30-4 Anh ở đâu* (30-4 Where are you?) in the collection of *Mưa thành phố* (City Rain) and *Lời hứa của chiến tranh* (The Promise of War) in the collection of *Sẫm Violet* (Dark Violet) are characterized by outstanding personalities. The characters are brave and willing to sacrifice their personal lives for the cause of liberation. In contrast, Vũ Nam describes the Vietnam War from the perspective of the defeated. Thus after 1975, the lives of the South were described as miserable, which was argued as the

consequences of the defeat of the South Vietnam regime and the weakness of the administration of the Communist government. The short stories *Sau ngày tang* (After the date of the funeral), Vũ Nam's debut work, is just one example. The collection of short stories was composed shortly after Vũ Nam's arrival in Germany and published by Viên Giác in 1978. In this book, Vũ Nam built many typical characters, like Hai Thạch, Tư Tấn, Hạnh who experienced the injustice in postwar society because they were involved in the old regime. In several other short stories, Vũ Nam expresses his support for the Ngô Đình Diệm government and strongly condemns the communist government. On the one hand, the collection of short stories accurately reflects the mood of the refugees who left for political reasons. Unlike the first wave of Vietnamese immigrants, the Vietnamese boat people in Germany belonged to the second wave. It was the boat people who crossed the sea from 1979 onwards and understood why they chose to leave and what they left behind. Having lived under the communist regime and experienced the harsh life after 1975, the writers in the second wave of refugees viewed literature as a mission to claim freedom and democracy, and to cry for the lost country. However, because of the perception of literature as a weapon for political attitudes, *Sau ngày tang* (After the Date of the funeral) only shows the author's political viewpoint rather than his writing ability. Thus, the representation of the characters, who were poor farmers but still supported the government, was somewhat forced. It reflects the author's bias to construct anti-communist characters that blindly supported the South Vietnamese government rather than literary images with psychological shades.

Amongst the group of authors from the North, who were sympathetic to the Hanoi government, the homeland is painted with a lot of love. These authors include Nguyễn Văn Thọ with short stories *Làng bên sông* (Village on the riverside), *Miếu ông Bồi* (Boi's temple), *Hà Nội hoa* (Hanoi flowers), *Mưa thành phố* (City Rain), *Chuyện tình của cha tôi* (My father's love story); Đỗ Trường with short stories *Đêm giao thừa nghĩ về mẹ* (Thinking of mother in new year eve), *Phượng ơi đừng nở nữa* (Phoenix flowers, please stop blossoming); Mai Lâm with *Từ xa Hà Nội* (Far from Hanoi), *Xa rồi ngày xanh* (Away from green days). The common point of these authors is the unity of love to homeland and family, the village, the food or the local customs. In other words, the familiarity with the lifestyle or customs of the family and surrounding environment is the source of the memory, from which it develops into love for the country.

However, since writers are migrants, the homeland that is remembered and written back to is not the homeland at present but the homeland-in-memory. Lê Minh Hà's works are one of the most well-written descriptions of Hanoi. Hanoi, the main theme in Lê Minh Hà's literature, is depicted with bitterness and regret. Lê Minh Hà was born in 1962 in Hanoi and graduated from the Faculty of Literature and Pedagogy in 1983. Prior to settling in Germany, she had 8 years of teaching at Hanoi-Amsterdam High School. She wrote a lot in Vietnam and collaborated with many magazines overseas such as *Hộp Lưư, Văn, Văn học and Gió Đông* before launching her first book in 1998, entitled *Trăng goá* (Last quarter of Moon). Lê Minh Hà wrote a lot of vignettes *Thương thế ngày xưa* (Beloved Old Days), novels *Gió tự thời khuất mặt* (Wind from the Unseen Time), *Phố vẫn gió* (The Street is still Windy), but was more successful with her collections of short stories *Trăng goá* (Last quarter of Moon, 1998), *Gió biếc* (Beloved Wind, 1999), *Những giọt trầm* (Drops of Silence, 2005) and *Những gặp gỡ không ngờ* (Unexpected Meetings, 2012). Leaving Hanoi in 1994, when the city just started its transition to the socialist-oriented market economy, Hanoi in the work of Lê Minh Hà is beautiful, poetic but also dilapidated. This land is home to a lost generation who are locked in a struggle to secure a livelihood.

For example, the character Ngân in the novel *Gió tự thời khuất mặt* (Wind from the Unseen Time)¹⁶¹ went back to the old Hanoi to find out about the turbulent past and a period of chaos. Ngân's examination of the past is also a quest for the identity of a whole community, inquiring about the origins of a fabricated history, of a culture without identity, of a personality being bound with dogma and confusion. Therefore, literary space in the novel not only refers to geographic but also cultural space. Similarly, the novel *Phố vẫn gió* (The street is still windy)¹⁶² is set in Hanoi from the years after the liberation of 1975 until now. Lê Minh Hà built up Hanoi with two opposite extremes of old and new characteristics, where the heroine Ngân (the same name as the character in the previous novel) is left disappointed and distressed with the current state of Hanoi. Having spent time in Vietnam during its subsidy period¹⁶³ and currently living in

¹⁶¹ Lê Minh Hà, *Gió tự thời khuất mặt*, <http://vanviet.info/van/gi-tu-thoi-khuat-mat-2/> (last accessed 28 August 2017).

¹⁶² Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 2014.

¹⁶³ Subsidy period is the name used in Vietnam to a stage where most economic activity takes place under the planned economy, a feature of the economy under communism. Accordingly,

Germany, Lê Minh Hà is not a part of either the contract workers or boat people groups but she shares the writing technique with other immigration writers: i.e using flashback in writing. The flashback works well in portraying the juxtaposition of the elegant and charming old Hanoi with the chaotic Hanoi in the present, thereby questioning the validity of the war and the new government's ruling.

In addition to the writer Lê Minh Hà, other writers such as Phạm Thị Hoài, Thế Dũng, and Thế Giang also describe urban life in the North during the subsidy period up until to the renovation period, which contains many paradoxes in society. In this, Phạm Thị Hoài is a very special case. She is considered a talented writer not only in the Vietnamese community in Germany but also in other countries such as the United States, France, Australia. Her websites *Talawas* and *Pro&Contra* are considered valuable sources for political, cultural, and social research. Her novels, short stories and essays reveal a critical view of the Vietnamese people's bad habits and point out the weaknesses of totalitarianism at the same time. However, as for fiction, most of her stories were written before her settlement in Germany. Thus, regarding her fiction, she is a representative of Vietnamese literature in the period of renovation rather than a representative of a migration writer. In contrast, Thế Giang with the collection of short stories *Thằng người có đuôi* (Man with Tail) can be considered a typical author of immigrant literature. He wrote his work whilst he was abroad, more specifically, his works reveal anti-communist attitudes. He was born in Hanoi but went to Saigon in 1975 and belongs to the group of boat people who escaped Vietnam in 1980. Though only one collection of short stories *Man with Tail* was published, Thế Giang caused a buzz because of his strong criticism of the communist regime in his writing. For example, the short story *Vũng nước đọng*¹⁶⁴ (A Stagnant Water Place) shows a somber realism, and focuses on the sale of the bodies of poor prostitutes and sleazy guests. Stagnant water is a metaphor for the inertia and muddiness of human dignity. Prostitutes or employees just represent one class of people living at the bottom of society, those who have been promised a life of equality, prosperity and happiness in the socialist regime. Similarly,

the private sector gradually removed to make way for the state-economy leader. Although the subsidy regime existed in the north under the regime of North Vietnam before 1975, the subsidy period is often used to refer to economic activities in the country Vietnam period from early 1976 to late 1986 across the country, i.e. before the Renovation period.

¹⁶⁴ Thế Giang, *Thằng người có đuôi* 1987.

the true face of the socialist regime was nakedly exposed in the short story *Cay đắng nở hoa* (Bitterness blooms), where the duplicity, deceitfulness and artifice of a part of leaders of the culture field were portrayed as a typical trait of the Socialist officials.

In the group of authors from Southern Vietnam, localization is a characteristic in most writers' work, but the degree of political expression depends on the authors' background and personality. For the boat people, the homeland is where they are always headed. However, love for the homeland is combined with hatred of the new government. The more they love and remember the nation, the more aggressive they feel towards the regime. Writers belonging to the boat people group include Tuỳ Anh (Phù Vân) and Vũ Nam. The poet Phù Vân was born in 1938 in Huế, Vietnam and is a former engineer. After April 30, 1975, he went to prison for re-education and was released from prison in 1980. Afterwards, he crossed the sea and settled in Germany. He is currently the editor of the *Viên Giác Magazine*. Tuỳ Anh composed different genres, from poetry, to prose and letters. The themes of his work are quite diverse, the most prominent being the feelings of an exile, the love of home, family, resentment to the incumbent government, but some of his work is also Buddhist-oriented. However, whilst prose is like an outfit, poetry is his soul. The collection of poems *Ngoài xa dấu chân mây* (Beyond the footprint of clouds) in 1994 contains the feeling of a person who is always tormented about the reality of the country and obsessive about the loss of memory. For example, in the poem *Tháng tư gợi nhắc niềm đau*¹⁶⁵ (April- Reminiscence of the pain), the poet expresses bitterness and resentment when he remembers the historic April, depicting the pain of losing his identity:

Tưởng đã phai mờ cội nguồn chủng tộc

Bằng vào tên họ nửa Á, nửa Âu

Bằng vào quốc tịch vô căn mất gốc

Quên hẳn da vàng, mũi tẹt, mắt nâu!"

(*Tháng tư gợi nhắc niềm đau*)

Thought to have faded racial origin

¹⁶⁵ Tuỳ Anh, *Ngoài xa dấu chân mây* 1994, 28.

By names in half Asia, half Europe

By uprooted nationality

Forget the yellow skin, flat nose, brown eyes

(April-Reminiscence of the pain)

In contrast to Tuỳ Anh and Vũ Nam who express political attitudes in their work, Ngô Nguyên Dũng does not blatantly reveal political tendencies in his work. Ngô Nguyên Dũng's literature contains complex ideas, combines many themes in one story and frequently uses the stream of consciousness to describe the characters' psychologies. In particular, similar to Đoàn Minh Phụng, Ngô Nguyên Dũng characterizes the human condition in relation to nature and the universe, the finitude of human, the complexity of psychological life as influenced by external forces. The best examples are the stories: *Núi man rợ* (Savage Mountain), *Người đi bên cạnh tôi* (The person who walks beside me) in the collection of *Âm bản* (Negative Version); *Những vì sao* (Stars) in the collection of *Dòng chữ tâm tình* (Words of Sentiments); *Chợ phiên đầu xuân* (Market at the beginning of spring) in the collection of *Tiếng núi* (the Sound of the Mountain); *Ngôn ngữ tuyết* (Language of Snow) and *Chờ đê vỡ* (Waiting for the dike broken) in the collection of *Ngôn ngữ tuyết* (Language of Snow). However, in the works by Ngô Nguyên Dũng, the memory of the homeland and the characters that expressed more views on the age become the prominent themes. Some examples are the short stories *Canh bạc* (Gamble) in the collection of *Âm bản* (Negative Version), *Chốn tâm tình ẩn náu* (Place for hiding feeling) in the collection of *Dòng chữ tâm tình* (Words of Sentiments) and *Say trăng* (Drunk for Moon) in the collection of *Tiếng núi* (Sound of Mountain). For example, in the short story *Canh bạc* (The Gamble), the writer expresses the quandary of the Southerners right before the take-over of the Communists to the South in 1975. The protagonist, like many other people, is presented with a dilemma to either choose to live with a new regime (the Communist regime) or to escape it. In the chaotic days of Saigon, he felt agitated, waiting for something but not sure what happened:

In the last morning that I walked around with Nguyễn, I felt uneasy, waiting but did not understanding what I waited for [...] Go or stay. I caught the same concerning the eyes of the city residents. The future under

the communist regime is an immense and vague language, an illusion; only unusual people think it is real.¹⁶⁶

This is a common feeling among the locals who almost lose their motivation to live, and do not see any sign of hope and faith in the new regime. That is why the protagonist spends his last days before the fall of Saigon gambling. His boredom and hopelessness are shown in the way he spends his money in a rush in case the Republic of Vietnam falls.

It is worth remembering that Ngô Nguyên Dũng is not a boat person in Germany even though he came from the South. He belongs to the wave of immigrants who arrived in Germany in the 1970s to study, and gained permanent residence. However, he shared with other Southerners the nostalgia of the lost Saigon and a desire to build a lost homeland in the host country. Nevertheless, their tragedy arises from the moment they build a lost homeland because it was essentially just a fantasy of an imagined land that will wither sooner or later. And then the immigrant gets stuck in their imagination, partly wanting to build a real life for their children in their new country and partly wanting to return to their native land.

As mentioned above, whilst the level of political expression depends on the character and creative tendencies of the author, localization is the common theme throughout the entire body of work. Almost all of the writers build literary space and time based on their personal experiences and insights. In particular, some Vietnamese authors focus entirely on writing about their childhood experiences, or customs in their homeland. For example, Phong Hung Lư Nhon Nghĩa almost writes solely about the Khmer life in Châu Đốc, An Giang province, for example in his collection of short stories *Như cánh chuồn chuồn* (Like the dragonfly wings). Huy Giang writes about the life of poor working people in the Mekong Delta region in his stories *Nước mặn* (Salt water), *Còn đây kỷ niệm* (Memory is still here) and *Những nụ hoa bần* (The flower buds of Bần tree). The strength of these authors is their recall of many of the customs and practices of local people. The

¹⁶⁶ “Buổi sáng cuối cùng dạo phố chung với Nguyên, tôi mang tâm trạng của một kẻ nôn nao chờ đợi, mà không hiểu chờ đợi cái gì. [...] Đi hay ở. Tôi bắt gặp những ánh mắt ưu tư tương tự của người dân thành phố. Tương lai dưới chế độ cộng sản là thứ ngôn ngữ mênh mông mơ hồ quá, là một ảo giác, chỉ những kẻ bất thường mới nghĩ rằng nó có thật.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Ấm bản* 1994, 56.

authors also include folksongs from the Mekong Delta and the southwestern border. These works of literature are a valuable source of information as they help the readers to understand not only the cultural or local languages but also the feelings of the Vietnamese.

Mini conclusion

To conclude, this chapter gives a brief introduction about the formation of the Vietnamese community and the subsequent Vietnamese literature that has been written in Germany. In the first section, I showed how the Vietnamese community was formed and how it has developed in Germany. As I mentioned, there are two main groups of people, the boat people and the contract workers. Also, some people arrive in Germany for family reunification purposes and as students. Since they are distinguished from each other in terms of social and political backgrounds, these groups have created their own sub-cultures in reality, which is thereby reflected in the various themes in their writings.

In the second section, I focused on the distinguishing feature of Vietnamese literature that is its multifaceted nature. Vietnamese literature began to emerge at the beginning of the 1980s with the arrival of the Vietnamese boat people. The mid-1980s can be seen as its period of development. This period saw plenty of works being produced on a variety of themes and in a number of different genres. Aside from the boat people, writers are also contract workers, immigrants who arrived to be reunited with family members and social activists, all of whom actively contribute to Vietnamese literature in Germany today. There are two manifestations of how writers came together. The first is their joining in the VWA, which was considered a formal agreement on some shared thoughts of writings. In most cases, these shared thoughts were the nostalgia of the lost country and criticism of the current regime. In addition, there were many writers in Germany in the 1980s who received support from Viên Giác pagoda to publish their books. Viên Giác also a socio-cultural center where writers could connect with each other through literary activities. Therefore, I consider that the writers' shared collective memory was reinforced through their joining in Viên Giác magazine, the second tie which plays a crucial role in both religious and literary lives.

Last but not least, I introduced the characteristics of Vietnamese literature in their approach to literary spaces. There are two chief literary spaces in the works – towards the

host land and towards the homeland in which writings about the homeland (Vietnam) are more dominant. In general, two core characteristics of Vietnamese literature in Germany are localization and politics. It is also worth restating here that Vietnamese literature in Germany is diversified and fragmentary. The Eastern European communist bloc collapsed, leading to the formation of a Vietnamese community in East Berlin and also in Eastern Europe. Whilst some writers acknowledge the socialist regime negatively and insist on freedom and democracy, another group still regards Vietnam as the ultimate destination. Therefore, the latter often do not pay attention to the issues of freedom and democracy, but mainly pay attention to their own lives. In addition, a number of writers who moved to Germany to reunite with their families are open-minded and focus on universal issues of human beings rather than political themes. This means that political topics have gradually become less prominent in Vietnamese literature.

CHAPTER 2: FROM GERMAN DREAMS TO GERMAN LIVES: ENVISIONING IDENTITY OF VIETNAMESE FORMER CONTRACT WORKERS IN VIETNAMESE LITERATURE IN GERMANY

1. Introduction to the literature written by the former contract workers

In the period of the late 1908s, working and living in the GDR was considered a life-changing opportunity for the Vietnamese, especially those living in Northern Vietnam. In an interview published in the *Der Spiegel* newspaper, the Vietnamese contract workers expressed their pride in working in Germany and their hope for a bright future after returning home:

We are building socialism in our homeland. And for this, we need a workforce. Industrial firms are being established throughout our country, but Vietnam is still known to be antiquated and agricultural. When we return to our homeland, we will be placed where the industry needs us. And we believe that this assignment will correspond to our wishes.¹⁶⁷

But history has surprising turns. The Vietnamese workers in Germany would not have expected a day when the GDR ended, their labor contracts were terminated unexpectedly, and the former workers waited for the day they return to Vietnam. How did the Vietnamese workers experience these historic events? More importantly, how did they deal with this adversity in their literature? This chapter will introduce and analyze the narratives of the lives of former contract workers in Germany.

The writers selected in this chapter share common backgrounds. They used to be contract workers, so they experienced the fluctuations in history themselves. Although each story reflects the writer's personal experiences, regardless of fictional details, the writers try to recreate the way Vietnamese people cope with the changes of the times, thereby depicting the rise and fall in the life of the Vietnamese who viewed East Germany as a socialist paradise. In general, these authors focus on describing the following topics: the struggle and the livelihood of the Vietnamese community after the reunification of Germany; the risks and the uncertainties that Vietnamese women faced on their journey across the border and how they earned their living abroad; the complex underworld that

¹⁶⁷ Siegfried Mann, "How do foreign workers live in the GDR?", 84.

some of the Vietnamese were part of who lived outside the law including undertaking activities such as smuggling cigarettes and dealing drugs and the moral decadence of Vietnamese people under the influence of money.

However, each author is different. Lê Xuân Quang only specializes in writing short stories and focuses heavily on describing the social situation of Vietnamese people in Germany. He emphasizes the characters' actions instead of psychological developments or the emotional nuances of the characters. Therefore, the strength of Lê Xuân Quang's short story is expressed in the way he recreates the harsh reality of Vietnamese life in Germany. As for the writer Thế Dũng, before coming to Germany, he wrote a number of pieces in Vietnam including poetry, novels, autographs, and some short stories. He specializes in writing about life in the host land and carefully describes the preparation undertaken by the Vietnamese for going overseas, including how they got a ticket, which many other authors did not mention.

Similar to Thế Dũng, Nguyễn Văn Thọ also composed and published books before his arrival in Germany. He writes about many social and cultural issues that Vietnamese people encounter in their lives in both Vietnam and Germany. However, if Thế Dũng concentrates heavily on the narrative of departure, Nguyễn Văn Thọ portrays the journey back in his most famous novel entitled *Quyên*. The narratives of departure and return in the works of Thế Dũng and Nguyễn Văn Thọ, as analyzed in this chapter, display how the characters confront the harsh reality of making a living and the process of shaping identities.

The authors Đỗ Trường and Nguyễn Công Tiến did not write that much and only published one debut each. However, both expressed their refinement and enthusiasm when writing about the working life of the Vietnamese people in Germany. Except for the authors mentioned here, the authors who do not belong to the group of former contract workers also mention the life of Vietnamese people in Germany. However, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters, the memory of Vietnamese life and culture is the main topic in works written by former students, boat people or free immigrants. Meanwhile, no one can better describe the influence of the historical changes on the immigrants than those who experienced these historic events themselves. Lê Xuân Quang, Thế Dũng, Nguyễn Văn Thọ, Đỗ Trường, and Nguyễn Công Tiến provided lively

literary materials to help us outline the identity of community groups as contract workers.

This chapter will begin with an analysis of the narrative about the departures, illustrated by the journeys of the main characters in the two novels *Hộ chiếu buồn* (Sad Passport) and *Một nửa lá số* (Half of the Horoscope) by Thế Dũng. The workers in the GDR have diverse backgrounds. However, in his novel, Thế Dũng depicts immigrants from a specific intellectual class. The writer specifically describes how these characters reveal their sense of identity when living and working abroad. In the next part of this chapter, I will focus on the narratives describing the social and economic life of Vietnamese people in Germany written by a number of former contract workers. I purposely put these analyses right after the narrative of departure through Thế Dũng's novels to create seamless visualizations of the migration and residence of Vietnamese people in Germany. The last part of the chapter will introduce the narrative of return in the novel *Quyên* by Nguyễn Văn Thọ. In fact, most of the content in Nguyễn Văn Thọ's novel also describes the main characters' illegal cross-border journey. However, at the end of this fiction, which ends with the heroine's decision to repatriate, shows that she recognizes the role of the homeland in the interaction with the multicultural context.

2. The narratives of departure in *Hộ chiếu buồn* and *Một nửa lá số* by Thế Dũng

2.1 On the departure

As for the intention to integrate into the host country, the contract workers were not as willing as the boat people. The short-term language training before their arrival did not prepare them well for their life in Germany, which led them to think of living in Germany as a temporary situation, where they could earn money in five years by working hard and then go back to Vietnam as a king. Thế Dũng in his novel *Hộ chiếu buồn* (The Sad Passport) shows popular cases among young people in Vietnam, thereby outlining Vietnamese identity in the years after the Renovation period (*Thời kì Đổi mới*) in 1986. However, the protagonists in the fiction are not typically "good" characters. The author instead constructs real-life characters, as portrayed through the events in the character's life where the darker sides of people are revealed.

The title of the novel in German *Der Traum von Orly*, which was translated by Thế Dũng in Vietnamese *Hộ chiếu buồn* (The Sad Passport), indicates how meaningful the departure was for the contract workers. Generally, going overseas became a dream

for most Vietnamese people who saw foreign countries as exotic and promising lands. Bernd Wolf lists several reasons why the contract workers wanted to work in the GDR, including:

to allow them to send money home to their families; to obtain further professional or vocational training; to legally escape the system in place in Vietnam; to escape the economic, social and political crises in Vietnam.¹⁶⁸

The first two reasons, at least, are explored in Thế Dũng's another novel, *Một nửa lá số* (Half of The Horoscope). The protagonist sees working overseas as a chance to "earn money and experience, learn more language and then come back."¹⁶⁹ However, for those intellectuals who hold academic degrees, the departure was not looked at purely for economic reasons. In particular, the two characters in Thế Dũng's novels view the trip as their chance to get out of a suffocating work environment. This is alluded to in the character Vũ Hoàng Giáp's thoughts in *Một nửa lá số* (Half of The Horoscope). As an artist, working in a boring environment, he is prevented from writing: "He will be depleted gradually mainly due to sadness and depression rather than poverty."¹⁷⁰ Also, the character Trần Linh in the novel *Hộ chiếu buồn* (Sad Passport) showed his reasons for aspiring for social mobility, both economically and politically.

Trần Linh's story begins with the bitterness he feels when he realizes that he is a loser in a game of life: "And now he is obviously a loser in the acrobatic game around the confusing administrative system of society."¹⁷¹ Born in a poor peasant family, Trần Linh aspires to settle down in Hanoi, "a constant desire turns into an intense lust that often dominates every his thought and becomes his ultimate goal."¹⁷² He graduates with a bachelor degree, majoring in French in Hanoi, and becomes a French teacher in the

¹⁶⁸ Bernd Wolf 2007, *The Vietnamese Diaspora in Germany: Structure and Potentials for Cooperation with a Focus on Berlin and Hesse*, 6.

¹⁶⁹ "kiếm tiền, kiếm vốn sống, học thêm ngoại ngữ, sau đó trở về" Thế Dũng, *Một nửa lá số*, 34.

¹⁷⁰ "Chú sẽ bị suy kiệt dần mòn vì buồn giận và uất ức là chính chứ không phải vì đói ăn." Thế Dũng, *Một nửa lá số*, 38.

¹⁷¹ "Và bây giờ thì hiển nhiên hẳn là người thua cuộc trong trò chơi nhào lộn vòng quanh cái hệ thống hành chính rối rắm của xã hội." Thế Dũng, *Hộ chiếu buồn*, 9.

¹⁷² "một khát vọng thường trực, một dục vọng thường xuyên mãnh liệt chi phối mọi suy tư và là mục tiêu tối cao của hẳn." Ibid., 8.

Department of Health in Quảng An Province (a fictional province), which was seen as a job for a provincial man who had little to no money or social relations. While teaching French there, he gets a very attractive job offer to work in the Ministry of Health in Hanoi. Again, this turns out to be a challenge because Trần Linh needs to have a residence permit to get this job.

Let us take a look at the problems surrounding getting a permanent residence permit in Hanoi:

The case A considered to be transferred to Hanoi must be already working in another province for at least five years, having the original household registration and a private house in Hanoi (or parent's house, brother's house or uncle's house). As for the case B: the persons must have wives or husbands who are working and living in Hanoi and the family is currently in the state of separation and needs to be reunited; also the person, in this case, must have work experience in another province for five years. And God knows what happens in the case C. [...] It is said that if the person in this case wants to go through the procedure of paperwork, they must have a lot of "bullets". That means a lot of gold."¹⁷³

The protagonist did not fit any of these cases. The character blames his misfortune for the absurdity of the household registration (*hộ khẩu*) regime and the existing administrative mechanism. However, his failure at getting a residence permit was predictable since it went against the state-approved regulations, i.e urban-to-rural, lowland-to-highland. It is worth noting that breaking away from home village (*thoát ly*) became fashionable for peasants: "State jobs, and migrating for family reunification, became the main routes to urban life."¹⁷⁴ Such a popular route put pressure on highly densified cities, such as Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh, and was absolutely not welcomed by the

¹⁷³ "Đối tượng A được xét chuyển về Hà Nội là đã công tác ở tỉnh khác ít nhất là 5 năm, có hộ khẩu gốc và đã có nhà riêng ở Hà Nội (nhà của bố mẹ, anh chị, chú bác gì đó cũng được). Đối tượng B: Khổ chủ phải có vợ hoặc chồng đang công tác và có hộ khẩu ở Hà Nội và hiện nay gia đình đang ở trạng thái ly tán cần được đoàn tụ, nhưng cũng phải đã trải qua công tác ở tỉnh khác là 5 năm. Còn đối tượng C là gì có trời mà biết được. [...] Nghe đâu đối tượng này muốn trở thành người có khả năng đi xuyên tường ở các thành lũy giấy tờ thủ tục thì phải có vô cùng nhiều "đạn". Nghĩa là phải có vài cây vàng." Ibid., 25.

¹⁷⁴ Luong Van Hy, *Urbanization, Migration, and Poverty*, 109.

authorities. Therefore, the household registration was just one of the tools for de-urbanization, which aimed to “restrict urban expansion, controlling how many people moved to the city and, more importantly, who moved.”¹⁷⁵

The significance of having a household registration in cities was not only attached to economic advancement, i.e the allocation of housing, food, jobs and schools for children. Being a citizen became a criterion for masculinity. The social position and working ability were the man’s way to show off. That was why being settled in Quảng An province, the protagonist insisted on moving to Hanoi: “He was not born in this world to live in Quảng An until old-age. Perhaps get married and raise pigs there? No! If his life could not be in Hanoi, it must be in Paris but not elsewhere.”¹⁷⁶ However, he could not get either a job or a residence permit in Hanoi. Here emerged his desire for going overseas to “revenge for his fate.”¹⁷⁷

At first, he planned to go to Paris, work there for a few years and then return home. He believed with his working experience and also, with some savings accumulated from the job overseas, he could get a job in Hanoi, buy an apartment and get married to his girlfriend. However, things changed when his friend suggests that he should go to the GDR instead of France as a team leader and an interpreter. So, he goes abroad and becomes a team leader which was seen as a “prestigious” role. Let’s see how this young man finds his way out by taking advantage of relationships, something that is a very common Vietnamese custom.

First of all, he wisely learns which paperwork he needs to become an interpreter for contract workers in Germany. Then, he secretly records the names of those who played decisive roles in supporting him with said paperwork. By acknowledging their roles, he surreptitiously meets them to create a sense of intimacy. As a result, he forms close relationships with officials who come to help him in the future. In this way, his path to migration gradually takes shape.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 109.

¹⁷⁶ “Anh sinh ra trên đời này đâu phải để rồi sống ở đất Quảng An đến già. Chẳng lẽ lấy vợ và nuôi lợn ở đó à? Không được! Đời anh không ở Hà Nội thì phải ở Paris chứ không thể ở nơi khác.” Thế Dũng, *Hộ chiếu buồn*, 33.

¹⁷⁷ “phục thù cho thân phận của mình” Ibid., 13.

At first, he finds a way to get onto the list of those attending the entrance examination for interpreters. This strategy takes advantage of his intimate relationship with his boss, Mr. Mão, a director in the Department of Health. He asks Mr. Mão for a very good recommendation letter to send to Trần Huy, a director in the Ministry for Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA). Then Mr. Trần Huy introduces the protagonist to those who were in charge of selecting applicants. In addition, he tries to contact Mr. Đức, the most second important person after Mr. Huy to accept Trần Linh for the contest. Knowing that Mr. Huy's wife, who is always sick, uses B6 supplements, Trần Linh purchases these supplements and donates these to Mr. Huy in order to please him. Finally, Trần Linh is officially named on the list of the exam attendants. Thanks to his learning German so hard, he passes the exam with excellent grades across the board and is the contestant with the highest grades.

However, Trần Linh's journey to Germany does not go smoothly. Even though he passes the exam with the highest scores, Trần Linh suddenly receives bad news. MOLISA and the Department of International Cooperation decide to assign only one person as a group leader to Quảng An province but that person has to be a party member.

In principle, the applicant who is named as a group leader does not require as high a level of German as an interpreter does. However, the criterion of being a party member really kicks Trần Linh out of the game as although he is qualified in German, he is not a party member. At that time, he interrogates the importance of this criterion for his career. In Vietnam, the important criterion for someone to be promoted in government is that they have to be "red" (Communist) and a specialist (*hồng và chuyên*). Being a party member is more important than qualifications. The protagonist realizes this bitter truth too late:

Why is he too stupid to consciously strive to become a party member? Why? With this title, he saw clearly that being a party member in the era he was living would have rights, benefits and favours. [...] If he was a party

member, he would have a chance to go abroad. There would be a chance to be a leader. Priority and incentives would be given.¹⁷⁸

Through showing the struggle of Trần Linh, the author cleverly exposes a different side of the Communist Party of Vietnam, the most powerful institution in Vietnam. Instead of giving up, Trần Linh is determined to think of a way out:

Anyway, the Party is still human. No matter how strict it is, the Party is still human. So, he has to find a way to ask the Party for help in order to be allowed or accepted by the Party to go abroad as an interpreter.¹⁷⁹

More specifically, Trần Linh decides to do the following. First, he meets Mr. Đức, a party member as well as the head of MOLISA. By showing his difficulties, Trần Linh convinces Mr. Đức to send a letter to the MOLISA, requesting to exchange the criterion required to become a team leader for the criterion required for interpreters. In other words, candidates must qualify as interpreters to become a team leader. This action was a form of recruitment designed to benefit Trần Linh because he is the only one qualified to be an interpreter.

Next, he meets Mr. Hà Nghiêm who has a great influence on the head of the Personnel Department at MOLISA. Thanks to his help, the Department of International Cooperation dispatches a paper which names Trần Linh as an applicant. However, in the process of preparing papers in Hanoi, he has an erotic adventure with a married woman. Being attacked by the woman's husband, Trần Linh forced hospitalisation, from which his work was delayed. However, Trần Linh devises a new trick. He talks with Mr. Đức, requesting him to put pressure on Hoàng Thúc, an assistant of Mr. Đức. Hoàng Thúc then asks his sister, who works in the Department of International Cooperation, to give one

¹⁷⁸ “Tại sao hấn lại ngu dại không có ý thức phấn đấu trở thành Đảng viên? Tại sao? Cũng là danh hiệu ấy nhưng hấn thấy rõ ràng vào được Đảng trong cái thời mà hấn đang sống có nghĩa là sẽ có quyền, có lợi và được ưu đãi. [...] Bây giờ mà vào được Đảng thường là rồi sẽ có cơ hội đi nước ngoài. Sẽ có cơ hội làm lãnh đạo. Sẽ được ưu tiên, ưu đãi!” Thế Dũng, *Hộ chiếu buồn*, 236-7.

¹⁷⁹ “Dù sao thì Đảng cũng vẫn là con người. Dẫu có là xương sắt da đồng gì đi chăng nữa thì cũng vẫn là người. Cho nên hấn phải tìm một mưu kế gì đó để nhờ Đảng. Để Đảng cho phép hoặc để Đảng phải thuận lòng cho hấn xuất ngoại với tư cách là phiên dịch.” Ibid., 237.

more criterion for Quảng An province. That extra criterion was for Trần Linh. At the last minute, he makes it onto the flight to the GDR.

It can be seen that within the Communist Party there was a quiet but fierce race by party members to win their interests. The winner or loser of the race depended on the player's potential: such as money, positions, or personal prestige. However, no matter what his potential was, Trần Linh deduces the real motives of Party members and, especially, how flexible the party really is. His paraphrase of the "Party is like a human" is the desacralization of the once unlimited power. In a flash, the Communist Party of Vietnam appears in the form of real people, honoring personal relationships as opposed to the law. Trần Linh's success is the most obvious evidence of this desacralization:

For so long, people kept deifying Party members in particular and the Communist Party in general. Or the Party members are free to delude themselves and to canonize themselves unreasonably.¹⁸⁰

Although the protagonist's use of tricks to achieve his goals might make readers feel estranged from him, his case showed that the reason for departure is not motivated entirely by economic reasons. He has thoughts which reveal his feelings for those who are left behind, especially when compared to the narrative of departure as applies to the contract workers and the boat people:

He also did not think he was wiser and more proper than those who got into a boat to escape blindly. Every deadlock has a key and every wall has a door. His way of crossing the border works for him. And the ways other people cross borders are suitable for their current situations.¹⁸¹

Here, the deadlock was pointed out as the main cause for leaving, whether because of economic or political reasons. The protagonist's act of bribing the state, which is done

¹⁸⁰ "Bấy lâu nay người ta cứ hay thần thánh hoá Đảng viên nói riêng và Đảng Cộng sản nói chung. Hoặc là Đảng cứ tự huyền hoặc và tự phong thánh cho mình một cách vô lý." Thế Dũng, *Hộ chiếu buồn*, 264.

¹⁸¹ "Hắn cũng không hề nghĩ rằng hắn khôn ngoan và đứng đắn hơn những người xuống thuyền vượt biên một cách mù mù kia. Chẳng qua là mỗi một bẽ tắc riêng tư đều có một lối thoát. Giống như mỗi một bức tường đều có thể mở một cánh cửa. Cách vượt biên của hắn thích hợp với hoàn cảnh của hắn. Và cách vượt biên của những người kia thì lại phù hợp với hoàn cảnh hiện thời của họ." Ibid., 55.

in several ways such as asking for sympathy, donating presents, relying on intimate relationships, was explained as a consequence of the social injustices involved in assigning jobs. Before leaving, the character was assigned a job “in a dull, depressing place, and seriously lacking light.”¹⁸² So, he must attempt to get his light back. The life in France or Germany is the light of his life. In addition, the departure of the contract workers was obviously less risky than crossing by boat; not to mention the economic benefits it brought. The difference between the two forms of migration is more clearly stated in this story:

But they leave to never return, or do not know when they will return to this country. As for him, he wants to leave. But he leaves to be able to return. He could not sacrifice himself for the risky voyage. He needs to take full advantage of the current social institutions to reach his goals. His goal is still to use his full capacity and intelligence to cross the border legally. Leaving with a proper legal status, then ensures that the return is dignified.

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2.2 In search of identity

The story of Trần Linh, a character represented the Vietnamese contract workers in the novel *Hộ chiếu buồn* (Sad Passport), proves that it is almost impossible for him to get a ticket to leave for the GDR without using his tricks and money (though not much). All kinds of tricks, as illustrated in the above-mentioned part, are just some examples of how much effort an individual had to put in to find his way out. The departure is shown as the result of the person’s realization of his “place” in the homeland in which going overseas becomes a precious chance to have a better life. The protagonist’s awareness of his “place” in a homeland plays a crucial role in envisioning the formation of identity when they arrive in the host land, especially for those who actively choose to leave as contract workers. The analysis of the second novel *Một nửa lá số* (Half of the Horoscope) by Thế

¹⁸² “vào một chỗ khuất lạp buồn tẻ, và thiếu ánh sáng một cách trầm trọng.” Ibid., 55.

¹⁸³ “Có điều họ ra đi để không bao giờ trở lại hoặc chẳng biết tới bao giờ mới trở lại nỗi xứ này. Còn hấn, hấn muốn ra đi. Nhưng hấn ra đi để vẫn có thể trở về. Hấn không thể thí thân cho cuộc hải hành đầy mạo hiểm. Hấn cần phải tận dụng cái thể chế xã hội hiện thời một cách triệt để trong việc thực thi mục đích. Mục tiêu của hấn là vẫn dùng toàn bộ năng lực, trí tuệ để vượt biên một cách hợp pháp. Ra đi với một tư cách pháp nhân đảng hoàng, để rồi cuộc trở về cũng đảng hoàng.” Ibid., 55.

Dũng will show how the transformative identity of the protagonist is created in the context of conflicting values between the self and other cultures. The protagonist's constant switch between individual identity and group-identity shows his ambivalence in preserving his own identity and interacting with others'.

The main character in *Một nửa lá số* (The Half of Horoscope) was constructed in the same way as the one in *Hộ chiếu buồn* (Sad Passport), as he is also an intellectual, who is bored of the stagnant life and dreams of leaving for a better life. Vũ Hoàng Giáp was a poor 35-year-old poet, working in the Arts and Literature Association in a small province. His reasons for leaving as a contract worker are the same as most others' reasons for leaving: to earn money, to learn and to escape the crisis:

This time of leaving is for no obligation. It is a decision he made voluntarily to export the rest of his life to Germany. Leaving seems to be a way to earn money and earn some more life experience. To him, this time, going away is also a means of fleeing violence. To seek a golden chance to live with a passion for real literature.¹⁸⁴

Unlike the others, he is an artist who chooses to join the group of “normal” contract workers as leaving means to gain the freedom for writing as he wants to. He sees the journey from Vietnam to the GDR as a chance to “stimulate” his imagination for writing, “to encourage adventures and aspirations and expose the events and scenes of human life.”¹⁸⁵ Although the protagonist's desire to write freely derives from his boring life, it proves to be a naïve illusion as he looks for new challenges to get away from his boredom. The protagonist's case outlines the first characteristic of contract workers as a whole as it reveals their blurred visions of the reality of working abroad.

The protagonist's naïve perception of the unknown host land also makes his trip both forced and voluntarily at the same time. On the one hand, he is aware of the departure

¹⁸⁴ “Lần này không vì nghĩa vụ gì. Là sự tình nguyện xuất khẩu nửa đời mình sang Đức. Ra đi, hình như là vừa để làm ăn kinh tế vừa để học thêm dăm ba tiếng hát câu cười và giọng khóc nơi xa. Với hắn, lần này, ra đi còn là đi lánh bạo. Là đi tìm vàng để mà sống được với văn chương đích thực.” Thế Dũng, *Một nửa lá số*, 79.

¹⁸⁵ “khích lệ được những phiêu lưu và những khát vọng phơi bày trần trụi sâu xa mọi biến cố và cảnh tượng của kiếp người.” Ibid., 85.

to experience a real life, “to breathe the dust and dirt of the livelihood.”¹⁸⁶ On the other hand, he sees the trip as an inevitable option of the times:

The world is like a huge flea market. He knows that. But still, he rushes. Feeling free in the fierce self-determination and volunteering; at the same time, he feels the pressure of the invisible violence of the world. He disagrees with himself. He disagrees with his ecological environment. Nothing is good if it does not put in its right place. On the contrary, nothing becomes bad when it was placed in the right place.¹⁸⁷

Hometown is seen as a stagnant place, which the main character aspires to escape. This differentiates him from the boat people. Whilst in the former, the cramped space in the hometown is considered a place that stifles the protagonist’s creativity, the homeland is often remembered by the boat people with mixed emotions. (This will be further analyzed in the next chapters.)

What is special about this protagonist is his identity as a poet, which means he is also classified as an intellectual. His departure shows how suffocated the “art community” was in a socialist society, which in turn leads him to decide to leave:

The rhythm of public servant life under the regular supervision of the Provincial Party Committee and Provincial Committee; of the Party Committee and the authorities; of the Trade Union and mass organizations such as the Youth or Women’s Association is very stable and safe for the writers. All year round, just listening to the news, if one sticks to the political events and writes articles on occasion, then you will be paid regularly [...] But his mind and body are not in tune with the pace of such public servants.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ “hít thở bùn đất bụi khói của cuộc mưu sinh” Ibid., 25-6.

¹⁸⁷ “Thế giới vẫn đang như một cái chợ trời khổng lồ. Biết thế. Mà hấn vẫn lao đi. Vừa cảm thấy tự do trong cuộc tự lựa chọn quyết liệt và tình nguyện; đồng thời, hấn vừa cảm thấy chính hấn đang phải chịu đựng một áp lực, một sức mạnh bạo liệt vô hình của thế sự. Hấn bất hoà với chính bản thân hấn. Hấn bất hoà với môi trường sinh thái của hấn. Chẳng có cái gì tốt được nếu không được đặt vào đúng chỗ của nó. Ngược lại, chẳng có cái gì trở nên xấu khi đã được đặt vào đúng vị trí của nó.” Ibid., 83.

¹⁸⁸ “Cái nhịp sống công chức văn nghệ dưới sự giám sát thường xuyên của Tỉnh uỷ và Ủy ban tỉnh, của Đảng uỷ và chính quyền, của Công đoàn và các đoàn thể quần chúng như Thanh niên,

However, what did others think about the protagonist's departure as a contract worker? The narrative interestingly shows how his parents considered the departure of their son as both good and bad luck. For example, they thought of the shifting between the poet and the worker as a shameful "brain drain": "I see terrible waste. The nation is suffered from a brain drain in a cruel way. I am sorry for Hoàng Giáp's poetical role."¹⁸⁹ The mother even exposes a very typical way of thinking about the son's leaving in her comparison between the departure for the purpose of working and for higher education:

I would be proud of him to go overseas as a doctoral student. Instead, though being training and educating himself, he had to throw away books to work as a coolie to earn a daily living.¹⁹⁰

Nevertheless, his mother believes that her son has a bright future. For her, East Germany was still a good place for her son to go overseas, though she cannot distinguish between East and West Germany:

Why aren't we optimistic when he goes to East Germany instead of Laos or Cambodia? Why do you [the protagonist's father] worry when he goes to the home town of Karl Marx and Engels?¹⁹¹

The characters' complex thoughts go some way to show the tension in making decisions to go or to stay. It also shows the participant's consciousness in viewing the transformation of his role in society, from the position of a poet to that of a worker. As a poet, he has the pride of being an intellectual, albeit a poor one. As for the new role, although he can earn income, he is a worker. His consciousness marks the first shift from individual identity, as a poet, to a "group identity", as a Vietnamese contract worker. Later, this shift is represented in the worker's living conditions in Germany.

Phụ nữ thực ra là rất ổn định và an toàn cho những ngòi bút. Quanh năm cứ nghe ngóng bốn mùa thời sự, bám sát các sự kiện chính trị nhân dịp mà ninh lược, xào nấu chữ nghĩa sao cho đủ món vừa miệng thì cứ gọi là lĩnh lương đều đều.[...] Nhưng thân tâm hẳn đâu có đồng điệu được với nhịp sống công chức văn nghệ như thế." Ibid., 85-6.

¹⁸⁹ "Tôi thấy phí phạm khủng khiếp. Quốc gia bị chảy máu chất xám một cách dã man. Tôi tiếc thương cho thân phận thi sĩ của thằng Hoàng Giáp." Ibid., 142.

¹⁹⁰ "Nó xuất ngoại với tư thế là người đi làm nghiên cứu sinh thì mới hợp cách, mới oách. Rèn luyện mãi, đào tạo mãi, ai ngờ rốt cục do cảnh nhà thế nước mà phải quảng bút sách để đi làm cu ly cốt kiếm miếng cơm manh áo hàng ngày." Ibid., 143.

¹⁹¹ "Chuyện, nó đi Đông Đức chứ có phải đi Lào, đi Căm Pu Chia đâu mà không lạc quan. Nó tới quê hương của Karl Marx của Enghel mà ông còn lo lắng nỗi gì." Ibid., 144.

While the protagonist was in Vietnam, he “lived alone with one room, one bed, one chair, one desk”¹⁹² he then goes on to live in a shared room with four other workers in Germany. The transformation from individual identity to group identity emerges clearly after the protagonist’s arrival in Germany. At first, when he lands at Berlin-Schönefeld Airport, he is aware of himself now belonging to the group of Vietnamese contract workers through their shared “informal uniforms” i.e. “the new jean clothes of workers exported from Hanoi surprised some of the staff at Schönefeld airport and made them smile.”¹⁹³ He also feels sympathy when he witnesses the luggage belonging to a Vietnamese worker being opened and the contents being exposed:

Suddenly he dazzled because there was a package of vermicelli tossed out along with the packages of sodium glutamate, with the black and red fabric of kimono mixed with dried bamboo shoots, Thái Nguyên tea and the makeup boxes made in Thailand. [...] Nobody started to laugh at it because, perhaps, all of them suddenly sunk in shame. The shame was shared by the entire group from Vietnam due to the pitying look of the East German friends who caught sight of the incident.¹⁹⁴

The shame of one Vietnamese worker became the shame of the Vietnamese group when they realized they were all the same. A group of the Vietnamese contract workers versus the Germans!

The longer the protagonist lived together with his fellows as a group, the more profoundly he was aware of his role as part of the group and sharing the same Vietnamese identity. When they all settled down in their shared dorm, the character’s imitation of a simplified altar in their room combined with the act of burning incense is a characteristic of their Vietnamese identity. Gertrud Hüwelmeier describes this as a religious practice of Vietnamese traders, mostly women, at the Đồng Xuân market in Berlin:

¹⁹² “một mình một phòng một giường, một ghế, một bàn” Ibid., 308.

¹⁹³ “Những bộ quần áo bỏ cả cây mới cứng của các lao động được xuất khẩu từ Hà Nội làm cho một vài nhân viên hàng không ở sân bay Schönefeld ngạc nhiên cười tủm tỉm.” Ibid., 302.

¹⁹⁴ “Bỗng dưng hân hoa mắt lên vì có một gói miến rong bị xô tung ra cùng với những gói mỳ chính, với màu vải đen vải đỏ của những chiếc áo Kimono lẫn với măng khô, chè Thái Nguyên cùng những hộp son phấn nhãn hiệu Thái Lan [...] Không ai nở cười vì có lẽ tất thấy đều bất chợt chìm ngập trong nỗi xấu hổ. Nỗi xấu hổ chung cho đàn chim Việt trước cái nhìn soi mói thương hại của những người bạn Đông Đức đã kịp nhìn thấy sự cố ấy.” Ibid., 303.

Once their residency status was finally certain, a number of former contract workers rented shops, became retailers, and started to create small altars in shops, snack bars, and restaurants, mostly in the eastern areas of Berlin. They use these shrines to venerate Ông Thần Tài (God of wealth) and Ông Địa (God of the Earth), asking for the protection of the territory of their shops and the well-being of the owners and their family.¹⁹⁵

To her, religious practice, which was interwoven with the transformation from “socialism to capitalism”, is “strongly related to mundane purposes such as excellent high school diplomas for children, economic success, and good health.”¹⁹⁶ However, the creating of a small altar serves more than just business purposes. The use of public altars in pagodas or private altars at home reflects the Vietnamese need for spiritual guidance. By burning incense and offering flowers and fruits to the ancestors and Gods, the Vietnamese wish to clear their minds, keeping their bodies safe, and helping themselves to overcome all difficulties. Here, the migration of contract workers is no different from the uprooted movement by nature, which consequently leads to their instability. Therefore, the act of burning incense could be interpreted as creating and preserving the cultural identity of the Vietnamese, maintaining a link to their “roots” and confirming their part of the Vietnamese community:

He placed a cup filled with flowers on the top of the cupboard along with a wine bottle branded Thanh Mai next to the rice bowl and solemnly lit a fire. And the bowl of incense sticks began to give off the soft smoke from the first filaments of incense he lit to pray to God of the Earth for good things in a foreign land. The whole group watched him clasped his hands and prayed very solemnly. From now on, just like the uprooted trees that have just been removed from their ancestral land, with taproot and rootlets being tangled and broken, now planted into a strange land, whether they were rooted in a new biological and geographical area or not? Looking at

¹⁹⁵ Gertrud Hüwelmeier, “Bazaar Pagodas-Transnational Religion, Postsocialist Marketplaces and Vietnamese Migrant Women in Berlin”, 80.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 88.

the wisps of slender smokes flying up, suddenly all of them understood that, from now on, they would be like one-house people, one-nest birds.¹⁹⁷

However, the shift from individual to group identity of the protagonist is always interactive. During his time working in factories, the protagonist becomes acquainted with some other Vietnamese poets and writers. Later, he is asked to read his poems at some meetings within the Vietnamese community. These unexpected meetings, surprisingly, make him feel touched because they give him the feeling of being an artist again. He felt somehow returned to his previous identity, a talented poet, who was admired and respected by his fans:

He was accustomed to receiving praise after reading poetry here and there, but the cheers of hundreds of Vietnamese students that night in Bernau made him feel choked up and happy. At that moment, he felt the poet inside still had an opportunity to manifest and survive.¹⁹⁸

The demand for living with his old identity emerged strongly in his determinate reaction with a team leader. The leader wanted the protagonist not to mention his previous job as a poet when interviewed. This was not accepted by Hoàng Giáp, because he saw the hiding of his CV as a lie:

No, I don't like lies. I used to be a soldier. Already a teacher. Already a poet. An arts editor. Now I voluntarily come here to work as a worker under a labor export contract. That is perfectly normal and good. I will only speak honestly and accurately about myself.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ “Hắn đặt cốc hoa lên nóc tủ cùng với chai rượu Thanh Mai cạnh cái bát gạo chiêm rồi long trọng bật lửa. Và bát hương bắt đầu nghi ngút những sợi khói mềm của nén nhang đầu tiên mà hắn thắp lên rắp tâm bái tạ Thổ Công nơi đất khách để cầu mong mọi sự tốt lành. Cả bọn nhìn hắn chấp tay khấn thầm rất đổi nghiêm trang. Từ nay, giống như những cái cây ngọn cỏ vừa được bứng ra khỏi vùng đất tổ, rễ cái rễ con đứt đoạn rồi bời, nay được trồng vào vùng đất lạ, chúng có bén rễ nổi vào miền sinh địa mới hay không? Nhìn những sợi khói mảnh mai dào dạt bay lên, bỗng dưng cả bọn hiểu, từ nay, họ sẽ giống như người một nhà, chim một tổ.” Thế Dũng, *Một nửa lá số*, 311.

¹⁹⁸ “Đã quen được hoan hô sau mỗi lần đọc thơ ở nơi này nơi kia, nhưng tiếng hoan hô của hàng trăm sinh viên lưu học sinh Việt Nam trong đêm ấy ở Bernau làm hắn nghẹn ngào hạnh phúc. Lúc bấy giờ, hắn cảm thấy thẳng thắn thi sĩ trong hắn vẫn còn có những cơ hội để hiển lộ và sống sót.” Ibid., 459.

¹⁹⁹ “Không, tôi không thích dối trá. Tôi đã là lính. Đã là nhà giáo. Đã là nhà thơ. Là biên tập viên văn nghệ. Nay tôi tự nguyện sang đây làm công nhân theo một hợp đồng xuất khẩu lao

This shows his need to balance both the individual and group identity and his struggle to survive. The thoughts of the protagonist reflected his effort to re-create a new identity in order to adapt to the new environment whilst maintaining his core values:

Accepting the challenge, uprooting ourselves from our own country, we cannot passively wait for God to replenish the roots that we volunteered. There is no other way than to spontaneously release our own saps into a strange land so that we can branch and root ourselves and create in the new land in an indomitable way.²⁰⁰

In short, the writer Thế Dũng, as a former contract worker, describes the journey of becoming a labor export worker in East Germany for those who came from the intellectual class. The main characters experience this journey with many conflicting emotions – both joyful and bitter. The reasons for their social mobility as explained in these novels are the combination of push and pull factors, including frustration with a stagnant working environment and the illusion of a bright future in the host land. Similarly, the identity of the characters is the result of a process of self-awareness both as the individual and the member of a group. However, the characters' recognition of the identity is constantly shifting depending on specific circumstances and conditions. The novels by Thế Dũng are two of the few works that provide literary materials on the motivation and the preparation of the workers under the Vietnamese labor cooperation program in Vietnam. The next section of this chapter will introduce in more detail the material and spiritual life of many Vietnamese contract workers, not just limited to the intellectual ones. The analysis of the Vietnamese lives in Germany is intentionally explored right after the analysis of the journey to create a seamless connection to the narratives of departure, living and return. The narrative about the departure, as just mentioned, is followed now by an analysis of the lives of former contract workers and their return to Vietnam.

động. Điều đó hoàn toàn bình thường và tốt đẹp. Tôi sẽ khai báo thành thật và chính xác về bản thân mình.” Ibid., 478.

²⁰⁰ “Chấp nhận thử thách, tự bật rễ khỏi cố hương chúng ta không thể thụ động chờ đợi thánh thần vun bón bù trừ cho sự bật rễ mà mình đã tự nguyện. Chẳng còn cách nào khác là chúng ta phải tự phóng sinh nhựa sống của mình xuống miền đất lạ để mà tự bén cành, tự cắm rễ mà tự sinh thành một cách bất khuất ở miền đất mới.” Ibid., 562.

3. Dream versus reality: Living and working in the new country

Most of the short stories describe the life of Vietnamese people after the reunification of Germany in 1989. This year is considered a turning point for the majority of the former contract workers, as they were forced to choose between staying or coming back to their home country. Most writers focus on the former as this was a popular choice for the Vietnamese community, this means that they, in turn, describe how Vietnamese people survived and lived in Germany.

Working hard to accumulate both experience and capital is a top priority for Vietnamese people in Germany to survive and obtain a residence permit. Working in a restaurant is a popular job, which is often described in the short stories written by Vietnamese writers. In these short stories, Vietnamese people are described as a hardworking and diligent community, always trying their best to succeed in business. For example, in the short story *May rủi giàu nghèo* (Good bad rich poor)²⁰¹ the author Lê Xuân Quang describes how the character Ca escapes from poverty, going from a scullion to the manager of many Asian restaurants and food supply companies. Besides describing the business in restaurants, Lê Xuân Quang describes other special business activities that Vietnamese people undertake in Germany. For example, the character in the story *Lái gà*²⁰² (Chicken trader) opened a food store and a slaughterhouse for poultry. The characters in the short story *Chiếc bơm xe đạp* (Bicycle pump)²⁰³ trade MIFA bicycles in Germany and send them to Vietnam to make a profit. In addition, difficulties and hardships in living in Germany are described in short stories such as *Điềm gở*²⁰⁴ (Bad luck) by Nguyễn Công Tiến; the stories *Tấm hình cũ*²⁰⁵ (Old photo), *Người đã đi qua chiến tranh*²⁰⁶ (The person who went through the war) by Đỗ Trường; *Oan nghiệt*²⁰⁷ (Karma) by Lê Xuân Quang and *Lằn ranh kẻ cắp*²⁰⁸ (Boundary of thief) by Nguyễn Văn Thọ. All of which interrogate the illusion of Germany being a socialist paradise for the

²⁰¹ Lê Xuân Quang, *Dòng xoáy cuộc đời*, 226-253.

²⁰² Lê Xuân Quang, *Đùa với lửa*, 193-242.

²⁰³ Ibid., 5-26.

²⁰⁴ Nguyễn Công Tiến, *Đất khách*, 98-113.

²⁰⁵ Đỗ Trường, *Không bao giờ thành sẹo*, 29-42.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 43-56.

²⁰⁷ Lê Xuân Quang, *Những số phận không định trước*, 11-32.

²⁰⁸ Nguyễn Văn Thọ, *Sắc Violet*, 125-139.

Vietnamese immigrants.

The life of Vietnamese contract workers is mentioned in a humorous way they deal with a Bulgarian prostitute in the short story *Luật giang hồ*²⁰⁹ (Law of Gypsy). The short story recounts the story of A Nhi A (a foreign name that has been translated into Vietnamese) making-a-scene with a group of Vietnamese about two other Vietnamese workers who refused to pay after their night ended. This group of four Vietnamese workers went to the dorm of the two workers to claim justice for the prostitute, and more importantly, regain the honor of the Vietnamese community! For them, not paying a prostitute is humiliating for them:

It seems like a chore but it is very involved in the Vietnamese identity right here, right now. It is because we are all Vietnamese. The group of Vietnamese who are making a living in Berlin, so I asked for it [...] She is a Bulgarian, a foreigner - so your behaviour will defame Vietnamese nationality.²¹⁰

When one of the two workers is forced to pay for the prostitute, he feels that he not only loses his money but also his face:

He understands that he cannot fail to pay 100DM for A Nhi A. But this is extremely difficult, because, suddenly, he feels too embarrassed. Moreover, he feels dazed because he does not seem to lose only 50DM. It looks like he just lost something worth more than that.²¹¹

Behind the dream of a prosperous and free life is the harsh reality of the Vietnamese people in the new land. Nguyễn Văn Thọ describes hard working days of a fruit seller in a short story *Lằn ranh kẻ cắp* (Boundary of the Thief) in which the seller

²⁰⁹ Thế Dũng, *Tiếng người trong đá Giáp Sơn*, 158-171.

²¹⁰ “Việc tưởng như là việc vặt nhưng lại rất can hệ đến bản mặt của người Việt tại đây, trong lúc này. Chính vì chúng ta là người Việt với nhau. Lại là một lũ người Việt đang kiếm sống nhọc nhằn ở Berlin, cho nên mình mới yêu cầu như vậy [...] Nó là người Bun, là người nước ngoài-chính vì thế mà việc làm của các cậu sẽ làm ô danh đến quốc tịch Việt Nam.” Ibid., 167.

²¹¹ “Nó hiểu, không thể không trả lại cho A Nhi A 100DM. Nhưng mỗi cử động của nó nặng nhọc vô cùng, bởi vì, bỗng dưng nó cảm thấy xấu hổ. Hơn nữa, nó còn cảm thấy bàng hoàng vì hình như không phải nó chỉ mất 50DM. Hình như nó vừa đánh mất một cái gì đó đáng giá hơn thế.” Ibid., 169.

has to work “from 12 to 14 hours, sometimes up to 16 hours a day.”²¹² The job is so heavy that when the night comes, the seller aches all over his body: “Life always goes on. No music shows, no television, boring. Even if for love or making love, he does not remember to do.”²¹³ In particular, the authors share how they described the status of women in miserable circumstances to show the extent of injury to female characters in the migration. The female characters in Nguyễn Văn Thọ’s novel and the short stories by Lê Xuân Quang, Đỗ Trường and Nguyễn Công Tiến are forced to do inferior jobs such as being prostitutes or waitresses and suffer much humiliation at the hands of their customers.

The character Xoan in the short story *Nhánh tre run rẩy*²¹⁴ (Shaky branch of bamboo) is such an example. Coming from a poor village in Vietnam, Xoan went illegally to the Soviet Union, and then Germany to find work. Unfortunately, she falls into the hands of unprincipled brokers. They sell her to the brothel in Czechoslovakia and eventually take her to Germany. While working in a brothel in Germany, Xoan meets her compatriot, Mr. Ngạc, who helped her escape the brothel. However, the unfortunate young girl finds herself in another terrible situation when she is raped by Thanh, a friend of Mr. Ngạc, and forced to be a prostitute in his brothel. The story ends with the tragic death of Xoan due to multiple injuries after being beaten by a group of gypsies.

The author Nguyễn Công Tiến builds the character of Xoan who constantly encounters many misfortunes in her life similar to the way the writer Nguyễn Văn Thọ builds the character Quyên in his novel *Quyên*. (This novel will be analyzed in more detail in the next section of this chapter.) The misfortunes and adversities encountered by female characters act as the “backdrops” in these works to exaggerate the good qualities of the female characters. The deep feeling of Xoan for her homeland is subtly expressed through her desire to draw a Vietnamese bamboo leaf on her two little fingers. Whilst working in the brothel, she keeps thinking of a way to support her family and dreams about making a return trip:

My dad wishes me to bring money back. My dad will build a small house,

²¹² “từ 12 đến 14 tiếng, có ngày tới 16 tiếng” Nguyễn Văn Thọ, *Sấm Violet*, 130.

²¹³ “Cuộc sống cứ thế triền miên. Không xem hát, không tí vi, nhạt nhẽo. Đến cả yêu đương, làm tình hân cũng chẳng kịp nhớ ra.” Nguyễn Văn Thọ, *Sấm Violet*, 131.

²¹⁴ Nguyễn Công Tiến, *Đất khách*, 182-200.

with a garden and a yard surrounded by a beautiful pruning fence. I go to work in the Soviet Union, my parents and the siblings look forward to seeing me very much. For some reasons, I always dream of the bamboo branches in front of the gate at night.²¹⁵

But unlike Quyên, repatriating is just a dream for Xoan. Instead, she ends her life in the hospital. As demonstrated in the following section, the character Quyên in Nguyễn Văn Thọ's novel is more fortunate than Xoan for many reasons. She actually came back to Vietnam after experiencing many adversities in her life in Germany. The narrative of return as expressed through the story of Quyên reflects the character's and also the author's effort to connect to the homeland. Nguyễn Văn Thọ constructs the character Quyên as someone who always headed to her motherland and who can make the return trip while living overseas despite the hardship related to repatriation. Therefore, while the character in Nguyễn Văn Thọ's novel is more idealistic, the female character in Nguyễn Công Tiến's story is more "realistic".

Sometimes, the workplaces of Vietnamese people in Germany are not mobile food cars or Asian food stores but the street, in the harsh weather. Many short stories depict the Vietnamese smuggling in which cigarette sellers display not only sales skills but also skills in observation and alarm when surrounded by police. This way of making a living became fierce when they were not only faced the German police but also other Vietnamese gangsters in bloody fights to scramble for business. Some examples are shown in these short stories: *Quả báo* (Retribution) by Đỗ Trường; *Mảnh đời phiêu bạt* (Adventurous life), *Thuốc lá-Máu nước mắt* (Cigarette-Blood Tear), *Ngày giỗ mẹ* (Mother's death anniversary), *Cái giá của bài học* (Price of lesson) by Lê Xuân Quang; *Ngọn cờ* (Flag) and *Người xưa trở lại* (Old man returns) by Nguyễn Công Tiến.

The smuggling of cigarettes by many Vietnamese people is usually described as gang activities in which sellers on the street are just a chain in the smuggling and distribution line of cigarettes. This business is managed and controlled by chieftains. Although tobacco dealers on the street can earn a high income, they are also subject to

²¹⁵ "Ba con mơ ước sau này con sẽ đem tiền về. Ba con sẽ xây một ngôi nhà nhỏ, có sân có vườn và xung quanh là hàng rào cây cối thật đẹp. Con đi lao động bên Liên Xô, ba má và các em con trông lắm đó chú. Chẳng hiểu sao, đêm nằm con rất hay chơng bao thấy khóm tre trước cổng." Ibid., 192.

surveillance, chase or attack. For example, the short story *Thuốc lá máu nước mắt* (Cigarette Blood Tear) by Lê Xuân Quang describes the bloody massacre of a mafia gang in a Vietnamese apartment complex, which is the main area of distribution for cigarettes. There, the gang “uses a submachine, killing five people on the spot, seriously injuring two [...] They killed both two women. Counting on the corpses of the victims, there are at least five bullets in the bodies.”²¹⁶ In particular, the culprits in the murder of the Vietnamese are the Vietnamese, which shows deep disagreement and contradiction between groups of Vietnamese in the immigrant community.

Thế Dũng also explores the divisions between these community groups in the short story *Đời không tự tử*²¹⁷ (Non-suicide life). In this short story, a group of three Vietnamese youths set up a gang of thieves and robbers, and mug rich Vietnamese people. Their activity is so risky that they are ready to kill the victim if they resist. In the end, this criminal gang is brutally murdered by another organization, known as the Vietnamese Charity, for the purpose of bringing peace to the Vietnamese community! In general, the mutual fighting between fellow countrymen all came about for profits. In particular, illegal cigarette trading also led to other illegal business activities i.e. selling drugs. In the short story *Mảnh đời phiêu bạt*²¹⁸ (Adventurous life), the character Tri is described as a thug who has a criminal record and then switched to trafficking cigarettes on the street. Thanks to good observations and knowledge of martial arts, Tri repeatedly escapes arrest. His agility catches the eye of a smuggler. Tri is then recruited and joins the drug trafficking gang. In the end, Tri and other characters, who were involved in illegal business, meet a tragic end, either dead or imprisoned.

The higher the income is, especially the income derived from illicit activities, the easier it is for characters to fall into forms of illegal spending money such as gambling or betting. Entertaining by gambling was described as the main cause of divorce in Vietnamese families, such as the character Chí Tây in *Chí Tây*²¹⁹ or the character Chung in *Cá độ*²²⁰ (Betting).

²¹⁶ Lê Xuân Quang, *Những mảnh đời phiêu bạt*, 251-292.

²¹⁷ Thế Dũng, *Tiếng người trong đá Giáp Sơn*, 203-227.

²¹⁸ Lê Xuân Quang, *Những mảnh đời phiêu bạt*, 134-211.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 54-78.

²²⁰ Lê Xuân Quang, *Những số phận không định trước*, 229-244.

In addition, the economic life of former contract workers is described in opposition to their spiritual life. Lê Xuân Quang has built a multitude of corrupt characters who are willing to exchange their happiness with their families for money. Some examples are the characters in Lê Xuân Quang's short stories such as Nhài in *Dở dang*²²¹ (Unfinished), Tuyết Nga in *Ghen tuông thường tình*²²² (Normal jealousy) or Hường in *Phúc và họa*²²³ (Good and bad luck) and the wife in Đỗ Trường's short story *Lầm lỡ*²²⁴ (Mistake).

Unable to endure a dull and poor job as a salesgirl, the character Tuyết Nga seeks to become the mistress of many different men in exchange for a rich and affluent life:

The money made her blind. Every time she made a mistake to accept her boss's remuneration, she told herself, 'Next time I will end.' Next time, and next time, everything is the same.²²⁵

Similarly, the character Nhài in *Dở dang* (Unfinished) abandons her child to follow her material needs. And the character Hường in *Phúc và họa* (Good and bad luck) breaks up with her husband just because he did not give her the money she wanted. In the short story *Báo hiếu cha* (Repay for father), the alienation of the characters is portrayed through how the sons behaved with their sick father. Except for the eldest and youngest daughters, the sons in the family silently expect their father to die soon so that they could inherit the father's property. These sons still argue about the inheritance after their father's death, leading to the whole family having to go to court to resolve the problem.

Issues about the generation gap in Vietnamese families, which reflects the conflict between cultural values, are also mentioned in some short stories such as Lê Xuân Quang's *Bản sao kì lạ*²²⁶ (Strange copy), *Đứa trẻ thông minh*²²⁷ (Smart kid), *Bán mình*

²²¹ Ibid., 177-200.

²²² Lê Xuân Quang, *Những mảnh đời phiêu bạt*, 79-133.

²²³ Lê Xuân Quang, *Đùa với lửa*, 193-242.

²²⁴ Đỗ Trường, *Không bao giờ thành sẹo*, 149-160.

²²⁵ “Đồng tiền đã làm cô loá mắt. Cứ sau mỗi lần làm lỗi để nhận lấy một khoản thù lao của sếp, cô lại tự bảo mình ‘Lần sau sẽ chấm dứt’. Lần sau, lần sau nữa, chứng nào vắn tắt ấy.” Lê Xuân Quang, *Những mảnh đời phiêu bạt*, 91.

²²⁶ Ibid., 212-250.

²²⁷ Lê Xuân Quang, *Đùa với lửa*, 153-175.

*chuyện con*²²⁸ (Selling oneself to redeem a son), *Cuộc chia tay bất đắc dĩ*²²⁹ (Reluctant farewell) and Nguyễn Văn Thọ's *Trong bão tuyết*²³⁰ (In blizzard). The Vietnamese parents in these short stories show their love and care for their children. However, the reaction they get from their children is a nonchalant, cold attitude, or worse. For example, the short story *Bản sao kì lạ* (Strange copy) describes the persistent disagreement between the mother Hòa and her daughter. The disagreement arises from the daughter's choice of her boyfriend who, according to the mother's view, is a useless guy. Their conflict becomes so tense that the daughter is willing to leave home and live with her boyfriend. Similarly, the son, Thắng, in the short story *Cuộc chia tay bất đắc dĩ* (Reluctant farewell) even thinks of a tactic of pretending to listen to his father in order to get the father's money:

He needs a lot of money. Observing his father's, he concludes that it is best to please his father in front of him, and then do what he wants behind the father's back.²³¹

In general, the above depictions of the material and spiritual lives of the former Vietnamese contract workers expose raw facts about the lives of the Vietnamese in Germany. These narratives are literary materials that illustrate how the immigrant community, in this case is the community of former contract workers, responds to historical fluctuations in Germany. They show the severity of the migration process, which not only begins from the preparation phase for the migration but continues in the process of living and integrating into the host country. The last part of this chapter will introduce another narrative about the migration process of Vietnamese people from Vietnam to Germany – the illegal crossing of borders. Although this approach, as will be analyzed in the novel *Quyên* by Nguyễn Văn Thọ, has many potential risks, it is still chosen by the characters when they do not have a better option to go overseas.

4. The narrative of return in *Quyên* by Nguyễn Văn Thọ

The expressions of identity formation are not only demonstrated through the narrative of

²²⁸ Ibid., 83-104.

²²⁹ Ibid., 120-152.

²³⁰ Nguyễn Văn Thọ, *Vàng xưa*, 5-29.

²³¹ “Cậu đang rất cần món tiền lớn. Quan sát tìm hiểu bỏ rút ra kết luận: làm đẹp lòng bố trước mặt là tốt nhất, còn sau lưng cứ việc theo ý mình.” Lê Xuân Quang, *Đùa với lửa*, 148.

departure, as in Thế Dĩnh's novels, but also through the narratives of return, as in Nguyễn Văn Thọ's *Quyên*. The novel *Quyên* describes the character's journey of crossing the border from Vietnam to Russia and travelling from there to Germany. During the border crossing, the protagonist Quyên falls into the hands of Hùng, the leader of the border crossing. He arrests and rapes her, which leads to her becoming pregnant. Later, Hùng comes to love Quyên and sets her free. However, the reunion with Quyên's husband in Germany does not go smoothly. Her husband abandons her, meaning that she has to make a living by herself. Finally, she finds a foreign man who loves her sincerely and marries her. After Hùng's death, Quyên decides to bring his body to Vietnam and buries him in the homeland.

During the late 1980s, to go successfully overseas without the approval of the Bureau of Labor Cooperation (such as in the case of the character Trần Linh above), some people went first to Eastern European countries, then crossing illegally into the GDR. The first chapter immediately exposed the dangers of the crossing in the illegal departure of the protagonist Quyên:

She [Quyên] remembered the frozen truck in which she and her husband had been holding their breaths, like mummies together, crossing the border of the two countries.²³²

However, eight-month-living in the forest helps Quyên to understand the nature of the bandit – Hùng. As a former contract worker in USSR, Hùng used to be a good and faithful husband to his wife. Nevertheless, his torturous personal life, which is interpreted as the consequence of life as a contract worker, was the cause of the corruption of Hùng. He is indignant about the life of contract workers like this:

I hate the phrase *labor export*. Humans are not rice, bamboo, animal or vegetables which can be exported! Indeed, labor is a commodity! But with the thoughts of ancient Vietnamese, no one could forget to say so! Not just a way to talk about the job makes hurts those who leave! There are so many terms and regulations on food, accommodation, or pregnancy,

²³²“Cô nhớ cái thùng xe tải đông lạnh mà cô và chồng đã nằm yên nín thở như xác ướp bên nhau, vượt qua biên giới hai nước.” Nguyễn Văn Thọ, *Quyên*, E-book, 32.

which disregard people ... such as the fact that one contract worker has to live in six square meters. Six square meters, do you understand? Six square meters - that is four people in one room, the room that only one or two Western could live in. Just live in such six meters! How many troublesome things happen, especially for women? It is clear that the ideology of being exported is very happy for us, no one considered our natural life anymore! There was a man in Germany, writing newspapers who called us as guest workers! True! Guest workers! ²³³

The hard life is not only the main factor leading to the fall of Hùng. The peak, which changes his personality, is his wife's infidelity. She is a contract worker in Germany but has a love affair with another man. With anger, pain, and disappointment, Hùng breaks up with his wife and completely loses his faith in true love. After this, Hùng starts making money at all costs because he thinks his wife betrayed him due to his poverty.

I hid my suffering the whole time since then, wandering to do business, bringing with me the grief like a cornerstone in my heart, never withering with the misery of poverty, because I had no money and also due to money I've lost her. ²³⁴

Not only does Nguyễn Văn Thọ condemn the lack of material life in the host land, but the author also implicitly questions the moral corruption of contract workers as the inevitable result of the changing conditions and environment. The decadence of Vietnamese virtues, especially sacrificing ethics and the loyalty of women, becomes a common phenomenon in the community of contract workers. In Germany, besides

²³³ “Tôi ghét cụm từ Xuất khẩu lao động. Con người chứ đâu phải gạo, tre, nứa lạt, thịt gà gia súc rau dưa gì mà mang xuất khẩu! Đã đành sức lao động là hàng hoá đấy! Nhưng với cái tình của người Việt xưa nay, ai lại quên đi để nói như thế! Không chỉ là một cách nói về một công việc làm những kẻ ra đi tổn thương đâu! Biết bao điều khoản, những quy định về ăn, ở, chữa đê coi người ta như gỗ đá ấy ... ví như quy định cho một người đi xuất khẩu ăn ở trong sáu mét vuông. Sáu mét, cô hiểu không? Sáu mét, tức là bốn đứa một phòng còn bọn tây thì phòng đó chỉ có một đứa, cùng lắm hai đứa ở thôi. Cứ vậy mà sống trong sáu mét ấy! Bao nhiêu chuyện phiền toái xảy ra, nhất là cho cánh đàn bà con gái. Rõ là cái tư tưởng, coi được xuất khẩu là hạnh phúc quá rồi, chẳng ai xem xét đời sống tự nhiên của chúng tôi ra gì nữa! Có một người ở Đức, viết báo gọi tội lao động như cánh bọn tôi là Thợ khách. Đúng! Thợ khách!” Ibid., 22.

²³⁴ “Tôi giấu kín sự đau khổ trong suốt thời gian sau đó, lang bạt làm ăn, mang theo mỗi hờn căm như hòn đá tảng trong lòng, không bao giờ tan với nỗi khổ nạn vì nghèo, vì không có tiền và cũng chính vì tiền mà tôi đã mất cô ấy.” Ibid., 25.

working in the factory, most workers would seek to purchase goods (German bicycles, motorcycles or appliances are popular at the time), then send these products to Vietnam for profit. Typically, men would make money easier in this way, because they had enough physical strength to hunt down the goods. In such conditions, female workers will attempt to stick with men to assist them in both the purchase and shipment. Alongside the shared economic interest, this kind of relationship also contains emotional needs, including sex. The infidelity of Hùng's wife is seen by him as a common phenomenon of female workers living away from home:

The inevitable choice is that every woman must find someone, to trust, to rely upon a certain man, to make a living, to have goods, to send money home! So disgusting and sad! Such the attempting and pressing situation makes up many temporary relationships, connecting so many women and men who have husbands, wives, having peaceful families in their homeland?²³⁵

Hùng questions mournfully the cause of the corruption amongst the expatriates:

But why do those things not happen in the hometown, when the woman moved out of their hometown to city, also making a living away from home, also living in exile? Why, on the roads of the homeland, is everything not as noisy and temporary as it happens to many women and men here. It is painful to realize the truth that a lot of people, both men and women, betray their spouses and children in the homeland when they go overseas? I do not understand why in our country, although there were many relationships, sometimes they have to rely on each other, but it was not easy for them to betray family like when they were abroad? I cannot explain it. [...] The cultural, moral and traditional values for many years suddenly crack in pieces overnight²³⁶

²³⁵ “Sự lựa chọn tất yếu là, mỗi người đàn bà phải tìm tới ai đó, nhờ cậy, nương tựa vào một người đàn ông nào đó, để mưu sống, để mà có hàng, có tiền gửi về nhà! Kinh tởm và đáng buồn quá! Sự toan tính, hoàn cảnh thúc ép như thế, tạo nên đủ các mối tình gá tạm, gắn kết bao nhiêu người đàn bà, đàn ông đã có chồng, vợ, con cái, có gia đình yên ấm ở quê nhà?” Ibid., 24.

²³⁶ “Nhưng tại sao, những điều đó không xảy ra ở quê nhà, khi những người phụ nữ lên thành phố tại quê nhà chúng ta, cũng là cảnh xa quê kiếm sống, cũng là sự li quê, tha hương? Tại sao,

The narrator partly answered that question for two reasons. The first is the lack of understanding among the contract workers about Western social culture. There are many Vietnamese amongst the contract workers that believe that there was a freedom in loving and having sex there.

There are quite a number of Vietnamese people among the guest workers-contract workers - who mistakenly think that in western countries, people are free to love, free to make love without any regulations. This leap-frogging approach to a different culture, from villages to cities, from underdeveloped countries to developed countries in many aspects, those who were not prepared for “cognitive processes”, which is not only knowledge which was written in books, being drafted hastily in a few thin typed pages, created unhealed gaps.²³⁷

The second reason is the cramped living environment and prejudice in Vietnam, which has a lack of regard for the emotional needs of the Vietnamese people. When they were overseas, with their misunderstanding about sexual freedom in the West, Vietnamese workers, who have not been fully equipped with the socio-cultural knowledge, easily plunge into erotic relationships.

However, the narrator is not satisfied with his answer. The question that Phi, another male character in the story, raises about the change in his wife, refers not only the shift of cultural but also geospatial background as factors which change peoples' identity:

trên các nẻo đường quê hương, mọi sự không ồn ào gá tạm như điều xảy ra với không ít đàn bà, đàn ông tại nơi đây. Thật đau đớn khi nhận ra một sự thật, khi khá nhiều người cả đàn ông lẫn đàn bà ra xứ người đã phản bội lại vợ chồng con cái ở quê hương? Tôi không hiểu nổi, tại sao ở trong nước, cũng có bao nhiêu mối quan hệ, có khi phải nương tựa vào người khác, mà người ta lại không dễ dàng phản bội gia đình như khi ra nước ngoài? Tôi không lý giải nổi [...] Những giá trị văn hoá, đạo đức, truyền thống bao nhiêu năm nay, một sớm một chiều bỗng nứt vỡ, rã nát.” Ibid., 25.

²³⁷ “Có khá nhiều người Việt Nam trong số Thợ khách-Công nhân xuất khẩu lao động- lầm tưởng rằng ở Phương Tây người ta tự do yêu đương, tự do làm tình, chẳng có biên giới kỉ cương gì. Sự tiếp cận một nền văn hoá khác biệt, có tính nhảy cóc, từ làng bản lên thành phố, từ nước chậm phát triển tới một đất nước đã phát triển nhiều mặt, không được chuẩn bị về “quá trình nhận thức”, chứ không phải chỉ là những kiến thức được ghi trong sách vở, lại được soạn thảo một cách vội vã, hời hợt trên dăm trang đánh máy mỏng dính, đã tạo nên những lỗ hổng không bao giờ hàn gắn được.” Ibid., 75.

It turns out that his family in Vietnam, although the nature of his wife is bad, is surely less uncertainty than when they are pushed abroad [...] Although that village is really poor and has many old customs, there is still a land for his family to take root and not be disintegrated, because Thị (Phi's wife), no matter how impudent she was, still did not have a chance to humiliate him among relatives, neighbors, and even in their great family.²³⁸

The cohesion in a community is interpreted as a tie that helps curb sexual instincts, and control the rebellious behavior, if any, of each individual in that community. In villages,

although it is just a primitive law of the community, its cohesion between neighbors and regions was stronger than strict regulations in a developed and civilized country, which reduces the prolific nature of people.²³⁹

To a large extent, village or hometown, in this case, is enhanced as an ideal space; where individual identity can be forged to fit the community identity. However, as was demonstrated in the novel, the community identity in the case of Vietnam immigrants is just a visionary concept, a body without a soul. This kind of identity was created on the principle of respect for the community and to avoid losing face, rather than people's self-consciousness about their cultural and moral values compared to other communities. Therefore, when the individual is separated from their community, the identification standards of Vietnamese people, especially women, as fidelity, sacrifice or hard-working, became faded. In the fiction, Phi and Quỳên vaguely recognize the fact that the Vietnamese lack something: "She clearly sees her countrymen missing something, something with extensive properties, covering up her entire community."²⁴⁰ The Vietnamese lack the realization of themselves and their core values, which helps them

²³⁸ "Thì ra cái gia đình của vợ chồng gã ở Việt Nam, dù con vợ gã bản chất chẳng ra gì, chắc vẫn đỡ sút mẻ, đỡ bất trắc hơn so với khi đẩy ra nước ngoài [...] Cái làng nghèo đói thật, lắm lệ tục cũ kĩ thật, nhưng vẫn còn đất cho gia đình gã bám rễ vào, khỏi tan rã, vì Thị dù có lẳng lơ đến tới bao nhiêu, vẫn không thể có cơ hội một mình trơ tráo tới mức sỉ nhục, bĩ thừ gã giữa họ hàng, làng xóm và ngay trong đại gia đình của gã và Thị." Ibid., 82.

²³⁹ "Tuy chỉ là một thứ luật sơ khai của một cộng đồng, mà tính liên kết chòm xóm, địa phương nhiều hơn tính luật pháp chặt chẽ của một xã hội văn minh phát triển, cũng đủ sức câu thúc, đủ để có thể giảm nhanh ở phần bản năng sung mãn của con người." Ibid., 88.

²⁴⁰ "Cô thấy rõ những kẻ đồng hương của cô thiếu thiếu một điều gì đó, một điều gì đó có tính rộng khắp, bao trùm lên toàn thể cộng đồng của cô." Ibid., 88-9.

adapt to the new environment.

The corruption of contract workers while living abroad became a familiar motif in Nguyễn Văn Thọ's novel. However, it is worth noting that the change of personality only takes place in one way. Their starting point in Vietnam is good, but they go bad when they go abroad. At the same time, the author does not mention the change in the character's personalities in the opposite direction, i.e from abroad to Vietnam. All of the supporting characters were created as alienated characters. An example of this is seen in the case of Hùng. He was a forestry worker when he was in Vietnam and he gradually deteriorated when he became a contract worker. Another example is the case of the character Thị, Phi's wife. As a contract worker, she left Phi and had sexual affairs with many men just because of money.

As the protagonist Quỳn is built as a perfect character model in all aspects, her identity is not so convincing. Quỳn is described as a beautiful girl with outstanding traits such as being hardworking, faithful and honest. She really loved her first husband, although he could not sympathize with her. Once in a relationship with Hùng, Quỳn plays an important role in saving his soul. During his time spent living with Quỳn, Hùng returns to his good nature. Even when Quỳn has sex with Phi, the owner of the restaurant where she works, Quỳn's act is still explained as a gratuitous act. Immigration identity cannot be as constant and permanent as Nguyễn Văn Thọ describes Quỳn. On the contrary, the identity of immigrants should be seen as the process of interaction and transformation in the context in which it is formed. The author's construction of the Vietnamese woman who possesses the typically good characteristics of Vietnamese women, especially when these traits are unchanging over time and space, indicates that the author is not aware of the impact of social factors on the formation of cultural identity to each individual. Immigration in Quỳn's case is understood as a premise to let characters reveal outstanding personalities such as being faithful, hardworking, compassionate, who always heads to the family and homeland. The immutability of these personality traits may turn Quỳn into a typical character (*nhân vật điển hình*) but not necessarily a typical immigrant character. Therefore, this narrative in Nguyễn Văn Thọ's fiction is not only the narrative of departure but also the narrative of return, in which the protagonists always maintain their good qualities that they have before the leaving instead of those representing the environment and immigrant circumstances in which the

characters were created.

In particular, the ending of the novel with Quỳên's unexpected repatriation emphasizes Nguyễn Văn Thọ's intention to build the narrative of return. Hùng, the man who gives Quỳên many feelings of love and resentment, who is also the father of Quỳên's daughter, becomes seriously ill and dies. After his death, Quỳên decides to take his body to Vietnam and bury it in her family's garden. This action is interpreted as a custom in the Vietnamese culture "the sense of the dead is that of the final" (*nghĩa tử là nghĩa tận*)²⁴¹, the notion that people should ignore all problems and conflicts to express affection for the last time for the dead people. However, at the airport, Quỳên thinks not only of Hùng's but also her return to Vietnam. She reveals her thoughts on her homeland as a peaceful place that she always looked forward to returning to: "Adventure to Germany, although both unhappy and lucky, has she ever forgotten her years in the homeland?"²⁴² Even Kumar, Quỳên's new husband, thinks of flying to Vietnam to meet Quỳên and her daughter. To him, Germany is not recognized as his hometown, "how beautiful this country is, it is never, never his country."²⁴³

Mini conclusion

In conclusion, apart from narratives of the Vietnamese contract workers living and working in Germany, I have explored two contrary narratives in the works of Thế Dũng and Nguyễn Văn Thọ. They are the narrative of departure and the narrative of return, both are related to the sense of belonging. Although the above-mentioned writers came from Northern Vietnam and left for Germany to work as contract workers, the protagonists in their fictions showed the complexity and contradiction in terms of social and political viewpoints towards the homeland. Therefore, analyzing two narratives enables me to define the matter of identity for the Vietnamese migration community, which primarily depends on how they realize their place rather than where they are. The choices of leaving or returning also reflect how experiences of living in homeland or host-land could influence on the shape of the identity of the Vietnamese people in Germany.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 197.

²⁴² "Phiêu bạt sang Đức, cả khi bất hạnh lẫn khi may mắn, có bao giờ cô quên đi những năm tháng ở quê hương?" Ibid., 228-229.

²⁴³ "cái xứ sở tươi đẹp tới vậy, mãi mãi chẳng phải là của anh, chưa bao giờ là của anh" Ibid., 233.

CHAPTER 3: NARRATIVES ABOUT MEMORY AND THE INQUIRY OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN LÊ MINH HÀ'S NOVELS

1. Memory and literature: Theoretical framework

The literary appearance of the Vietnamese community in Germany is not only encapsulated in the narratives about the former contract workers' material and spiritual lives. While the before-mentioned writers illustrate how the immigrants struggle with their hard living in the host land, Lê Minh Hà, a writer who came to Germany to reunite with her family, focuses on the characters' close relationship with the homeland through the narratives about Hanoi. Chapter 3 is devoted to the memory and the inquiry of cultural identity in Lê Minh Hà's novels. The analyses of the manifestation of memory and identity come from how I understand and apply theories of memory and urban ecology in studying texts, which will be introduced in the first part of each analysis content.

Since its conception in Maurice Halbwachs's landmark *Social Framework of Memory*²⁴⁴ (1925, 1941), memory studies has shifted from individual experiences to social and cultural bases of shared memories, i.e collective/cultural memory at the beginning of the twentieth century. For Halbwachs, memory is framed in both the past and the present; hence studying memory means identifying the shifting social frames of the subjective mind rather than the subjective mind's inherent properties. Halbwachs's concept of collective memory emphasizes the social construction of individual memory, arguing that "[I]t is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize individual and collective memories."²⁴⁵ All individual remembering is shaped by social materials and built within a social framework. Even when the act of remembering is done individually, this is referred to as "social beings with reference to our social identities."²⁴⁶ Not only individuals but also groups themselves share their own memories which are called "publicly articulated images of collective pasts."²⁴⁷

The role of literature as a medium of cultural memory is incontrovertible. Both canonized and popular literature have served as the media of memory, where they fulfill

²⁴⁴ See further in Astrid Erll et al, *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, 155.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 156.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

the mnemonic functions such as “the imaginative creation of the past lifeworlds, the transmission of images of history, the negotiation of competing memories, and the reflection about the processes and problems of cultural memory.”²⁴⁸ As a symbolic form of the cultural memory, literature intersects memory in its condensation, narration, and genre. The condensation refers to the power of bringing together/opposing various semantic fields in small spaces by using literary devices such as metaphor, allegory or intertextuality. In memory studies, condensation means “the compression of several complex ideas, feelings or images into a single, fused or composite object”²⁴⁹; as a result, the objects evoke different interpretations. By narration, Astrid Erll refers to the process of selection, combination, and creation of meaning that both literature and memory share. Like literature, the large quantities of dates and facts in memory cannot be remembered and narrated without the act of choosing pivotal elements and of leaving out insignificant ones. Genre is another resemblance between literature and memory. Genre is a form or type of communication which has socially agreed upon conventions that have been developed over time. In literary studies, genres serve as conventionalized formats that we automatically draw on whilst reading to explicate meaningful patterns of representation. The genre formats are retained in cultural knowledge that individuals obtain through “socialization and enculturation”²⁵⁰; hence they are genre schemata used not only in literature but also in memory studies.

Nevertheless, literature is not merely the simulation of the real world. In the construction of memory, literary works contain noticeable differences to other symbol systems, consisting of fictional privileges and restrictions, interdiscursivity, polyvalence and the production or reflection of memory. The feature of fictional privilege is quoted from Wolfgang Iser’s theory of literature, which conceives two forms of boundary-crossing for every fictional representation. The first form deals with the reality expressed in literary texts. Whilst the external reality is repeated in the literary text, it becomes signs and conveys different meanings in the fictional world. The second relates to the imaginary in texts. Through its representation in fiction, the imaginary obtains the determinacy that it did not have before. The two distinct processes create a “reproduced reality” in fictional

²⁴⁸ Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 144.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 145.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 148.

texts where “extratextuality reality merges into the imaginary, and the imaginary merges into reality.”²⁵¹ As a result, the interplay between the real and the imaginary reconstructs cultural perceptions. Interdiscursivity refers to Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s term of “heteroglossia”, or different-speech-ness, where all forms of discourse encompass various forms of speech. According to Bakhtin, language is heteroglot, representing “the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth.”²⁵² In this way, the intersection of each language system gives space for memory to be established divergent and contested, serving “as a medium which brings together, and re-connects, in a single space the manifold discrete parlances about the past.”²⁵³ Astrid Erll also mentioned the feature of polyvalence of literature, which emphasizes the semantic complexity of literary representation of the past. Last but not least, the feature of production and reflection of memory is explored in literary texts. While the construction of the past is shown through the act of telling in literary works, this process is observable and criticizable. Hence, “literary works are memory-product and memory-reflexive, and often, like a reversible figure, simultaneously.”²⁵⁴

2. The fiction of memory: The case of *Gió tự thời khuất mặt* by Lê Minh Hà

Literary critics Ansgar Nünning and Birgit Neumann propose the term “fiction of memory” firstly to refer to narratives that describe the workings of memory. In a broader sense, the fictions of memory involve stories that focus on the “imaginative (re)construction of the past in response to current needs.”²⁵⁵ This kind of fiction includes predisposition, biases, and values which serve as conventional codes for understanding past and present.²⁵⁶

In the fictions of memory, the order of analepses, or flashback, has the most influential impact on the creation of memory-like narratives. Ordinarily, the chronological sequences of events are interrupted by interjections of earlier events, which

²⁵¹ Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary Charting Literary Anthropology*, 3

²⁵² M.M Bakhtin, *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*, 291.

²⁵³ Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 151.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Birgit Neumann, “The Literary Representation of Memory”, 334.

²⁵⁶ See further in Ansgar Nünning (ed), “Fictions of Memory”, 49-75.

was called completing analepsis by Gérard Genette.²⁵⁷ The completing analepses, often found in classical fictional autobiographies, serve as an effective device for “bridging the gap between specific past events, the figures’ own memory-created starting point, and a moment in the present at which the process of remembering is initiated.”²⁵⁸ Nevertheless, contemporary fictions of memory also witness the chronological order in favor of the constant oscillation between different points of time. The alteration in consecutive ordering is semanticized to demonstrate “the haphazard workings of memory”, thereby “highlighting the memory-like quality of the narrative”.²⁵⁹

The narrator’s oscillation between the past and present of Hanoi is a prominent technique in Lê Minh Hà’s fictions, such as *Gió từ thời khuất mặt* (Wind from the Unseen Time) and *Phố vẫn gió* (Street is still windy). Hanoi is normally described in the subsidy period (1976-1986), interwoven with its current socialist-oriented market economy. The flashback is utilized, which allows the narrator to move back and forth to different points of time, thus displaying the influence of urbanization on Vietnamese personality and identity. Through the narrator’s switching across different points of time, the writer displays how memory works to (re)construct the images of Hanoi and its transformation.

In this part, I am going to take into consideration of memory in two levels. In the first level, memory is taken into consideration as a structural/technical function, i.e. viewing memory as affecting the structure of fiction. For instance, the occurrence of memory is recognizable through the frequent shifting between chapters, which is a mimesis of life-narrative. With such a shifting structure of the fiction, the act of remembering becomes pivotal for the protagonist to connect people and events at different points of time, thereby creating a fiction of memory. In addition, the structural function of memory is depicted through the building of the character’s state in reminiscence. The heroine remembers her life in disordered stages throughout the novel, from her childhood to her age in the present. Also, she frequently tells the stories of her father, mother, schoolboys and even neighbours. The way that the author builds up the

²⁵⁷ The term of completing analepses was coined by Gérard Genette in comparison to paralipsis. While the former is featured by ‘the elision of a diachronic section’ in narrative, the latter is created ‘by the omission of one of the constituent elements of a situation in a period that the narrative does generally cover’. See further in Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse An Essay in Method*, 1980, 52.

²⁵⁸ Birgit Neuman, “The Literary Representation of Memory”, 336.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

characters who feature in their flashbacks illustrates how memory affects the fiction on the structural level. However, the manifestation of memory is not only demonstrated in the formal aspect of fiction. On the second level, memory, which served previously as a literary device, shows its power even more. The protagonist's act of recalling becomes the process of giving a form to the memory, in which the protagonist is a carrier who conveys the representation of memory. The readers witness the usurping of memory in its control over the protagonist and the protagonist's struggle to escape from the power of memory. Also, the power of memory is expressed in relation to history and identity. That memory is used to query the authenticity of history also proves the effect of memory in the novel.

2.1 Memory as a structural aspect of the fiction

Basically, the fiction *Gió từ thời khuất mặt* (Wind from the Unseen Time) revolves around the story of Ngân, a young girl living in a collective dormitory in Hanoi in the years before the Renovation period. Ngân is a young and sensitive girl, constantly observing the change of society around her, thus drawing on her own life experiences. That is why in this novel, the narrator describes many different lives of people in the dorm and the people living around Ngân. The novel does not follow the pattern of typical novels. It does not take the reader to the climax with the closing and opening details. In contrast, the story switches from character to character, constructing a picture of the social life in Hanoi after 1975. It is the construction of Ngân in the state of remembrance by the author that makes me see the novel as a fiction of memory.

The fiction includes 31 chapters. However, Lê Minh Hà does not focus on building a seamless storyline around the heroine Ngân. Instead, throughout the novel, there is a constant flow of memories. The protagonist constantly reminisces not only the stories about herself but also those about her friend, her mother, and her father. For example, from chapter 1 to chapter 5, she reminisces about her neighbours living in the dormitory near the banyan tree, especially the madwoman Tam and the good-hearted deputy director Thân. Between chapter 5 and chapter 7, Ngân reminisces about her family life, her father, and her boyfriend, Vĩnh, at university. Chapters 10 and 13 completely revolve around the family background of Vĩnh. Similarly, in chapters 19 and 21, Ngân recalls the silly games she played when she was a child in the dorm. Along with the protagonist's recalling of things and events, there is a temporal shifting throughout the

novel. For example, in chapters 1 and 2, which describes the madwoman climbing the tree, the narrative is told in the present tense. Chapter 3 witnesses the shift of the narrator back to Tam's past to tell the cause of Tam's panic. Again, the temporal shifting occurs in chapter 4 where Mr. Thân, a director at Ms. Tam's factory, comforts her to get through the fear. The frequent shifting between timelines and spaces in fiction is the first indication of the effect of memory on the structural level of the work.

Gió từ thời khuất mặt (Wind from the Unseen Time) takes place in a small quarter in Hanoi. It opens with the shared belief of the people about the sacredness of a premature death next to a banyan tree. The short-lived baby who was left by his parents near the banyan tree is sanctified and worshiped as a god. People build a small altar in front of the tree and rush to prayer. Pregnant women burn incense there before giving birth. Salesmen in the nearby market regularly patronize before opening stores. Incidentally, the entire population of the neighbourhood not only share the divine worship of a dead soul through their sharing the collective mindset of practicing the ritual but also share a collective identity. All of them unconsciously declare their informal home address at the maternity hospital or Banyan Tree at the Cow farm.

Collectivity is even legitimized by the fact that all of them live in the dormitory of a factory, thereby sharing the same home address. The dormitory is designed as a whole unified building, with common spaces for inhabitants such as shared dining rooms, reading rooms, table tennis, courtyards, and gardens. Even the children have the same names such as Quýt, Chiến, Thắng, Hòa, Bình, Hồng, Hà that their parents, when naming their children, even share the same mood of liberation:

Most homes live almost the same rhythm of living, working and playing. There are a few families, which have a different pace of life, which makes the others both skeptical and jealous. But they are minorities, who are proud but still finding ways to hide themselves.²⁶⁰

²⁶⁰ “Hầu hết mọi nhà đều sống gần như cùng một nhịp ăn, làm, chơi. Cũng có đôi ba gia đình có một nhịp sống khác khiến mọi người vừa nghi ngại vừa ganh tị. Nhưng họ là thiểu số, một thiểu số hãnh diện song vẫn phải tìm mọi cách che giấu mình.” Lê Minh Hà, *Gió từ thời khuất mặt*, 6. Texts which are quoted here bases on the file that the author sends directly to us. This file is slightly different from the print version of *Gió từ thời khuất mặt*. The print version published by Nhà xuất bản Hội nhà văn (Publishing of Writers Association) has been censored in some parts. Therefore, I use the file, which is considered more complete, for my analysis.

Here, the role of memory is to simulate the flow of life as shown by the introduction of several lives of various supporting characters. The narrator Ngân is still the main character. However, her position, at the beginning of the work, is replaced by her memories of other characters. Memory, with its selectivity and condensation of the most memorable moments, is used to rationalize the sudden occurrence of the supporting characters in the position that would have belonged to the heroine. In that context, the shifting of the character's viewpoints is particularly conducive to evoking the impression of the process of the heroine's memory. It can be said that, throughout the novel, the protagonist does nothing more than reminiscence and contemplate the past.

The feature of the people's collective identity living in the dormitory is not the only example that illustrates the simulating role of the memory. In the first chapter, the character Tam, a mad girl in the dorm, is suddenly mentioned as evidence of the characteristic of the selectivity of memory. At the beginning of the novel, Tam appears under the image of the madwoman, stirring the weary life of the tiring people in the dorm by climbing to the top of the tree and crooning. Tam, a half-crazy woman, works in the kitchen of the dormitory. She is pregnant with an unknown man, carrying a fear of being discovered, dismissed and ridiculed by others. However, the fear which makes Tam get crazy is interpreted as a psychological corollary as she witnessed her cousin, Phận, get pregnant without being married and later died because of complications with an abortion. This was planted in the heart of the Tam, who is just 18-years-old at that moment, and makes her obsessed with the misery of the woman's condition: the pursuit of love and happiness can be paid by human life. In Ngân's memory, Tam's life story is a crucial event, which changes the perception of the girl about the fragility of the woman.

Although Ngân's stream of thought about the people around her emerges in the first chapters, she herself actually appears in her detailed description of appearance and action after the fifth chapter. The protagonist is introduced as a mature woman, who is smart and sensitive. After graduating from the Faculty of Literature, she struggled to find a job sufficient to feed herself and her family. For example, she applied to work as a reporter in a newspaper editorial office. Despite being rated highly for her writing ability, the editorial board refuses her because they accept another acquaintance. The irrationality of the allocation of human resources, based on relationships rather than capacity, makes

the girl feel confused and helpless. Her bewilderment is expressed in her tacit agreement with her friend, who chose to study and lived abroad instead of returning home:

What do you come back for? Will it be possible to escape from this difficult journey because it will be the same if you have nothing else attached to your degree that you worked so hard to get.²⁶¹

What makes *Gió tự thời khuất mặt* (*Wind from the Unseen Time*) a fiction of memory is that the memories are knitted together at different levels, and are even featured in the character's actions. The case of Ngân is a concrete example. The character's conversation and actions are overshadowed while her psychological progress is clarified. It should be noted that what makes Ngân confused is not just the difficulties she encounters in making a living. More importantly, what makes her confused is her ability to observe, understand and be sensitive to age. The young woman's insight makes her sink into her dreams and chooses what she wants to remember. The role of memory is not only manifested through the ability to govern the character's psychology, though. In chapter 7, memory plays a role as the source of energy for the girl's belief. In particular, memory becomes a criterion that helps Ngân to define the meaning of happiness in marriage. For her, when women regret the past because they have not done what they wanted to do, the "mourning of the past" becomes a "right" to help them survive:

When a woman can no longer live for and with her desire, she must let her mind remember the past. Otherwise, she will not tolerate the feeling of betraying herself. Memories always light up the living day of someone solemnly and sadly. This is the charm of the past in Ngân.²⁶²

Memory, as Ngân said, is a harbinger of a mental separation between a wife and a husband when a woman cannot find sympathy with her husband in the present; when they are both forced and eager to stick with their past memories, even if their devotion to

²⁶¹ "Về sẽ làm gì? Liệu có thoát được hành trình khổ ải này không nếu cũng chỉ như nhau, không có linh kiện phụ tùng gì đi kèm cái bằng đã tu luyện bao lâu mới có." Lê Minh Hà, *Gió tự thời khuất mặt*, 110.

²⁶² "Khi người đàn bà không còn có thể sống cho, sống cùng khao khát, thì phải để cho họ quyền thương nhớ tháng ngày đang qua. Nếu không, họ sẽ không chịu được cảm giác mình phản bội lại chính mình. Hồi ức luôn làm sáng lại ngày đang sống một cách trang trọng và buồn thảm. Đây chính là vẻ quyến rũ của quá khứ trong Ngân." Lê Minh Hà, *Gió tự thời khuất mặt*, 28.

the past causes them to become lonely and feel out of place in the present. Here is Ngân's thought:

He [the husband] cannot imagine how many times she was with him on the street, this childish woman had separated herself from her husband. Only those memories are real. Only sadness is real. Only Ngân and the far away, and numb loneliness.²⁶³

It is not just Ngân, but also her father, who is in a constant state of remembering. Ngân's father is described as a soldier, who is always in his dreams because of the absence of "the selling cries in the fog on the streets before the war."²⁶⁴ The father's reminiscence is mentioned in chapter 5, chapter 7, chapter 17 and chapter 18. He remembers his years of resistance, when all the soldiers had scabies, yet they still hugged to warm each other up. He also remembers the day he was wounded during marching; a friend took him away, took care of him and shared food with him. For him, memory is the source of living that helps him survive and believe in life. The memory contains love between people in difficult times. For him, memory is not only the past but also the future itself, since in peaceful days, the father's mind is sent back to the lost days:

How can he tell Ngân that these [memories] are a permanent love and he believes there are people who will never change their love. Without that belief, how could he live after the days when he no longer dared to believe anyone he met [...]?²⁶⁵

In summary, I have shown how memory is reflected in the structural level in the novel. The narrators are built through their memories, which allows the readers to access the different stories of the main and supporting characters. However, memory is not only manifested through the structural level in the novel. In the next section, I will analyse how memory is more powerful in the novel. This manifestation supports my argument in proving Lê Minh Hà's novel as the fiction of memory.

²⁶³ "Anh không thể tưởng được ra rằng biết bao lần đi cùng anh trên phố, người đàn bà trẻ con kia đã tách mình ra khỏi chồng. Chỉ những hoài nhớ kia là có thật. Chỉ nỗi buồn kia là có thật. Chỉ còn Ngân và xa xôi, và nỗi cô đơn tẻ người." Lê Minh Hà, *Gió tự thời khuất mặt*, 28.

²⁶⁴ "những tiếng rao đêm rải trong sương trước ngày kháng chiến" Lê Minh Hà, *Gió tự thời khuất mặt*, 21.

²⁶⁵ "Làm sao ông có thể nói cho Ngân hiểu được rằng đây là những ân tình vĩnh viễn và ông tin có những người không bao giờ thay lòng. Không có niềm tin ấy, làm sao ông có thể sống sau những ngày không còn dám tin ai mình vẫn thường gặp mặt [...]?" Lê Minh Hà, *Gió tự thời khuất mặt*, 27.

2.2 Memory as the main theme of the fiction or the power of memory

In the first part, memory works functionally in the work. The manifestation of memory lies in the way the characters are constructed in the state of recollection; thus, affecting the whole structure of the fiction where the shifting between chapters often occurs. Not only does it work in the structure of the fiction but memory also becomes the frequent obsession by the protagonist. Memory even reveals its control, and usurpation of the protagonist. Accordingly, the main character reveals the struggle to get rid of the effect of memory. In addition, the power of memory is expressed in relation to history and identity. In particular, the heroine uses memories to question the authenticity of history, thus re-establishing the value of history and national identity. The two relations of memory with characters and with history and identity are illustrative examples of the study of memory in Lê Minh Hà's fiction.

2.2.1 In the relationship between memory and characters

The relationship between characters and memory is complicated. At first, memory has control over the protagonist. The protagonist's struggle to take back their memory is reflected through her selection of different kinds of memory which are then used or neglected.

As for the first manifestation, memory shows its influence in the setting of a scientific conference, where Ngân meets her ex-boyfriend Vĩnh. Vĩnh can be considered as a male protagonist. He was Ngân's boyfriend during the college years. However, when they meet again after ten years apart, Ngân implicitly compares Vĩnh in the present with his past. For example, when he waits for her on his motorbike, Ngân looks at his appearance and thinks "just like the old days."²⁶⁶ When they went to café together, Ngân keeps reminiscing about the old memory:

There is something back. [...] The days of ice cream and donuts, the days of turning to the bookstore and regretting going out, the holidays in Tam

²⁶⁶ "y như ngày xưa" Lê Minh Hà, *Gió tự thời khuấy mặt*, 31.

Đảo where they shared branches of orchids with each other. The days of love [...]”²⁶⁷

The conversation brings them back to the old days, because in fact, except for memories, there is nothing in common between Ngân and Vĩnh. Vĩnh is from a well-off family. His father is a government official. His mother studied abroad and is respected by others. Vĩnh’s family is rich, so he has a full life compared with friends of the same age. Compared to Vĩnh, Ngân’s family belongs to the lower class. Therefore, she always seems to be indifferent to the fullness of Vĩnh’s life because she did not want to be inferior. “To the little girl, indifference is always a desperate attempt not to lose herself.”²⁶⁸ Despite the differences in family circumstances, Ngân and Vĩnh are close friends. Their love could have developed if Ngân was not harassed by Vĩnh’s father; and if she had not found out about the secret relationship between their fathers. Knowing this embarrassing event, Ngân breaks up with Vĩnh.

Chapter 11 gradually reveals the mysterious relationship between Vĩnh’s and Ngân’s fathers. Ngân’s father and his friend, Uncle Thái, were abducted by Vĩnh’s father. Vĩnh’s father made the life of Ngân’s family so hard. Also, Vĩnh’s father ordered Uncle Thái’s wife to move to a new office. No one knows why she was psychologically shocked and went crazy since moving to a new agency. Once she finds out about the hidden relationship between her father and Vĩnh’s father, Ngân ends her friendship with Vĩnh. Memories, which belong to the fathers’ generations, affect the daughter’s generation. The power of memory is revealed sophisticatedly through the protagonist’s sensitivity and vulnerability to social fluctuation in which her father and the friends are included.

The following chapters in the fiction show the protagonist’s effort to usurp memory. After being disturbed by Vĩnh’s father and knowing the truth of his past, Ngân calmly confronts him when Vĩnh’s father touches her again. She calls him Mặc, the real name that is only known to his close friends. She makes him panic by recalling the old memories where he owed a debt of gratitude to his comrades and where he has to face his own sin. However, she chooses to leave Vĩnh on that day, when she realizes she has stirred up memories of her father’s generation and used them to control the memory of

²⁶⁷ “Có điều gì rung rung trở lại [...] Những ngày kem que và bánh rán, những ngày rẽ vào hiệu sách lại tiếc rẽ đi ra, những ngày Tam Đảo hi hục bung bê hoa địa lan về chia nhau. Những ngày thương yêu lắm.” Ibid, 31.

²⁶⁸ “Ồ cô bé, về ơ hờ luôn luôn là cố gắng đầy thất vọng để mình không bị mất mình.” Ibid., 35.

Vĩnh's father. By doing that, Ngân is unable to stand outside the stream of memories of those around her, and the consequence of infringing on other people's memories is that Ngân's mind is no longer quiet.

The power of memory reveals itself in chapter 12. This chapter shows the protagonist's unexpected response when confronted by her father's memories. She chooses to stay out of them, even when she knows them thoroughly. She tentatively recognizes the risk of being poisoned by bad memories, and chooses to be immune to grieving memories:

To Ngân, that was his [the father's] past. Subconsciously, Ngân denies the burden of bearing the past, bearing the pride and suffering of the parental generation. Ngân subconsciously understands the risk of poisoning herself with the tender bitter taste of the past.²⁶⁹

In the confrontation with memory, the protagonist chooses to deny sad memories. The act of denial, however, is an acknowledgment of the power of memory in her personal spiritual life, and implicitly shows how the characters are influenced by memory. She partly seemed involved, partly wanted to stand outside the complex memories of her father and his friends. Even though those memories are not hers, they somehow affect her life. At least she gave up her first love due to the memories of others. Memory is not only seen in relation to the characters but also in history and identity. This relation also shows how memory can be the main theme of the fiction or how the fiction of memory is narrated by Lê Minh Hà.

2.2.2 In the relationship between memory, history, and identity

In the traditional view of the relationship between memory and history, "memory reflects what actually happened and history reflects memory."²⁷⁰ According to Peter Burke, history is traditionally seen as a "remembrancer, the custodian of the memory of public events which are put down in writing for the benefit of the actors, to give them fame and for the benefit of posterity, to learn from their example."²⁷¹ However, he was conscious

²⁶⁹ "Nhưng với Ngân, đó là quá khứ của ông. Một cách vô thức, Ngân đã chối từ nghĩa vụ gồng gánh dĩ vãng, gồng gánh tự hào và đau khổ của thế hệ đã sinh thành ra mình. Một cách vô thức, Ngân đã hiểu ra khả năng nhiễm độc trong hương vị dịu dàng đắng cay của quá khứ." Lê Minh Hà, *Gió tự thời khuất mặt*, 42.

²⁷⁰ Peter Burke, "History as Social Memory", 188.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

of the subjective nature of both memory and history, suggesting that the act of remembering and writing about the past includes “the conscious and unconscious selection, interpretation and distortion.”²⁷² From there, he proposes a way to look at memory as a “historical phenomenon” or “the social history of remembering.” According to Burke, social memory, like individual memory, is selective, variable from time to time and affected by the social “organization of transmission and different media.”²⁷³ Also considering memory in relation to history, Allan Megill proposed a new way of looking at memory. Far from being the raw material of history, “memory is the Other that continually haunts history. Memory is an image of the past constructed by a subjectivity in the present.”²⁷⁴ Allan Megill also mentions an inseparable relationship between memory and identity. He claimed that memory was conceived by a “sense of weak and threatened identity. Thus, identity is not a fixed entity but a construction; and constructing identity will lead to a constructing memory.”²⁷⁵

Megill’s argument about the relationship between history, memory and identity works well in clarifying the heroine’s confusion of real life, of the past and the future of the country. The heroine’s confusion is interpreted as a consequence of the conflict between memory and history. Frustrated by the deceptive history, the protagonist clings to memory as a way to find the old values. In this case, memory plays a role as “a response to an anxiety arising from the failure of modernity, with its focus on the pursuit of the new, to provide an adequate account of what is past yet continues to haunt the present.”²⁷⁶ Confusion comes with the insecurity of identity as the heroine is alienated in a modern society. Accordingly, the protagonist, who is part of a diaspora, attains a new value system, or a new identity when she recognizes the old values in the modern society.

The perception of Burke’s selectivity of both memory and history and Megill’s view of memory as the Other play an important role in analyzing the new manifestation of memory in Lê Minh Hà’s novel. In Chapter 15, the protagonist reveals her identity as part of the diaspora and tells the story of the other diaspora to illustrate the conflict between history and memory in which memory is the Other. The protagonist tells the

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Ibid, 189.

²⁷⁴ Allan Megill, “History, Memory, Identity”, 196.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, 194-5.

²⁷⁶ Ibid, 196.

story of a Vietnamese diaspora in France. She does not reveal the identity of the man belonging to this diaspora. Readers only know he is an old man, who participated in the war in Vietnam and believed in revolutionary ideals. However, at the time when Ngân meets him, he was living in exile in France. He is disappointed by the reality in Vietnam and has lost faith in life. The image of Vietnam in his memory illustrates the otherness of the memory, which is partly understood as the cause of the tragedy of an exile. Since exiles are always the other, their memories are always the Other. The old man dreamt about the old place, where realities exist in memory instead of real life:

[A] banyan tree in front of the village, (of course), women carrying baskets hung from the end of a bamboo pole on their shoulders, [...]; the poor little children had to feed themselves, the muddy roads, the thatched roofs, the sunshine on the distant river, the sad smoke.²⁷⁷

And the tragedy of his life in exile is that he has to “borrow a host land in order to live for the homeland.”²⁷⁸ The detail which characterizes the loneliness of the old man is when he sinks into his nostalgia for his homeland and doubts everything he knows about human destiny and cyclical stories:

He has been sitting like this for so long, alone with his memory, even though so many people rushed out of this place. Every dawn. Every noon. Every sunset. Long sleepless nights. The house was like a mountain that he could not come down from to reach the lively Paris. Night. Mountain. Rain. The sorrow of the land. How many times has he lived with that feeling in his long turbulent life?²⁷⁹

The tragedy of a man in exile is the beginning of the long journey to questioning history through the use of memory. Chapter 16 gives Ngân’s account of how history is

²⁷⁷ “một gốc đa đầu làng, (đã hẵn), những người đàn bà xắn váy quai cồng gồng gồng gánh gánh [...]; bầy trẻ nghèo mới tí tuổi đầu đã phải xốc vác nuôi thân, và những con đường làng lầy lội, những mái tranh đã ải, nắng trên sông xa, sương khói buồn buồn.” Lê Minh Hà, *Gió tự thời khuất mặt*, 59.

²⁷⁸ “mượn quê người để kí thác cả cuộc đời đã sống cho quê hương.” Lê Minh Hà, *Gió tự thời khuất mặt*, 58.

²⁷⁹ “Ông đã ngồi như thế bao lâu rồi, đã cô độc cùng trí nhớ của mình, dẫu có bao người lao xao vào ra nơi đó. Mỗi bình minh. Mỗi ban trưa. Mỗi hoàng hôn. Mỗi đêm dài khó ngủ. Ngôi nhà chon von như một ngọn núi mà ông không thể nào tự lần xuống được nữa để đến với ngoài kia hùng hực vô tư lự Paris. Đêm. Núi. Mưa. Nỗi sầu cổ quốc. Bao nhiêu lần ông đã sống cảm giác ấy trong cuộc đời dằng dặc biến cố của mình?” Lê Minh Hà, *Gió tự thời khuất mặt*, 60.

mediated through the rhythm of the song praising and cheering soldiers. These scenes were staged and shown on the television:

Paco, a river of immense blue water, deep blue water... Through the month, River, do you know a helmsman called A Sanh... Dear A Sanh, you sail the boat on the river day and night ... You help many people to fight America in many years. Your effort is silent. [...]²⁸⁰

The songs of the war in the battlefield work to create optimism for people and to dissimilate from the hard truth. That is the history of an era. But in Ngân's memory, the past is not just her own. Her memory consists of the interlocking of the history of the time and the perception of its pristineness. This leads to countless contrasting pieces of information about the same facts. For example, the happier the mothers sing the more sadly they turn their back on the shabby cottage. The hero named A Sanh mentioned in many songs is no longer heroic but is cowered in real life because he "has forgotten most of his youth, forgotten the national language, only because of poverty and anger, sitting obsequiously and bewilderedly in a photo which was posted on a newspaper."²⁸¹ Smiling soldiers, who waved their arms before the battle, may, in fact, have died.

Chapter 17 continues to explore the heroine's disbelief in the objectivity of history. The cruelty of the recorded history is evident by highlighting some of the iconic images while overlooking the crowd. The narrator explains:

Because people always see in it [the history] the silhouette of the hero or the traitor. The crowd always rushes ahead, building up the soul of the country with their deaths and their own losses, which is only honoured as "our troops", "us", only counted by loss.²⁸²

²⁸⁰ "*Hồi Paco ơ dòng sông mênh mông đôi bờ xanh biêng biếc nước chảy xiết sâu thẳm... Qua tháng ngày hồi sông ơ có biết anh lái đò tên gọi A Sanh... A Sanh ơ ngày đêm anh lái đò trên sông... Đò anh đưa bao người đi đánh Mỹ bao năm ròng chiến công anh thầm lặng..*" This is the lyric of the song "Người lái đò trên sông Pô cô" (A helmsman on Poco river), composed by Cẩm Phong and Mai Giang. Lê Minh Hà used this song to illustrate the heroic feature propagated in Vietnamese media. Lê Minh Hà, *Gió tự thời khuất mặt*, 63.

²⁸¹ "đã quên gần hết tuổi trẻ của mình, quên cả tiếng phổ thông, chỉ vì nghèo đói quá, cơ cực quá, ngồi cóm róm ngơ ngác trong bức ảnh đăng trên báo." Lê Minh Hà, *Gió tự thời khuất mặt*, 63.

²⁸² "Bởi vì người ta luôn chỉ thấy trong đó bóng dáng các cá nhân anh hùng thành hay bại, hoặc kẻ phản bội bại hay thành. Còn đám đông luôn lao đi trước, dựng hồn sông núi dậy bằng cái chết, bằng mất mát của riêng mình, bất quá lắm cũng chỉ được tôn là 'quân ta', 'bên ta', chỉ còn được quy thành những con số tồn thất." Lê Minh Hà, *Gió tự thời khuất mặt*, 66.

The paradox here is that the individuals' sacrifices and losses were ignored and generalized into crowds, the people, as "our troops". In contrast, history rebuilds and deifies certain individuals as navigators and exemplary figures for the masses to follow. Such history is perceived by Ngân as "heartless" history. In this chapter, the protagonist recounts the images of ordinary people instead of stereotypes, but they themselves make up the community. They represent the truth in the fictional series of historical events. Some of those individuals are Ngân's father and his teammates. When he was just 14 years old, he was in charge of shipping ink to Việt Bắc for printing newspapers. They found two porters to carry ink and papers to the mountain. At midnight, the group was ambushed by French soldiers. Panicking, Ngân's father carries a document bag and finds his way to a meeting place. Surprisingly, the two porters in this situation try to deliver all of the goods by carrying them on their shoulders and finding the way to the gathering place:

It is unbelievable that two people who were just hired by the group finally returned to that place. It is unbelievable that the bamboo poles with two huge bamboo baskets are still on their shoulders. Throughout the night, they ran the war with the other's goods which they knew very well, not once thinking about throwing the baskets away to free themselves.²⁸³

That is the proof of enlightenment, of the love for the country from the ordinary people who are silent, faintly hidden behind the collective crowd. This simple love derived from the honesty, pure nature and poorness of two commoners in the countryside. The narrator argues that people are made up of such brave commoners who are just rural, plain and even less educated. Such commoners are the people, the truth, and history:

And if she could carve a sculpture, or set up a statue of the people, or, if Ngân could donate an idea, she would simply chisel the image of the two commoners with calm faces, who steps into the wind backward with the heavy bamboo poles, the bamboo poles instead of the sword or gun. That is enough for people to go through the disorder, go through history in the

²⁸³ "Không thể tin được là hai người nhà quê gánh thuê cho đoàn lúc ngã chiều cũng tìm về được chỗ đó. Không thể tin được là đòn gánh với hai cái bô to vật vắn đè trên vai họ. Suốt ngày suốt đêm họ đã chạy giặc với đồ đoàn của người khác mà họ biết rõ là gì, không một lần tính chuyện quăng quách đâu đó cho nhẹ người." Lê Minh Hà, *Gió tự thời khuấy mặt*, 70.

midst of happiness and suffering. That is enough to make people immortal.

Yes! Immortal!²⁸⁴

That the authenticity of history is questioned by the protagonist shows the grand narrative's collapse where history no longer conquers memory. Also, this reveals the individual's anxiety in reaction to the deceptive history and the failure of such a history in generating a collective consciousness and an identity.²⁸⁵ While history was driven by authorities, memory was shaped by individuals. In the case of Ngân, her memory was shaped through the frequent questioning of history, her awareness of the deception of history and her comparison between history and memory. However, as shown in the narrative, the use of individual memory, which is selective and subjective, to query history shows that memory, like history, is uncertain and obscured. Also, the process of questioning the authenticity of history demonstrates memory as the other in its relation with history.

In conclusion, memory becomes the focus in my analysis of the novel *Gió tự thời khuất mặt* (*Wind from the Unseen Time*) by Lê Minh Hà. There are two manifestations of memory in the novel, which are shown in the structural and fictional levels. As for the former, memory reveals its influence on the structure of the work, where there is a switch between different points of time or an oscillation between past and present. However, the frequent presence of memory, expressed through the heroine's and other characters' retrospective states, makes me think that memory not only plays a structural but a fictional role too. In the second part of this section, I analyse how the protagonist is not the heroine, but memory is the central subject and leads the plot. Memory brings the reader back to a distant space, re-creating the image of subsidized collective housing as a manifestation of community living. Memory is the source of the sadness and confusion of the main characters, especially when the character falls into a panic. Moreover, I analyze how memory is used to question the authenticity of history and to shape collective identity. In

²⁸⁴ “Và nếu có thể tự khắc cho mình một bức phù điêu, hay dựng một bức tượng về nhân dân, mà thôi, nếu Ngân có thể tặng không một ý tưởng, thì thế, chỉ cần khắc, đục hình ảnh hai người dân quê mặt lạnh như ngói cũ lằm lỉ mãi một bước vào gió ngược với đôi quang gánh trĩu nặng, đôi quang gánh, chứ không phải là gurom hay sùng. Thế là đủ để dân mình đi qua tao loạn, đi qua lịch sử chung chiêng giữa hạnh phúc và đau khổ. Thế là đủ để nhân dân thành bất tử. Phải! Bất tử!” Lê Minh Hà, *Gió tự thời khuất mặt*, 70.

²⁸⁵ Allan Megill, “History, Memory, Identity”, 197.

the triangle-relation between memory, history and identity, memory is shown as a powerful but isolated entity. Taking memory into consideration in the novel *Gió từ thời khuất mặt* (Wind from the Unseen Time) aims to portray the representation of memory in literature studies.

3. Nature, city and identity: The analysis of *Phố vẫn gió* from a perspective of urban ecology

3.1 Theoretical framework of urban ecology

Originating from the need to examine literature from an ecological perspective, ecocriticism takes an “earth-centered approach” to literary studies rather than a human-centered approach.²⁸⁶ The field of environmental literary studies emerged in the mid-eighties. The primitive awareness of the study of the environment in literature started with a course description “Teaching Environmental Literature: Materials, Methods, Resources” edited by Frederick O. Waage in 1985, as found in *The American Nature Writing Newsletter* by Alicia Nitecki in 1989, and the creation of the academic position in Literature and the Environment in University of Nevada, Reno in 1990. The early nineties saw the birth and rapid development of research programs on natural writings or environmental literature. Among the highlights are the 1991 MLA session organized by Harold Fromm titled “Ecocriticism: the Greening of Literary Studies”, the 1992 American Literature Association symposium chaired by Glen Love entitled “American Nature Writing: New Contexts, New Approaches”; and especially the formation of Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1992.²⁸⁷ Since 1993, the ecological literary study had developed into a critical school and has become a remarkable field of study thus far.

So, what is ecocriticism? Joseph W. Meeker in 1972 suggested the term “literary ecology”, as used to refer to “the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works.”²⁸⁸ William Rueckert coined the term ecocriticism to refer to the

²⁸⁶ Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, xviii.

²⁸⁷ Ibid. See further also in Muftah, Muneera & AL-Mudafar, Zayed. (2018), “Land and Identity in Randa Abdel-Fattah’s Novel *Where the Streets Had a Name*: An Ecocritical Reading”, Conference paper, 19.

²⁸⁸ Joseph W. Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*, 9.

usage of ecology and ecological concepts to literature studies in 1978.²⁸⁹ Cheryll defined it generally as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” in 1993.²⁹⁰ What is distinguished among scholars is their varied way of naming, such as ecocriticism or literary ecology. However, what the scholars do have in common is that they all emphasize the connection between literature and the physical world. The theorists of ecocriticism finally came to understand the expression of nature, including land, place, wilderness and so on, in literature; the relationship between man and nature is expressed literally; the role of physical setting in the novel; the influence of environmental crisis in literature and culture.²⁹¹

Ecocriticism has been divided into three waves, a useful distinction introduced by Lawrence Buell. The first-wave of ecocriticism pays attention to nature writing and wilderness in texts. The second-wave offers a new way of approaching the environment in literary studies. In particular, the distinction between the human and non-human was broken down in which the environment is now included in nature and urban settings.²⁹² Also, the second wave examines the literary construction of nature by discussing the effects of gender, race, class, and sexuality on the perception of the environment. The third wave of ecocriticism covers all “the artistic representation of environmental conditions and experiences of various cultural groups around the world; environmental justice criticism, urban and suburban experiences”.²⁹³ In general, the third wave of ecocriticism combines elements from the first and the second waves but advocates for global ecocritical practice.²⁹⁴

Urbanity, though evolved in the broad sense of the ecological criticism, has been treated marginally in theory and application. Ecocriticism is associated with the study of

²⁸⁹ William Rueckert, “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”, xx.

²⁹⁰ Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, xviii.

²⁹¹ Ibid, xix.

²⁹² Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1995, 11.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ See further in Derek Gladwin, *Ecocriticism*, Oxford Bibliographies, <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0014.xml#obo-9780190221911-0014-div1-0004>, DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780190221911-0014. Also in Ismaila Orichaa Azeez, “An Exploration of the Hermeneutical Phases of Ecocriticism”, *Global Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol 2, No 7, 1-6. <http://www.eajournals.org/wp-content/uploads/An-Exploration-of-the-Hermeneutical-Phases-of-Ecocriticism.pdf>.

wilderness or documents derived from a sense of ecological environment. While the city “is associated with processes of replacing rather than harboring the natural and the wild”²⁹⁵ as Catrin Gersdorf points out, Yi-Fu Tuan also describes urban spaces as the bulwark for humanity to escape “nature’s undependability and violence”.²⁹⁶ In this sense, urban space serves as a border shelter for humanity against the tyranny of nature.²⁹⁷ But is there always a contrast between city with nature? Does indeed the distinction between “the urban and the wild, between environments created and inhabited by humans, and environments created by natural forces and inhabited by non-human animals, plants, and other living creatures”²⁹⁸ exist as Catrin Gersdorf puts it in her research? Lewis Mumford in his landmark 1938 study *The Culture of Cities* saw the city as not only “arise[n] out of man’s social needs and multiply both modes and their methods of expression”²⁹⁹ but also the product of the earth and of time. He also recognized the city’s position in nature as “like a cave [...] or an ant-heap”³⁰⁰, that is, recognizing a human-built object as a natural object; “a conscious work of art” that means to recognize a concrete object as abstract and imaginary existence.

Mumford is not the only one who values the relationship between the city and the natural environment. Lawrence Buell proposes six subtle metaphors for the relationship between nature/environment and urban space. He goes from the metaphors which have “a historical basis as a longstanding arrangement of the physical landscape” and appears in traditional literature such as city as “urban-nature binary” or city as “holistic macro-organism” to the more creative such as city as fragmentary assemblage, as a palimpsest, as network and as an apocalypse.³⁰¹ Among these metaphors, Buell’s imagination of city as a palimpsest is striking because the city is conceived in terms of layers or stages of growth in place through time.³⁰² This metaphor lies in understanding the city as part of the ecosystem, through time it will vary according to the variation of the external environment. The way the architect studies the entire ecosystem around a site, such as the

²⁹⁵ Catrin Gersdorf, “Urban Ecologies: An Introduction”, 1.

²⁹⁶ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Escapism*, 10.

²⁹⁷ Lisa Benton-Short and John Rennie Short, *Cities and Nature*, 2008.

²⁹⁸ Catrin Gersdorf, “Urban Ecologies: An Introduction”, 1.

²⁹⁹ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, 4.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 5.

³⁰¹ Lawrence Buell, *Nature and City: Antithesis or Symbiosis*, 4.

³⁰² *Ibid*, 8.

water source or the biosphere, to build the city to aim for the ultimate goal, i.e. design a city that is not against nature, is the evidence for this metaphor.

Buell's metaphor has been adapted in more sophisticated ways in viewing the relationship between the city, human and nature in Lê Minh Hà's second fiction. Essentially, such metaphors as body or palimpsest prove that there is indeed a complex in a single mass considered ecology. Ecology is not just the visible co-existence of civil works and environments such as parks or fountains. The relationship between non-human and human elements actually takes place through the association of nature in the physical form of urban life, i.e. the interrelation occurred in the mind. Recording the multidimensional interaction among the ecological elements, including city and human, is how I analyze architectural expressions in literature. From there, I argue that the spontaneous extension of civil spaces reflects the negative transformation of the identity of Hanoians. Set in the North of Vietnam during the subsidy period, Lê Minh Hà describes the urban encroachment of the people in the way they transform public places into private spaces. The way Lê Minh Hà juxtaposes the expansion of civil space with the change of the homeowner's lifestyle or the tragedies they encounter shows that the writer not only tells a social but also a cultural story.

In the analysis of the expression of the ecological environment in *Phố vẫn gió* (Street is still windy), nature is no longer admired but also increasingly urbanized. On the surface level, the expansion of urban space is explained by the consequences of unreasonable migration policies. On a deeper level, the prevailing urban space reflects the profound transformation of community identity in the corresponding space. Surprisingly, in the midst of the struggle between the old and new architectural appearance, between city and nature, the ugly face slowly reveals itself. The analysis of urban life, nature, and identity is displayed at different levels. First, I will describe the different living spaces that exist in Hanoi's subsidized society, including the dormitory space, the old town space, and the villa space. The difference in living space reflects the social privileges that the occupants enjoy depending on their social status. However, there are conflicts between the different personalities living in each separate living space. The battle between different individuals mixed in common spaces reflects the misperception of immigration policy in Hanoi. In particular, the "war" between the occupants is not limited to personal disputes between people but also between people and space. The result

of the encroachment process is the expansion of the dwelling spaces, which leads to the diminishing of the natural environment. In the end, urban space prevails and confirms its own identity.

3.2 Architectural space is a symbol of social status

To some extent, the fiction *Phố vẫn gió* (Street is still windy) can be considered the second part of *Gió từ thời khuất mặt* (Wind from the Unseen Time). In the final chapter of the latter novel, the protagonist Ngân has chosen to leave with her husband, keeping in her mind her memories and love of the dormitory in Hanoi, which shapes her childhood and personality. In *Phố vẫn gió* (Street is still windy), the author lets her heroine return. During her return, the protagonist, as someone who has lived overseas has a reason to sink into her old memories. Being away from home makes her knowledge of Vietnam become the past. However, the memory, in this case, coincides with the realities that she is witnessing. Hanoi is described in two opposing states. Similar to *Gió từ thời khuất mặt* (Wind from the Unseen Time), Hanoi in *Phố vẫn gió* (Street is still windy) is imagined through different periods. Unlike the former, the latter concentrates more on the story of the heroine. In the former novel, the narrator tells many stories about her family members and people in the dorm. In contrast, *Phố vẫn gió* (Street is still windy) focuses on the heroine: her affections and her close friends.

The narrator Ngân opens the novel by introducing different architectural spaces in Hanoi. In the beginning, there was a clear distinction between the two groups inhabiting two different spaces: the street-side houses (*nhà mặt phố*) and the dormitory houses (*nhà tập thể*). In particular, people living in the street-side house are tacitly understood as having higher social status and better economic conditions than the other. Architectural space, in this case, acts as an indicator of social status. The “street-side” architectural spaces are introduced by the narrator when she talks about the whereabouts of two girlfriends. Béo lived in a villa and Thái Hằng lived in a house in the old town.³⁰³

Béo is the first girlfriend to be mentioned by the narrator. Her parents are high-ranking officials of the government, so they live in an old French villa. And what makes this girlfriend so impressive to the protagonist is not just the friend’s looks but also her

³⁰³ The Old Quarter comprises of the unique streets and architecture of old Hanoi. The area is famous for its trading of local handicrafts and traditional medicine. Also, this is considered as the most expensive place in Hanoi.

house: “Béo’s family lived almost entirely on the second floor of a mansion on the street”³⁰⁴ The term “almost” is used to refer to the Béo’s family sharing the villa with another family, which I will analyse in detail later. However, sharing a villa is not an issue. It is important that in the mansion, Béo’s family has its own bathroom and toilet. It is the toilet, in the context of every house having a shared toilet in Hanoi, which identifies them as a middle-class or popular family. The author describes the toilet in detail:

In fact, the toilet seat was broken and the administrative office (probably) had substituted the broken one with the old wooden one. When it was not used, it was hung up on a large hook.³⁰⁵

But imperfection is not a big deal, because the lacquered wooden seat looks beautiful: “No matter what the wood is, it is good and beautiful.”³⁰⁶ And more importantly, in the toilet in Béo’s house, one can bring a novel to read: “[...] in the eyes of a commoner girl, the toilet is an evidence of “part of socialism”³⁰⁷ when people “sitting there to read Paris collapsing in the afternoon when sunlight goes through the dracontomelon tree straight to the frame windows.”³⁰⁸

In addition to a group of privileged people who are housed in old mansions, the residents of street-side houses also house people who were born and raised in Hanoi, or originated in Hanoi (*Hà Nội gốc*) - Thái Hằng’s family, another girlfriend of the narrator, is in this case. The word “street”, for example, in “street-side”, implied one’s status compared to a “dorm-house”, the same way that Hanoi city-men are compared to “the countryman” or the provincial people. Behind the notion of the streets implies the characteristics of rich, luxurious and educated. Lê Minh Hà attaches a metaphor of “Hanoian” with the metaphors “great branches long roots through generations” (*cành to rễ dài nhiều đời*) to refer to the cultural heritage of Hanoi. That is why other people living

³⁰⁴ “Nhà Béo sống gần như trọn vẹn tầng hai một biệt thự trong phố.” Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 14.

³⁰⁵ “Thật ra thì bộ phận bệ xí bị hỏng và phòng hành chính cơ quan (chắc thế) đã thừa riêng cho nhà nó một cái thay thế bằng gỗ, không dùng thì treo lên một cái móc to.” Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 15.

³⁰⁶ “Gỗ gì không biết, nhưng tốt và đẹp.” Ibid.

³⁰⁷ “vì trong mắt một cô bé con nhà bình dân, cái nhà xí là minh chứng của ‘một phần của chủ nghĩa xã hội.’” Ibid.

³⁰⁸ “ngồi trong đó đọc Paris sụp đổ dưới ánh nắng chiều rơi qua vòm sấu vào thẳng khung cửa sổ.” Ibid.

in Hanoi tend to stick with Hanoi, becoming Hanoian and (hopefully) inheriting values in the name of being Hanoian.

The original owner of the street-side house, the grandmother of Thái Hằng, was born and raised in Hanoi, married with the grandfather who was as a secretary. After her husband died, she lived in the street-side house with four generations of her children. The whole family shares a very beautiful street-side house, which has two floors and two blocks. On the first floor of the front row is where Thái Hằng's grandmother and her son (Thái Hằng's uncle) live. In the back row is Thái Hằng's unmarried aunt. The second floor is home to Thái Hằng's family and the family of Thái Hằng's uncle. Like Béo's villa, this house has its bathroom, kitchen and toilet. Again, the reader is reminded of the importance of the private kitchen and toilet:

After all, the whole family has a backyard, a kitchen for all the relatives to gather together even when cooking at the same time, a bathroom and a clean toilet that they do not have to scrape the newspaper around the door to wait for their turn like any house in the old town in the old collective dormitory in Hanoi.³⁰⁹

The possession of a private living space, whether small as a toilet or kitchen or large such as a house, marks a privilege in society in which the dwellers are entitled. The house refers to the social status and ranking of the homeowner compared to the rest of the population, such as senior officials like Béo's family or those who originated in Hanoi like Thái Hằng's family.

To emphasize the ownership of a home as social privilege, the narrator introduces the mansion and the "street-side" house of friends, as "the other" minority, in relation to the dormitory residents, the "us" majority. The difference in the distribution of living space not only exposes inequalities in the coordination of social rights among different groups of people in society but also the differences in behavior that individuals deal with in their living space.

³⁰⁹ "Dù gì thì cả đại gia đình còn có một cái sân sau, một gian bếp mấy nhà họ hàng ruột thịt tha hồ quay móng vào nhau mà múa đũa ngay cả khi nấu ăn cùng một lúc, một nhà tắm và một nhà vệ sinh sạch sẽ không cần phải ý tứ ve vẩy mấy mẩu báo loanh quanh gần cửa chờ tới lượt mình như ở bất kì số nhà nào trên phố cổ hay khu tập thể đời đầu nào ở Hà Nội." Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 70.

The narrator lives in a three-block dormitory with her family. In her dormitory, each family consists of spouses and children assigned to a 14m² apartment. If single, the area of 14m² is divided into 2 to 4 people living together. The living area of the protagonist's family is equal to the size of Béo's bedroom. While the protagonist has to consider buying a tael of peanuts to roast for the whole family, Béo's family has several sacks of peanuts. While the pepper was only distributed on the occasion of each family's holiday, Béo's mother puts pepper into cloth bags and places these in wardrobes to prevent cockroaches. The difference in family circumstances reminds the narrator of odor that only rich families have:

The odor in her [Béo] house is different. It is airy, which has no smell of oil and fish-sauce interweaving in dishes, the smell of wet laundry and the smell of people, which is immediately obvious in any family's space in my dormitory.”³¹⁰

Living in a French-style villa, Béo's family and their co-inhabitants belong to high-ranking elites who enjoy the privileges of society. Specifically, Béo's family and Thiều Như's family, Béo's neighbourhood, possess Tôn Dân “cover”³¹¹:

Tôn Dân' stamp means you have attendants paid by the government, twelve kilos of meat monthly, delicious rice purchased at the Ngô Quyền food store without queuing, white bread and fresh milk all served by attendants, the right to buy other high-quality food with low-price without stamps, and also the right to buy household goods at Giao Tế stores with foreigners on Lý Thái Tổ Street.³¹²

³¹⁰ “Mùi nhà nó khác. Nó thoáng đãng, không ám hơi dầu, hơi nước mắm dầy ra chặn bát, hơi quần áo giặt mãi không khô hay hơi người mà cứ đi vào phòng của mọi gia đình trong khu tập thể tôi sống sẽ ngửi ra ngay lập tức.” Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 188.

³¹¹ “Cover” is a folk term of “stamp” used to buy food in the subsidy period in Vietnam (1975-1986). The food rations are categorized into the types of A, B, C, D, E, which were depended on the rank of officers, professionals and ordinary people. In that, the owner of stamp A (premium stamp) could buy food at the shop at 14 Tôn Dân Street, a specialty for high-end food while the remaining households have Nhà Thờ's (Church) stamps.

³¹² “Bìa Tôn Dân có nghĩa là có cần vụ nhà nước trả lương, là mười hai cân thịt hàng tháng, là gạo ngon mua ở cửa hàng lương thực Ngô Quyền không phải xếp hàng, là bánh mì trắng và sữa tươi sáng sủa cần vụ đi lĩnh, là tiêu chuẩn mua các loại thực phẩm khác giá rẻ chất lượng cao không cần tem phiếu, chưa xong, còn quyền mua hàng gia dụng ở cửa hàng Giao Tế cùng Tây trên phố Lý Thái Tổ nữa.” Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 157-58.

Slightly different from Béo's family, Thái Hằng's family is not a high-ranking family but they are supported by their relatives who are living overseas (*Việt kiều*). So, Thái Hằng's family does not eat the food at the merchant's shop but buys food on the black market, which is more expensive and better quality: "tofu is a thin and odorous piece but not as sour as those at trade shops, water spinach is fresh but not raw".³¹³ In the eyes of Ngân, who lives in the dormitory, the luxurious life of her friends is not only the embodiment of privilege but also the beauty of being a Hanoian. This is a luxurious and superficial lifestyle, completely separate from that of the commoners:

This beauty is the root of the love that people give to this land, which makes many Vietnamese people who go and return to reach, thereby distressing deeply about the people living in Hanoi now.³¹⁴

3.3 Different living spaces reflect different behaviors

The introduction of living spaces is the perfect setting to show the way families live in these particular architectural spaces. The conflicts in personality traits reflect both the individuality and the complexity of the Hanoi identity, which is often assumed to be homogeneous. In this section, I will illustrate the relationship between space and identity by differentiating the lifestyle of residents living in different architectural spaces. Identity is proven here to be contradictory and diverse. The conflict of identity is considered a consequence of the existence in this living space.

Let us remember the important difference that the narrator mentions when comparing the villa, the "street-side" house, and the dormitory: that is the toilet. Béo's toilet is where people can bring books to read. Thái Hằng's toilet, which is not a comfortable reading place due to having to share it with members of her family, is still a private toilet for the whole family. On the contrary, the shared latrine in the dorm explains why the narrator sees Béo's toilet as a typical example of a socialist paradise. The latrine is a place where the users do not have to learn how to clean their stuff. They just wait for a cleaner instead. As a result, when the cleaner loses their job and the latrines have no water, the latrine is filled with Nhân Dân, Thanh Niên Tiền Phong or Thiếu Niên

³¹³ "đậu phụ là miếng đậu mỏng thơm lừng chứ không chua chua như cửa hàng mậu dịch, rau muống là rau mầm chứ không phải rau sọc." Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 166.

³¹⁴ "Về đẹp ấy là cội rễ của tình yêu người ta dành cho đất này khiến cho bao người Việt Nam đi xa về gần đều phải một lần tìm tới để rồi vì thế mà đắm thắm vọng sâu xa về người đang sống ở Hà Nội bây giờ." Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 166.

newspapers! It is not just in the latrine, but also in their everyday lives that the people in the dormitories show a very poor sense of hygiene:

Sweep dust out of their house, sneakily put it by their doors and wait for it to wander into the hallway and hope the dust of their house can be washed into other houses.³¹⁵

Not only an old villa with a private toilet becomes a paradise but also a collective dormitory with “several rooms, full of water, playing yard, flower gardens, cafeterias, low occupancy rooms”³¹⁶ become a dream for the narrator. In fact, Hanoi was extended and renovated after 1975 to accommodate for the evacuee and the people coming from the South. Hanoi is remembered for its withered appearance because it had to accommodate too many people and meet so many different living needs.

Corresponding to each living space is a different way of behaving. An illustration is the way each family argues with each other. For the daughters-in-law who live together in Thái Hằng’s house, the quarrels are revealed in a subtle, sarcastic way. In contrast, to the residents of the dorm, every quarrel is usually the offensive of the whole family fighting another one. Surprisingly, after each heated argument, they still live together, sharing happiness or sadness with each other. For example, they play sports together: “Gymnasiums in the afternoon are full of laughing and beatings.”³¹⁷ They also eat in the cafeteria: “At lunchtime, they all ran home, took a food bowl and joined a queue.”³¹⁸ In contrast, the members of the families living in the villa are always quiet and cold with the other members of the family. The difference in behavior between individuals in each living space seems to imply that “street-side” or “villa-style” residents are more modest, elegant and civilized. On the contrary, residents in the dormitories are casual and popular. However, there are exceptions between the seemingly default behaviors in each living space. The mismatch between the living space and the occupants shows that individual

³¹⁵ “Quét nhà ra bụi, rắc lại bên cánh cửa chờ nó lang thang trong hành lang và hy vọng bụi nhà mình dạt được vào cửa nhà khác.” Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 123.

³¹⁶ “điện nước đầy đủ, sân bóng, vườn hoa, nhà ăn tập thể, phòng trống nhiều cư dân ít” Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 16.

³¹⁷ “Sân khu tập thể chiều chiều vang tiếng nói cười và tiếng đập bóng.” Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 85.

³¹⁸ “đến giờ cơm trưa cơm chiều là tất cả chạy về nhà lấy cặp lồng ra xếp hàng” Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 85.

identity is both a flexible and independent entity that transforms according to the specific case.

The wife of the chief of the (unknown) department is typical for the case of mismatching between living space and corresponding behavior. She shares the villa with Béo's family, which means she possesses certain privileges. However, she occupies the common living space in the villa. First, she occupies the area at the end of the yard, which was a bicycle parking space, to make her own kitchen. More than that, she uses the common corridor between her family and Béo's family as a warehouse. She puts a dresser in the corridor, loads pouches on the top of the dresser, and "in front of the cabinet she puts broken seats and a hundred things [...]." ³¹⁹

The neighbors of Béo's family, who live downstairs, also have fierce competition. In particular, the conflict between Thiều Anh's family, who is Mrs. Thiều Như's daughter with her first husband, and Uncle Khánh's family, Mrs. Thiều Như's second husband, all culminated in the day Thiều Anh's family decided to build the wall in the yard to separate the room of Uncle Khánh and his son Phan from the rest of the villa. It was "the wall that builds the arc at the foot of the staircase that separates the tall and wide corridor." ³²⁰ The wall is identical to the brick wall in the countryside but rises up at the corridor of a French-style villa in Hanoi. The brick wall is the declaration of warfare for the family of Thiều Anh, including the couple and a daughter, and their stepfather's family, including Uncle Khánh and Phan, because of their living and eating with others. Although Ms. Phương, the common daughter of Uncle Khánh and Mrs. Thiều Như, takes down the ugly wall, the family sentiment could not be saved. The brick wall was smashed but another wall, derived from jealousy and greed, was erected: "Now, in that family, there is a real wall and a heated atmosphere that even someone living out of the family is afraid of." ³²¹ The struggle for living space illustrates the scarcity of space where the conflict of material interest reflects the differences in cultural understanding. In Thiều Như's family, the blood relation is almost the only glue that connects the members. Aside from members who have blood relatives, the relationship among others is easy to crack when there is

³¹⁹ "trước cánh cửa tủ bà còn chắt thêm ghè gãy và đủ trăm thứ bà giần" Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 59.

³²⁰ "bức tường xây vòng cung đón ngay chân cầu thang ngăn đôi cái hành lang vừa cao vừa rộng" Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 109.

³²¹ "Bây giờ, giữa gia đình đó là một bức tường có thật và một bầu không khí sục sôi đứng ngoài cũng thấy nhột nhạt." Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 114.

competition for material benefits, regardless of how long they live together under the same roof.

In addition to the battles in the mansion among the people who want to fight for their status, the mismatching between living space and occupants also manifests itself through the character living in the collective dormitory, who dreams about living in a street-side house, who freely walks between two living spaces and watches the behavior of those who live in it. This is the narrator. The narrator “I” is a classmate of Thái Hằng and Béo. She is a Hanoian but a Hanoian living in the dormitory. She has an opportunity to witness the wealthy lifestyle of her girlfriends, and compare it with her dormitory living. Traveling between two distinct living spaces turns her into “the Other” in her own living space. She uses the latrine in the dormitory house but dreams about the toilet at Béo’s house. She loves literature books or foreign music, which “wakes up her desire which could not turn into any reality”³²², while her neighbors play sports or chat with each other in the afternoon. The narrator does not even want to live a tedious life like the girls living in the dormitory:

I do not want to love like friends, do not want to have a guy who sees me having a red-faced nose and a face, trying to carry several aluminum pots piled up together and washing clothes and washing rice with one hand while the other hand tries to carry the bucket of water to step to upstairs.³²³

The narrator is the manifestation of a commoner, who desires to be recognized by their original Hanoi identity in an era when the cultural identity of Hanoian is easily replaced by social status or money.

In short, the differences in spaces are used for indicating status, professions, and other distinctions. The comfortable and beautiful living spaces such as the villa or the “street-side” houses are considered social privileges for senior officials. In contrast, the average class lived in cramped and unhygienic living spaces. Corresponding to each living space is a way of behaving. For example, “street-side” dwellers behave discreetly while dormitory residents are prone to brawling because they live together in a narrow space. However, there are still cases of distortion between living space and occupants

³²² “làm thức dậy những khát khao không có cơ biến thành hiện thực” Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 143.

³²³ “Tôi không muốn yêu như bạn bè, không muốn có một chàng trai nào thấy tôi mặt mũi đỏ tung búng lệch người nách mấy cái chậu nhôm móp chồng lên nhau cùng những áo quần vừa giặt rau vừa rửa gạo vừa vo, tay kia cổ xách theo xô nước lên gác.” Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 140.

manifested by the wars between families. While I have just illustrated the conflicts between individuals in the same living space, in the next section the conflict turns into a public invasion. I see the encroachment and occupation of the living space of the occupants as their murdering natural space, which leads to the victory and expansion of urban space. I argue the behavior of spontaneous urban expansion as the result of changing the way of thinking about the environment, which is partly related to personal identity.

3.4 Place and identity: The expansion of the urban and the emergence of identity in the city

In this section, I will go from analyzing the spontaneous urban extension of groups in each community, then analyzing the manifestation of identity in the process of urban expansion. The study of the relationship between place and identity is suggested by the concept of place-identity by Harold M. Proshansky in his article “Place-identity: Physical world socialization of the self”. In particular, Proshansky made interesting observations on the formation of the self in relation to the various physical settings of the surroundings. His argument is based on the assumption that

the development of the self-identity is not restricted to making distinctions between oneself and significant others but extends with no less importance to objects and things, and the very spaces and places in which they are found.³²⁴

Perceiving place-identity as a sub-structure of the self-identity, Proshansky defines place-identity as the complex cognitions of the person about the physical world in which he or she lives:

The cognitions represent memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings, and conceptions of behavior and experience which relate to the variety and complexity of physical settings that define the day-to-day existence of every human being.³²⁵

Among these environmental-related cognitions, the “environmental past” is seen as the most crucial one. It includes the person’s “cognition of places, spaces and their

³²⁴ Harold M. Proshansky et al., “Place-identity: Physical World Socialization of the Self”, 57.

³²⁵ Ibid, 59.

properties” in the past, which helps the person satisfy his or her biological, psychological, social and cultural needs.³²⁶

Apart from Proshansky, place-identity is also employed by other theorists. Yi-Fu Tuan³²⁷, Edward Relph³²⁸ and Anne Buttimer³²⁹ all share underlying assumptions about place-identity, including the sense of belonging that the person has about the place and the “unselfconscious state” that comes with this sense of belonging. Clare Christine Cooper³³⁰ focuses more on the interaction between the individual and the physical environment in which “the person creates an environment that ‘reveals the nature of the self’ and the environment, in turn, gives ‘information’ back to the person thus reinforcing self-identity and perhaps changing the person in some way.”³³¹

These interpretations of place-identity are the basis for my analysis of identity in relation to the changing appearance of the city. Theories of place-identity confirm the link between identity and surroundings. Generally, a place engenders a sense of attachment or belonging for the individual; a place helps the individual to define who they are; (the built and non-built) environment reveals the nature of the self, strengthening self-identity and even altering the individual. The spontaneous expansion of living space, as will be discussed below, not only reveals the desire for personal space, it is also the self’s articulation of its position. It articulates not only to the neighbors but also to the natural environment. With the expansion of urban space, the environment shows its victory with the non-built environment.

The encroachment in the dormitory

The invasion of living space starts from the dormitories, where the need for private spaces is more urgent than those living in the street-side houses. The embankment, where the children in the dormitory often play, has become temporary houses for some families. Bamboo culms are cut down, making space for the barricades for the new refugee families. Under the pressure of civil construction, the dike is “clamped by patchwork

³²⁶ Ibid, 59.

³²⁷ See further in Yi-Fu Tuan, “Rootedness versus Sense of Place,” 3-8.

³²⁸ See further in Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, London: Pion Limited, 1976.

³²⁹ Anne Buttimer, “Home, Reach, and the Sense of Place,” 166-87.

³³⁰ Clare Christine Cooper, “The House as Symbol of the Self,” 130-46.

³³¹ Cited in Harold M. Proshansky et al, “Place-identity: Physical world socialization of the self,” 60-61.

blocks.”³³² Instead of the smell of wind or bamboo and grass, now the dike smells of fresh feces. The people not only encroach on the ground but also on the above spaces. The old woman selling cakes in the dormitory is one of the pioneers of encroaching on the above space. After retirement, she takes advantage of the widespread balcony at the top of the stairs, shielding it to make a place for selling sticky rice every day. Suddenly, the environment is violated because the light in the dorm is completely covered by the papers covering the windows.

The families in the dormitory also make lofts and mezzanines, occupying the terrace into temporary rooms. The widening forms of houses in the dormitory distort the original architecture of the dormitories, turning it from a modern block into a slum over the years:

The first floor rebuilds the kitchen which was not distributed but due to agility; the second floor takes a chance, breaking the self-building balcony and expanding into two floors; the third floor makes use of the roof, buying iron piles to build a room which is needed for the newly married son.³³³

The image of the Hanoi dormitory is sloppy and degraded by countless acts of spontaneous reconstruction caused by the settlements. Replacement for an ancient Hanoi, with its leaves, wind, and aroma of blackboard tree, Hanoi is now filled with rubbish, water, and sudden encroachment in the form of civil construction. The narrator regrets the loss of the old city:

Every day, I see the change of Hanoi in the change of the dorm where I live, through the tumultuous roofs poorly grown up just as the countryside which was severely cut down and which was just beautiful if seeing through the airplane window and through the sewers after the rain.³³⁴

³³² “bị kẹp chặt bởi những khối nhà chắp vá.” Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 197.

³³³ “Nhà dưới kiên cố hoá phần bếp được phân thêm kèm phần không được chia nhưng do nhanh nhẹn mà có, nhà trên kết hợp, phá cái ban công tự khoan tự lắp xây tiếp thành hai tầng, nhà trên nữa tận dụng cái mái mua cọc sắt dựng khung quây thành bốn bức tường, lợp giấy dầu lên, thế là cũng thêm chỗ chui ra chui vào, khi cần biến ngay thành phòng tân hôn cho thằng con trai cưới vợ.” Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 92.

³³⁴ “Từng ngày, tôi nhìn thấy sự đổi thay của Hà Nội trong sự đổi thay của khu tập thể nơi mình sống, qua những mái nhà lổm chổm mọc lên tội nghiệp y như những cánh đồng quê bị cắt xẻ tôi tả chỉ đẹp khi nhìn từ cửa sổ máy bay và qua cái cổng sau những cơn mưa.” Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 193.

The encroachment in the villa

If the salesperson is the pioneer of encroachment in common space in the dorm, Ms. Nắng, an attendant of Mrs. Thiều Như, is the initiator who starts to encroach in the common space in the French villa. This woman proves how badly she lives in the old mansion. The transformation of the common space, which is the shared yard of the families in the villa, into a private space starts with Ms. Nắng's proposal of her living needs. Previously, she had a small room in the house of Thiều Như's family. Then she asks for permission to build a fourth-grade house near the entrance of the villa. The family of the chief of the department, the neighbor of Béo's house, also applied for the land next to his home. The overwhelming of the urban space to the natural environment is shown through Ms. Nắng's vegetable farm, how she grows vegetables outside the area of her home. Slowly, the urban space prevails through the sudden appearance of the fourth-grade house of the chief department person, which is between Ms. Nắng's house and the dracontomelon tree in the yard. Finally, nature is weakened by the image of this old tree stuck between the iron doors surrounding the newly built houses. Ms. Nắng's vegetable garden is rapidly pulled up, replaced by a new house to increase the used land.

The expansion of a new Hanoi takes place not just in the dormitories but also in the old villas. There is no longer a windy courtyard and the dracontomelon tree where the narrator can stand and listen to Uncle Khánh playing the Trịnh Công Sơn's music. Now, in the courtyard are splashes of water because the residents cook and wash there, "the sounds of cookware sets crashing into each other"³³⁵ and the sound of Ms. Nắng's laughing and chatting. It can be said the representation of this attendant is the typical symbol of the Hanoian in the socialist period: popular, aggressive and pragmatic. But she is also the cultural agent who disseminates the identity of the "collective" people in the "street-side" lives. The rudeness of the French villa architecture demonstrates that the battle between the dormitory people, such as Ms. Nắng or the couple of the chief of department, and "street-side" people, such as Uncle Khánh or the Béo's family is an unequal war. People like Ms Nắng are the victors, the living ones. In contrast, people like Béo's family are squeezed into the corner of the yard, under the shadow of an old tree, living silently and in an inferior way. The change of Hanoi identity begins from the very

³³⁵ "là loảng xoảng tiếng xoong chậu va nhau." Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 116.

strange expansion of living space in the villa, and, as evidenced in the next pages of the novel, this will be a transformative process broadly from urban architecture to the identity of Hanoians. In the end, the narrator begins to feel alienated in her city.

The beauty of the order and luxuriousness which were left in Hanoi around these houses are already broken. At that time I did not know that this weird extension continued in another dimension and by then I became a stranger in my city.³³⁶

To the change of identity

Coupled with the replacement of French-style architecture with patchwork and temporary constructions, a group of occupants considered the owners of elegant Hanoi is gradually replaced by commoners. At the beginning of the fiction, the narrator distinguishes between the architectural styles in Hanoi. Here, she focuses more on what constitutes “Hanoian” traditionally and the commoners living in Hanoi. For example, Hanoian is characterized by the way the old generations dress themselves:

No old women eat betel, they let their teeth become white. There are some old women, who curl their hair with the cloth knot like Thái Hằng’s grandmother, or with a velvet scarf. The old men are more formal. At the time almost all people changed from rubber slippers to recycled plastic sandals, the most luxury is wearing Tiền Phong sandals, which are transparent and soft, but I have never seen any old man who does not wear shoes at Thái Hằng’s house.³³⁷

The delicate nature of the Hanoians is shown by the way they prepare their meals:

Meals in the families in Hanoi, although poor they still keep green beans to make mung bean sprouts, having a very strange taste, ranging from light to strong taste, distinguishing themselves from the meals in many families

³³⁶ “Về đẹp quy củ và sang cả còn sót lại ở Hà Nội quanh những ngôi nhà này đã sứt mẻ mất rồi. Khi ấy tôi đâu biết rồi cái sự coi nới kỳ quái này còn tiếp diễn ở một chiều kích khác và đến lúc đó thì tôi đã thành người lạ ở chính thành phố của mình.” Ibid.

³³⁷ “Không bà nào ăn trầu, để răng trắng. Cụ búi tóc lộn như bà Thái Hằng, cụ vẫn khăn nhưng. Các cụ ông còn trang trọng hơn. Ở cái thời buổi gần như toàn dân mới chuyển từ dép lốp cao su sang dép nhựa tái chế, sang ra mới có được đôi dép Tiền Phong màu trong và nhựa mềm mà tôi chưa từng thấy cụ ông nào không đi giày ở nhà Thái Hằng.” Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 87.

who are state employees and because of being state employees, they become Hanoians.³³⁸

The narrator not only differentiates the “street-side” people and the commoners. She also shows differences between the “original” Hanoians and Hanoians who work at state companies, referring to immigrants from the provinces. However, those who are considered genuine owners, possessing qualities as being charming, noble and sophisticated, are pushed to the margin and become others. The narrator has repeatedly placed people as the symbol of Hanoi in the context of Hanoi’s chaos today as an illustration of the “misplaced”. For example, Ms. Liễu, an intellectual woman who was born in Huế and can speak French fluently, quietly having lunch in the canteen with the workers. Similarly, Khôi, the elegant uncle of Thái Hằng, lived inappropriately in society for such an elegance:

Khôi is the sacred sound of music in an empty city for a long night. Khôi is the fragrant odor of the lotus left in the sticky rice in the morning. Khôi is the smell of fog mixed with the smell of burning leaves at the beginning of autumn when the city is about to light up.³³⁹

Similarly, Bảo, Thái Hằng’s cousin, leaves home to work overseas. That the young man, who educated in a music conservatory, chooses to be a worker makes the narrator feel of grief as if she witnesses the beauty of Hanoi withering. This makes the narrator recall the fates of the Vietnamese abroad, who abandon the idealness of the life to live abroad,

those who were born to do art but decide to fight against their fates by living in exile to change their lives, for themselves and for the whole family and every day worry about the small shop, making a sad and happy livelihood with the price of the bottle of fish sauce, a pack of dry noodles or the clatter of knives as they make contact with the chopping board.³⁴⁰

³³⁸ “Bữa ăn ở những nhà dân Hà Nội nghèo vẫn quyết giữ giá làm đồ ngày ấy có một phong vị riêng rất lạ, từ độ đậm nhạt đến cách bày mâm, tự phân biệt với bữa ăn ở nhiều gia đình chồng vợ đều là người nhà nước và vì là người nhà nước mà thành người Hà Nội.” Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 99.

³³⁹ “Khôi là tiếng đàn thánh thót ngân dài đêm, phố, vắng. Khôi là mùi sen tàn hương còn vương trong miếng xôi buổi sáng. Khôi là mùi sương quyến mùi lá đốt chiều đầu thu thành phố sắp lên đèn.” Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 232.

³⁴⁰ “những người sinh ra để làm nghệ thuật mà lại chống số mệnh bằng một quyết định tha hương để đổi đời, cho mình và cho cả gia đình và từng ngày lo toan cho cái cửa hàng nhỏ làm sinh kế vui buồn với giá chai nước mắm, gói bánh phở khô hay tiếng lóc cóc vô nhịp điệu của dao gập thớt.” Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 200.

In particular, the narrator explains the transformation of Hanoi's architecture and its citizens in the present as a consequence of these "old motions, the time the Hanoians departed and were exchanged with another class of people of resistance, the winner."³⁴¹ The "motions" are the metaphorical expression which refers to the migration from North to South, also known as "takeover" (*tiếp quản*), and from South to North, or also known as "gathering" (*tập kết*). These migrations are the cause of separation, fragmentation, and confusion, which partly explains the differences in the lifestyles of the community groups.

Furthermore, the narrator mentions the sacrifices and suffering of insiders after each migration, as the price is paid for any changes in history. An example is Ms. Liễu's case. She is a student at Đồng Khánh high school, who married a student at the National School in Huế. The husband works in the Central Unification Committee, then goes to the South and becomes a senior official. Ms. Liễu lives in Huế to take care of her mother-in-law. Until she visits her husband in the South, she did not know that her husband was married. The sacrifice of a woman's life is exchanged with her loneliness, "no husband, no children, nothing, just an empty room and a devalued salary which has to be very clever for the woman to live at retirement."³⁴² The case of Uncle Kiên is another example. He migrates to the South with his elder sister, before going back to the North and crossing the border. He goes away with the memory of parents and brothers, whom he lost in Hanoi. Apart from the memory of his childhood and later the image of postmodern Hanoi, there is nothing left after the separation.

The expansion of living space is just the beginning of the story about the fate of the occupants. The degradation of urban structures and the narrowing of the natural space signify the deterioration of life quality and, more importantly, the transformation of Hanoi's appearance. From the elegant and delicate Hanoi expressed through architecture and people, Hanoi after 1975 becomes a multicultural place with a mix of different forms of identity. In particular, the crisis of urban life is the deep streams underneath the distortion of architectural space. By describing the degradation of life quality and the crisis of urban life, I will analyze the formation of Hanoi's new cultural identity.

³⁴¹ "động cựa thuở đó, thuở người Hà Nội ra đi và được thay máu bằng một lớp người khác, người kháng chiến, người chiến thắng." Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 87.

³⁴² "không chồng không con không gì cả, trụ thù lụi một căn phòng và đồng lương mất giá phải co quắp khéo lắm mới sống được lúc về hưu." Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 92.

The degradation of life quality is expressed ironically in the dream of an old man. When he hears the news about the country's renovation, he says: "Having decided to eliminate the subsidy period, it will be like the years of the sixties only a few years from now."³⁴³ The desire to turn back time makes the dream bitter. It also implies a criticism of the present-day subsidy regime, the period when reform programs have brought innumerable consequences for the people. In particular, the subsidy regime directly affects the food rations for poor families. The situation of the heroine is also illustrated. From a student to a government official, her monthly rice standards do not change at all! Also, the money exchange makes people's lives more miserable.³⁴⁴ The story of the turmoil in the Thái Hằng's family on the date of changing currency is the evidence of the people's suffering during the transition between the subsidy and the socialist-oriented market economy:

In the evening, the work team rushed into her [Thái Hằng's] house and rushed to the floor. The four bags of money are carried through the door and put on the car.³⁴⁵

The exhaustion of the economic state and the failure of the wage-price reform program³⁴⁶ are the reasons why the narrator chooses to go overseas. Her job with a starvation salary confuses her with the precarious life in the present. While seeking a way to work overseas as a contract worker, she witnesses an unstable Hanoi. In a cyclone of change, the urban landscape completely changes its shape. For example, in front of the narrator's old high school is a row of kiosks for rent. In front of every kiosk are colorful panels advertising

³⁴³ "Đã quyết tâm xóa bỏ bao cấp kiên quyết đổi mới thể này thì chỉ vài năm nữa là ta lại được như năm sáu mươi các ông ạ." Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 209.

³⁴⁴ In the period of ten years (1975-1985), Vietnam underwent three currency changes in 1975, 1978 and 1985. In the first exchange of money in 1975, the currency of Republic of Vietnam which has value over VND50 had to change to new ones. A second exchange of money in 1978 was seen as one of the ways to eradicate the commercial capitalist economy in South Vietnam. Changing currency is in fact a form of foreclosure and reduced black market economy. The last change of money was in 1985 with the issuance of new denominations of VND10, VND20, VND50, which was part of the government's wage-salary reform program. See further in <https://saigoneer.com/old-saigon/old-saigon-categories/2931-a-look-at-vietnamese-currency-through-history>.

³⁴⁵ "Buổi tối, tôi công tác xộc vào nhà nó, xông thẳng lên tầng. Bốn bao tải tiền toàn mệnh giá to được khuôn qua cửa nhà Thái Hằng ra phố, lên xe." Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 212.

³⁴⁶ Price-wage reform is the economic reform in Vietnam in 1985 to transform the economy into socialist-oriented market economy. However, this reform led to the subsequent economic crisis in reality.

for English centers and restaurants. Also, the space in front of the gate of the narrator's dormitory "has become an alley specializing in selling foods from morning to night and the owners of the shops are all retired employees, due to their inability to work or the unemployment in the companies"³⁴⁷ Although the shops and centers provided substantial revenue to the families who owned them, the "blue and red panels" destroy the charming Hanoi. The blooming of boutiques, restaurants, and shops appeared in Hanoi in the late 20th century. Although Hanoi-in-memory is poor but charming, it is only an imagined-Hanoi. And Hanoi with its roughness and shabbiness is the current Hanoi, a product unclaimed but in fact conceived in the streets in the transition period.

It turns out that the modern Hanoi has quietly formed and abruptly confirmed its own identity while the narrator is engulfed in the endless mindset of the streets in the lost days. In the midst of streets, the old Hanoian's houses have been replaced by new, ugly, but fashionable houses in the narrator's eyes. The story of the identity of the "dormitory people", who seems the "others" or the outsiders of the elegant old Hanoian, turns out to be the real owners of a new Hanoi. The process of urban transformation signifies the transformation of the marginalized into the central one. In the process of transformation, the graceful Hanoi itself has become "the Other." There is a shift in the memories of the narrator living in Vietnam to the narrator living overseas. The latter has confirmed the effect of the new Hanoi at present when thinking about Hanoi, she did not think of "deep brown roof tiles", "green rice in early season on the sidewalk" and "the flowers of blackboard tree".³⁴⁸ On the contrary, in her imagination she always thinks of "herself and her friends who fluttered around the carts selling vegetables and bread, the superciliousness of the women selling rice at the food store".³⁴⁹ After all, a real Hanoi is the diversity of different life flows mixed together, aggressively flowing through the ups and downs of history.

If the stories of Thái Hằng's and Béo's families were told from the beginning of the novel as a way to highlight the key figures of the urban Hanoi in the past, these characters are completely blurred by the end of the novel. Just like the image of the old

³⁴⁷ "đã thành một cái ngõ chuyên bán quà sáng quà tối và chủ nhân của những hàng quà đó toàn là cán bộ công nhân viên về hưu, về mất sức, về ăn một cục vì cơ quan không việc làm." Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 220.

³⁴⁸ "mái ngói thâm nâu", "cốm đầu mùa vừa hè", "hoa sữa". Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 227.

³⁴⁹ "chính tôi và bè bạn nháo nhác bên những xe rau xe bánh mì mậu dịch, về hòm hĩnh của các cô bán gạo ở cửa hàng lương thực." Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 227.

city of Hanoi gradually replaced by a new urban style, the representatives of the people living in the old streets gradually faded compared to the new Hanoian. Thái Hằng's grandmother, the powerful woman who represents the traditional Hanoian in the past, loses her power and lives quietly with her children. No longer sitting majestically in front of the house and watching the grandchildren coming in and out, she is now just "an old shadow in the locked window room, which only has one door facing the courtyard in the back."³⁵⁰ Along with the urban architecture, she cannot escape from the grief law of history and time. The narrator, who was once "the Other" in the dorm where she lives, continues to be "the Other" in a new Hanoi. Her loneliness was confirmed by how she felt her "drift" between this city and the others"³⁵¹; or how she saw "withered breath"³⁵² of the old Hanoi hidden behind the blazing looks of the new Hanoi. In particular, the denial of a new Hanoi is expressed exquisitely through the way the narrator ends the novel with a series of tragedies for the supporting characters. Tragedies are interpreted as the consequence of the asymmetric process between individuals and their surroundings in the process of urban modernization. For example, in Thái Hằng's family, the loss of the power of Thái Hằng's grandmother is a precursor to the downfall of a whole family. For example, although Bảo's family, Thái Hằng's cousin, is rich but not happy because Bảo dies, his father has an extramarital affair with another woman. The husband of Phương, Thái Hằng's aunt, also has a girlfriend and files for divorce. Thái Hằng divorces and finds a way to Russia to be a contract worker. Even Béo's family is no longer as prosperous as before. Béo got married to a poorer husband and accepts to live in an old garage in the mansion. She also moves to study mystical science and is eager to practice. People in the collective dormitory share the same fates. Young people die of addiction, or HIV infection because of their relationship with sex workers. These tragedies are the manifestation of the decay of a new generation, or the precursor to the instability of a new superclass in modern society.

While the narrator's nostalgia for an old Hanoi is understandable, the narrator's conceptualization of identity as a unified body is outdated. Identity is not a unified body

³⁵⁰ "giờ chỉ còn là một cái bóng già trong căn phòng cửa sổ khoá kín chỉ có độc cái cửa ra vào ngoảnh về phía sân trong." Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 224.

³⁵¹ "trôi dạt"; "giữa thành phố mình đang sống và một thành phố khác." Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 240.

³⁵² "hơi thở tàn" Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 241.

which is “assigned” to certain groups such as the original Hanoian, the street-side houses or the collective dormitories, the city or the provincial people. Even though each group of people behaves differently, Hanoi’s chaos in several migration flows shows that identity is dynamic and variable. Urban spatial distortion is a sign of a change in the minds of occupants, regardless of whether they previously owned the qualities of the original Hanoi. The old house of Thái Hằng is one such illustration. From a quiet but airy street house, the front of the house has been renovated to be a pharmacy, a photography shop, and is now a café:

In the old days, the shutters always opened in that direction. From the street is the scent of sunshine in summer, and the buzzing of cicada. From the street, the smells of the burning leaves in late afternoon mixed with fog and the smell of blackboard tree’s flowers spread inside.³⁵³

Now, the harmony between nature and the city has become a rivalry. Nature is completely overwhelmed by the image of the stunted tree in front of the house: “The country-almond is still there but it is strangely stunted when looking through the glass wall.”³⁵⁴

Mini conclusion

The environment has become a recurring theme not only in the two novels but also in other short stories by Lê Minh Hà. The surrounding environments usually become metaphors that represent the human mood. But ecology is not just nature but more-than-human-world, the term used by David Abram,³⁵⁵ which refers to the complex relationship between nature, city space, urban societies, and environmental surroundings. That is why in Lê Minh Hà’s writing, the concept of nature is also linked to the concepts of the operation of space or time, such as *Những triền xưa ai đi* (Who goes on old roads), *Mùa đi* (Season changes), *Những giọt trầm* (The drops of silence); or nature associated with urban space like *Phố vẫn gió* (Street is still windy). In other words, the relationship

³⁵³ “Ngày xưa, những cánh cửa chớp luôn mở về phía ấy. Từ phố, mùi nắng hạ nồng nàn, tiếng ve phả vào sôi sục. Từ phố, mùi lá đốt những chiều thu muộn pha lẫn sương mù và hương sữa rớt lan vào trong.” Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 205.

³⁵⁴ “Cây bàng ngoài kia còn đó, nhưng nhìn qua lớp tường kính bung bít thấy còi cọc lạ.” Lê Minh Hà, *Phố vẫn gió*, 205.

³⁵⁵ See further in David Abram, *The spell of the sensuous: perception and language in a More-than-Human World*, 1997.

between people and nature is now set in the broader context of urban communities and (natural and built) environments.

In *Phố vẫn gió* (Street is still windy), I chose the urban ecology as a grounding theory to explore the manifestation of city, nature, and identity. In particular, Proshansky's theories of place identity, which confirmed the link between identity and the environment, are the basis for my analysis of identity in relation to the representation of urban in the novel. As a Vietnamese diaspora writer living in Germany, Lê Minh Hà is particularly interested in the homeland situation and regularly selects Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, as the context for her compositions. In *Gió tự thời khuất mặt* (Street is still windy), Hanoi is described in the subsidy period (1976-1986), interweaving with the current socialist-oriented market economy. Flashback is utilized, which allows the narrator to move back and forth between different points of time, by that displaying the influence of urbanization on Vietnamese personality and identity.

I first analyzed the architectural spaces in Hanoi after 1975, paying particular attention to the phenomenon of spontaneous urban expansion taking place in residential areas. I argued that the spontaneous expansion of living space not only reveals the individual's desire for personal space toward their neighbors. It is also the self's articulation of its position towards the natural environment. With the expansion of urban space, the built environment has shown itself to be a winner when compared to the non-built environment. The study of urban space expansion is the premise for me to come up with the analyses of the two representations of identity in the work. First, it is the self-identity of the individuals in asserting their power over others. Second, identity is not only viewed exclusively as the human being's consciousness but also as the awareness of the city. In the struggle between the old and the new Hanoi, the new but ugly Hanoi wins. This leads to the replacement of French-style architectural spaces (often regarded as the traditional and charming architecture) with grotesque buildings. The city here is understood as a metaphor as "a conscious work of art" which occupies its position and has its own identity. Exploring the relationship between nature, urban and identity will bring a new perspective on the literary representation of nature in Vietnamese diaspora literature.

CHAPTER 4: NOSTALGIA, MEMORY, AND IDENTITY IN NGÔ NGUYỄN DŨNG'S WORKS

1. Introduction to Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's works

Ngô Nguyễn Dũng is a special case among Vietnamese immigrant authors in Germany. He has been composing poetry and writing short stories for columns in children magazines in Saigon since the 1960s. His first two volumes of short stories, including *Dòng chữ tâm tình* (The Words of Love) and *Mười hai hoa cúc* (The Twelve Chrysanthemums), were the result of his 18 years spent studying, living and working in Germany, paradoxically these were published in the United States and Canada. From the 1980s to the 1990s, the demand for printed books and newspapers for the Vietnamese migration community was very high. In particular, the United States and Canada, the two countries with the largest number of Vietnamese (make up more than half of all overseas Vietnamese in the world),³⁵⁶ became an exciting market for Vietnamese cultural products, including books, newspapers and music tapes. Compared to the publishing market in the United States, both Germany, the host land, and Vietnam, the homeland, are not favorable publishing environments for Ngô Nguyễn Dũng. With most of the compositions being written in Vietnamese (there are only two books that have been translated into German until now), it can be seen that in his early stage of writing, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng aimed at Vietnamese readers overseas. Meanwhile, it is hard to say if a large number of Vietnamese people in Germany (about 150,000 people in 2011, just less than the Vietnamese community in France) is sufficient to identify the country as a potential market. The reception of Vietnamese literature in both Germany and Vietnam has also

³⁵⁶ While the total number of overseas Vietnamese is about 4 million, the United States accounts for half (2,067,527) and Canada has 240,514. See further in Bureau, U.S. Census. "American FactFinder - Results" *Factfinder.census.gov*. Retrieved 10 April 2018.

<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=PR&Code1=01&Geo2=PR&Code2=01&Data=Count&SearchText=canada&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=Ethnic%20origin&TABID=1>

In Europe, France is the country with the largest number of Vietnamese people (about 300,000 as of 2012). Thus, France is home to the second largest number of Vietnamese in the world, after the United States. See further in World Heritage Encyclopedia, *Vietnamese people in France*. Retrieved 15 June 2018

http://self.gutenberg.org/articles/Vietnamese_people_in_France.

been an obstacle. Vietnamese diaspora literature is heavily censored by the state cultural agencies. This makes the publication of overseas works, including Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's, difficult.

Up until 2019, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng has published nine collections of short stories, two novelettes and two novels. His nine short stories include *Dòng chữ tâm tình* (The Words of Love), *Mười hai hoa cúc* (The Twelve Chrysanthemums), *Tiếng núi* (The Voice of the Mountain), *Chuông đêm* (The Night Bell), *Âm bản* (The Negative Version), *Gia đình Cún* (The Puppy's Family), *Hòn còng lửa* (The Island of Fire Crabs), *Ngôn ngữ tuyết* (The Language of Snow) and *Die Insel der Feuerkrabben* (The Island of Fire Crabs). The two novelettes are *Đêm* (Night) and *Khung cửa nắng* (Window Frame of Sunlight). The two novels are *Núi đoạn sông lia* (Broken Mountain, Separated River) written in Vietnamese and the *Tausend Jahre im Augenblick* written in German. Ngô Nguyễn Dũng shared his philosophy for writing in an interview I had with him in which he said that he views his writing as a way to “unleash invisible impulses, as well as personal ideas.” He even uses Buddhist philosophical language to approach writing as a “karma”, a “debt” that he has borrowed from many people in his lifetime.

It is not just writing but publishing that Ngô Nguyễn Dũng is involved in. To him, the publication is the way of re-arranging the works, “the bridge made by words that really exists between the author and the reader”. The difficulties in composing and distributing books in the host land have been exquisitely revealed by Ngô Nguyễn Dũng through the series of metaphors in our email exchanges referring to the fate of diaspora literature. For example, he considers his literary works as “literary children born in the host land, in the time of uncertainty, lack of early rain and afternoon sunshine in the homeland” or “the mirror that reflects the creative thoughts of the writer”. In that circumstance, the publication of his books is compared by Ngô Nguyễn Dũng as “the gesture of opening hands, just in the hope of receiving supportive reactions”. He acknowledged that if there were no books for publication, all his compositions would be “just discrete sketches, the children without birth certificates”. So my study of Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's works can be seen as the acknowledgement of the existence of these children, thereby analyzing and appreciating Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's contribution to Vietnamese literature abroad in general and in Germany in particular.

Nostalgia, memory and identity in Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's work are core issues that I will analyze in this chapter. In the beginning, nostalgia is not just the story of art, nor of diaspora literature, so are memory and identity. But it is difficult to deny the connection between these three concepts in the process of forming the diaspora community, where all members share the homeland both as the origin and the destination. As will be illustrated in the chapter, the identity of the diaspora is a hybrid one. The process of forming identity is the process of restoring their memories to build the diasporic narratives which touch the core values of the diasporic identities: who they are and what the meaning of their existence is. The process of restructuring memory to create an imaginary homeland, in a certain way, also expresses the nature of nostalgia, i.e the desire to return. The term "nostalgia" derives from the Greek compound of *nóstos*, meaning "homecoming", and *álgos*, meaning "ache".³⁵⁷ Writing itself, for the diaspora, is, therefore, the manifestation of nostalgia.

Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's works will be categorized into specific sub-categories, through which nostalgia, memory and identity are proved to be key themes throughout the works. In particular, the dark memories of the journey by the Vietnamese boat people are analyzed as the literary representation of restorative nostalgia in Boym's terms. In addition, the characters' fragmentary memories of the Republic of Vietnam, their extreme loneliness in the place of the residence causing their self-isolation, struggle to adapt or disintegration are representations of nostalgia. The expression of identity in relation to nostalgia and memory is highlighted through the analysis of the characters' ambivalence, hybridity and the search for identity. The search for identity is even expressed through the protagonist's relocating the concept of host land and homeland as well as blurring the boundaries of these places.

The division of sub-categories is the literary proof needed for me to establish the theories of diaspora literature in the case of Vietnamese literature in Germany. The works of Ngô Nguyễn Dũng with the diversity in subject matters share typical themes with those works written by authors escaping by boat. For example, the experiences of escaping by sea and living in the refugee camps are portrayed repeatedly as the author's compassion for the tragedy of the homeland. Moreover, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng focuses on the lives of the Vietnamese refugees in Germany as an excuse to expose the refugee's thoughts and

³⁵⁷ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xiii-xiv.

emotions. The place of settlement is considered by the refugees as the sojourn. For them, the homeland is always their motherland and the ultimate destination. Therefore, the host land is always compared against the homeland, becoming a better and safer settlement but paradoxically an alternative place, which could not replace the homeland forever. Homeland becomes a never-ending dream for the refugees, which appears in the writings of the refugees. In the case of Ngô Nguyễn Dũng, the memories of Vietnam are expressed in diverse and flexible ways. Homeland reappears throughout the group of works to show the discontent with the communist regime. The homeland is restored through the works focusing on rustic contexts, where the South Vietnam is characterized by its Mekong Delta culture. These illustrations are in the novel *Núi đoạn sông lìa* (Broken Mountain Separated River), the short stories *Hòn công lửa* (The Island of Fire Crab), *Xứ tưởng* (Utopia Land), *Nhân chứng* (Witness) and *Đệ tam khoái tửu điểm* (The Pub of the First Three Pleasures).

However, it is worth noting that the classification of subjects is relative because of certain constraints. For example, some works reflecting the refugee life in Germany are closely related to works dealing with the reminiscences of the homeland, even though they belong to two different subject groups. In this case, the boundaries among the sub-categories are overshadowed. Some examples are the short stories *Thương tích thời gian* (The Injury of Time), *Chốn tâm tình ẩn náu* (Where Feeling is hidden) and *Soi vùng kỷ ức* (Reflection on Memory). In the case of diaspora literature, the place of residence is viewed in the illumination of the home. The same is for the refugees who live in a host land but always head to the homeland. In this case, the context in the host land is just an excuse to reveal the refugee's feelings towards the homeland. Therefore, the classification of works depends on the narratives reflected in the works.

2. Nostalgia in Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's works

The term “nostalgia” first appeared in the 1688 doctoral thesis of Johannes Hofer, who took into account the medical impact of nostalgia on human health. Ten years earlier, in 1678, Hofer recorded the case of a young student from Berne who missed home to a life-threatening extent.³⁵⁸ However, with a trip to his hometown of Berne, he recovers. The condition of this student is explained by Hofer:

³⁵⁸ Cited in Andreea Deciu Ritivoi, *Yesterday's self Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity*, 15.

In the brain, specifically where images of the desired and familiar places are located, vital spirits surge back and forth through the nerve fibers that store the impressions of the native land. The repeated motion of these vital spirits gradually tires out to the point where they get out of control and start to move of their own accord, evoking the same images over and over again. Eventually, the only images produced in the brain of the diseased are those of home.³⁵⁹

According to Hofer, nostalgia included remarkable symptoms:

Persistent thinking of home, wanders about sadly, scorns foreign manners, seized by a distaste of strange conversation, inclined by nature to melancholy, bears jokes, slight injuries and pretty inconveniences in the most unhealthy frame of mind, makes a show of delight of the fatherland, meditation only on the fatherland, disturbed sleep, insomnia, decrease of strength, hunger, thirst, senses diminished, weakness, anxiety, palpitations of the heart, frequent sighs, stupidity of the mind, smothering sensations, stupor and fever.³⁶⁰

Willis McCann also listed the typical physiological symptoms of nostalgia, which revealed the effects of nostalgia on both physical and spiritual states of the patients:

Typical psychological symptoms include loss of appetite, nausea, the sensation of a dead, cold weight at the epigastrium, the feeling of being “all choked up inside,” a lump in the throat, a funny, “empty” feeling in the stomach, smothering sensations, a surging fear that something dreadful is about to happen at home, listlessness, loneliness, tears, an irresistible longing for home, inability to think of anything except home, and in severe cases, melancholia, hopelessness, fainting spells, illusions, hallucinations, and delusions.³⁶¹

According to McCann’s broadening list of the symptoms, “nearly every symptom known to man has been interpreted at one time or another as nostalgia.” The pathological symptoms of nostalgia began to be studied extensively in somatic, mechanistic and

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ Cited in Alexander R. Martin, “Nostalgia”, 93.

³⁶¹ Cited in Martin, “Nostalgia”, 94.

psychology from the Enlightenment onwards in Europe and the United States. The efforts to study transformation under the influence of nostalgia, despite some remarkable achievements,³⁶² cannot explain why a mental state can cause serious effects on various organs of the human body. In 1821, D.J. de Larrey, a military doctor who took part in various Napoleonic campaigns, partly explained the relationship between nostalgia, mental disorder, and organs in his collection of surgical studies.³⁶³ De Larrey divides nostalgia into three stages:

First, the mental faculties are affected, and the person shows signs of insanity by becoming delirious and remembering the delightful and enchanting images of home, when in fact the place may have been completely rude and barren. This state of exaltation causes high fever, irregular pulse, as well as sighing, constipation, and wandering pains in different parts of the body. In the second stage, as the organic changes progress to the brain in the form of lesions, the patient falls into a state of torpor. Finally, in the third phase, the person refuses to eat or drink, groans and weeps, and displays suicidal tendencies.³⁶⁴

By the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, nostalgia shifted from being treated as a medical disease to a psychiatric disorder.³⁶⁵ The patients' psychiatric symptoms included anxiety, sadness, loss of appetite and insomnia.³⁶⁶ Until the mid-20th century, nostalgia was considered as a form of melancholia,³⁶⁷ which caused the patients' intense unhappiness,³⁶⁸ "mentally repressive compulsive disorder"³⁶⁹ and depression.³⁷⁰ In general, this perspective viewed nostalgia as a form of homesickness, which changed in the latter part of the 20th century. The contemporary conceptions of

³⁶² George Rosen, "Nostalgia: A 'Forgotten' Psychological Disorder", 43.

³⁶³ Cited in Fuentenebro de Diego and Valiente Ots, "Nostalgia: a Conceptual History", 407.

³⁶⁴ Cited in Andreea Deciu Ritivoi, "*Yesterday's self Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity*", 17.

³⁶⁵ See further in Krystine Batcho, "Personal Nostalgia, World View, Memory, and Emotionality", 411-32.

³⁶⁶ See further in William J. Havlena and Susan L. Holak, "The Good Old Days": Observations on Nostalgia and its Role in Consumer Behavior", 323-29.

³⁶⁷ See further in Willis McCann, "Nostalgia: A Review of the Literature", 165-182.

³⁶⁸ See further in Nandor Fodor, "Varieties of Nostalgia", 25-38.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ See further in Harvey A. Kaplan, "The Psychopathology of Nostalgia", 465-486; Pietro Castelnovo-Tedesco, "Reminiscence and Nostalgia: The Pleasure and Pain of Remembering", 104-118.

nostalgia distinguish nostalgia from homesickness.³⁷¹ Nostalgia has been conceptualized as the “yearning for aspects of one past, a yearning that may include but is not limited to one’s homeland.”³⁷² Moreover, nostalgia is studied in its existential function, where it has been viewed as “an existential exercise in search for identity and meaning, a weapon in internal confrontations with existential dilemmas, and a mechanism for reconnecting with important others.”³⁷³

Svetlana Boym’s research goes beyond examining narrow pathological issues and their theoretical offshoots to engage with the cultural relationship between nostalgia, history and memory. Boym classified nostalgia into two categories, restorative and reflective nostalgia:

Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance.³⁷⁴

Boym’s classification is helpful as it allows me to approach Ngô Nguyễn Dũng’s work from a different angle. Among his works, the group of works about escaping by boat and of living in refugee camps are literary representations of restorative nostalgia. In fact, the journey across the sea, which makes the name of the boat people for the Vietnamese community, are historical facts. But the memories of them, which are recreated or reconstructed through literary works, are the “restored” products.

Boym considered the attempt of those who had reconstructed the lost home and emphasized that “restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition”.³⁷⁵ Ngô Nguyễn Dũng left Vietnam for Germany when the war in Vietnam was escalating and the young Vietnamese people were rushing down the road to demand national liberation (from 1969 to 1970s). His sense of loss and of the nation, paradoxically, began to emerge when he set foot in Germany. In that context, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng considers his works that deal with the refugee’s journey to freedom as the recording of the tragedy of the nation. The restorative nostalgia expressed in Ngô Nguyễn

³⁷¹ See further in Fred Davis, *Yearning for yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*; Constantine Sedikides et.al, “Nostalgia Past, Present and Future,” 304-307.

³⁷² Constantine Sedikides, Wildschut & Baden, “Nostalgia Conceptual Issues and Existential Functions,” 203.

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

³⁷⁵ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xviii.

Dũng's writing is his way to "protect the absolute truth."³⁷⁶ Writing about the cross-border journeys, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng particularly focuses on the mental disorder that refugees faced, particularly silence, anxiety, nightmares or haunting by their memories.³⁷⁷ Although he did not experience the difficulties in the journey of crossing the border himself, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng still vividly describes the horrific experiences of the refugees, which results from the author's conscience as a Vietnamese patriot.

In contrast to restorative nostalgia, which devotes itself to "a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home"³⁷⁸, reflective nostalgia stresses the longing itself as the homecoming is delayed wistfully, ironically and desperately. The truth and tradition of the homeland, which are protected by the act of reconstruction of lost home for the diaspora, are called into question in reflective nostalgic.³⁷⁹ Reflective nostalgia puts an emphasis on the imperfect process of remembrance, so the memory for the diaspora is fragmented, the "ruins", the "patina of time and history".³⁸⁰ As Boym said,

perhaps what is most missed during historical cataclysms and exile is not the past and the homeland exactly, but rather this potential space of cultural experience that one has shared with one's friends and compatriots that is based neither on nation nor religion but on elective affinities.³⁸¹

The image of the Republic of Vietnam reappears in some short stories written by Ngô Nguyễn Dũng can be considered as one of the "elective affinities" that migrant writers originated from the South share. Saigon, the capital of the Republic of Vietnam, is remembered in both peaceful and chaotic periods. In addition to the fragmentary memories of the homeland, the "ambivalence of human longing and belonging"³⁸² of the reflective nostalgic in Boym's terms also reflects the hybridity of the refugees. I will analyze migrants' dilemma status and reveal their in-between spaces through specific sub-themes. Specifically, the literary characters express their reflective nostalgia through the state of panic, the quest for identity and the loss of identity. In addition, the extreme

³⁷⁶ Ibid., xviii.

³⁷⁷ They are some common psychological symptoms in refugee families who have left Southeast Asia. See further in Soma Ganesan and Tsung Yi Lin, "Psychiatric Symptoms in Refugee Families from South East Asia: Therapeutic Challenges", 218-28.

³⁷⁸ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xviii.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 41.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 41.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 53.

³⁸² Ibid., xviii.

loneliness due to their reminiscing about home, which leads to their negative reactions or the loss of memory, is a clear expression of the fragmented nature of memory.

3. The dark memories of the boat people crossing the sea

The experience of migrating by boat and living in refugee camps is one of the most prominent themes in the literature and art of Vietnamese, contributing significantly to the creation of diasporic identity.³⁸³ In Australia, the writer Nam Lê in his stunning work *The Boat* (2009)³⁸⁴ portrayed vividly the voyage of Vietnamese escapees on the overcrowded trawler. The characters were described as being packed into heated holds reeking of urine and sickness in their search for the promised lands. Similarly, the journey of a middle-aged Vietnamese woman fleeing her homeland is reflected in the movie *Mother Fish*, also known as *Missing Water*, which was produced and directed by a Vietnamese-Australian refugee Khoa Đỗ. In this movie, the experience of crossing the ocean is accompanied by the shortage of food and water, the threat of rape and death by South-Sea pirates. The traumatic experiences of Vietnamese boat people in escaping by sea and living in refugee camps have also become the research objects for many scholars.³⁸⁵ At the same time, many archives on Vietnamese boat people were established.³⁸⁶ These materials show the valuable efforts of the survivors in recording the frightening experiences of the Vietnamese boat people. No matter what form the materials take, all materials in cinematic and literary archives deserve to be considered as the cultural heritage of Vietnamese immigrants, contributing to the interpretation of the identity of the overseas Vietnamese.

Similar to the Vietnamese migration communities all over the world, the Vietnamese boat people make up a considerable amount of the Vietnamese immigrants in Germany. With the support of Viên Giác Center³⁸⁷, the works of the boat people are

³⁸³ See further Glassey-Tranguyen, "Articulating Refug-endity in VietnAmerica 1975-2015: From Ethnic Autonomy to Global Visibility", 1-49.

³⁸⁴ See further in Nam Lê, *The Boat*.

³⁸⁵ Linda Hitchcox, *Vietnamese Refugees in Southeast Asian*, 37; James Freeman and Nguyễn Đình Hữu, *Voices from the Camps*, 7.

³⁸⁶ See further in Australian Boat People's Archives, Southeast Asian Boat People's Correspondent in Cornell, UCL Project Ngoc. Also, there are many Vietnamese boat people monuments built in USA, Canada, Australia and Germany.

³⁸⁷ See further in Chapter 1.

printed and published with ease, forming a community of writers and readers. The writer-reader communities not only exchange literary activities but also share political views about their home country. This is an important condition for organizing and maintaining a cultural community in the host land. In this situation, the experiences of crossing the sea and living in refugee camps have become common themes among boat-people writers. In the short stories, *Con sốt giữa đêm* (The Night Fever)³⁸⁸ by Phù Vân, *Giao mùa*³⁸⁹ (The Change of Season) by Huy Giang, *Bế tắc*³⁹⁰ (Deadlock) by Trần Phong Lữ, especially the novels *Nơi cuối dòng sông*³⁹¹ (At the End of the River) and *Câu chuyện từ con tàu Cap Anamur* (The Story of the Boat Cap Anamur), across the sea is explored repeatedly. For example, the male protagonist Nhân in *Nơi cuối dòng sông* seeks to escape by sea after being caught by the Vietnamese police, then finds a way to escape again. The novelette *Câu chuyện từ con tàu Cap Anamur* (The Story of The Boat Cap Anamur) revolves around the indifferent and disoriented life of Hạnh or the unfortunate Sương, who is ravaged by pirates at the refugee camp at Palawan. These female characters are lucky enough to be rescued by the boat Cap Anamur and get to safety. However, the vestige of the cross-border experiences can hardly be considered redundant given the fact that many found safe harbors or settled in host countries. The memories of escaping by sea and living in refugee camps are reflected in Ngô Nguyên Dũng's short stories, such as in the collection of short stories *Mười hai hoa cúc* (The Twelve Chrysanthemum)³⁹², *Dòng chữ tâm tình*³⁹³ (The Words of Love) or *Tiếng núi*³⁹⁴ (The Voice of Mountain), and indicate that the price of freedom could be paid by physical pains and mental traumas.

The psychological trauma of the female characters

The memories in the collection *Mười hai hoa cúc* (The Twelve Chrysanthemum), including the short stories *Nhật ký cuối năm* (Year End Diary), *Ba nhánh thủy tiên* (The Three Branches of Daffodils), *Mai cài tóc rối* (Ochna Integerrima set on Tangled Hair) or *Nở muộn* (Late Blossoming), explore the forms of physical pain and emotional trauma

³⁸⁸ Phù Vân, *Lão hũ chìm*.

³⁸⁹ Huy Giang, *Những nụ hoa bản*.

³⁹⁰ Nhiều tác giả, *Tập san Văn bút châu Âu số 2*.

³⁹¹ Vũ Nam, *Nơi cuối dòng sông*.

³⁹² Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Mười hai hoa cúc*.

³⁹³ Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Dòng chữ tâm tình*.

³⁹⁴ Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Tiếng núi*.

for the refugees. In Ngô Nguyên Dũng's stories, female characters are easily subjected to psychological traumas. Psychological traumas are manifested in depression, panic or silence in the victims. An illustration of the victim, who suffered both mental and physical injuries after the crossing, is the character Thảo in the short story *Nhật ký cuối năm* (Year End Diary). This fourteen-year-old girl is raped by pirates in the Gulf of Thailand, and she becomes pregnant. When the narrator "I", as an interpreter, meets Thao in a hospital, he sees the little girl alone and silent:

I see Thảo sitting at the window, half of her body was covered by a blanket, her hands cuddled a stuffed doll. That image touched me so much. Her eyes looked at me, though her mouth smiled, she was helpless, like a bunch of dry leaves swirling in the sky.³⁹⁵

Similarly, the characters Xuân in *Mai cài tóc rối* (Ochna Integerrima set on Tangled Hair), Mai Hân in *Ba nhánh thủy tiên* (The Three Branches of Daffodils) or Duyên in *Nở muộn* (Blossom late) fall into melancholy after the crossing. In the short story *Mai cài tóc rối* (Ochna Integerrima set on Tangled Hair), the character Xuân takes a journey of 16 days across the sea and is finally picked up. However, the journey brought her into crisis: "Xuân's brain blows like an earthquake. Her spirit is open to the wound of mad fire."³⁹⁶ She falls into a state of melancholy:

She does not destroy or yell, just sits like a statue. No food. No sleep [...] She sometimes smiles for no reason. She sometimes puts her hands subconsciously into her tangled hair.³⁹⁷

The characters Mai Hân in *Ba nhánh thủy tiên* (The Three Branches of Daffodils) or Duyên in *Nở muộn* (Late Blossoming) also become depressed after going through horrible experiences. In the short story *Nở muộn* (Late Blossoming), Duyên encounters more serious mental disturbances than the above-mentioned characters. When returning to the boat after being raped by pirates, Duyên "was just a bunch of cramped clothes,

³⁹⁵ "Tôi thì thấy Thảo đang ngồi bên cửa sổ, tấm chăn len bó lấy nửa người dưới, hai tay ôm khư khư con búp bê nhồi bông. Hình ảnh ấy khiến tôi xúc động quá đỗi. Hai mắt cô nhỏ nhìn tôi, tuy miệng cười nhưng bờ vờ, xao xác như hai nhánh lá khô chao bay trong trời mây xám." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Mười hai hoa cúc*, 130.

³⁹⁶ "Ốc nảo Xuân bùng cơn địa chấn. Tâm linh nàng mở rộng vết thương cho lửa điên tự do dâng trào." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Mười hai hoa cúc*, 228

³⁹⁷ "Nàng không phá phách, la lối, chỉ hay ngồi thừ như pho tượng. Không thiết ăn. Không màng ngủ [...] Lâu lâu nàng lại nhoèn miệng cười vô cớ. Bàn tay thỉnh thoảng đưa lên vuốt vô ý thức những sợi tóc loà xoà không buồn chải gỡ." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Mười hai hoa cúc*, 228

tangled hair, inexpressive face.”³⁹⁸ The memory of the trip reappears in Duyệt’s dreams. She dreams of transforming herself into a whale and being brutally massacred in the ocean. Ngô Nguyên Dũng skillfully uses nature to depict the human psyche, where a bloody slaughtered dolphin is used as a metaphor for the death of innocent people on the sea.

The psychological trauma of the male characters

The character Du in the story *Soi vầng kí ức* (The Reflection on Memory) has settled in Germany but is still haunted by the memory of escaping by sea. Memory in this short story appears blurred through the romance between Du and her German neighbor Lisa, a prostitute. However, the romance between Du and Lisa is just an excuse for the narrator to trace back to his memory about the homeland, which was seen as “the light which has not stopped getting brighter”.³⁹⁹ Du considers Lisa’s sex trade as a bitter paradox when compared to the bodies of the Vietnamese women raped when crossing the borders:

How many men put money in your hand just to have sex with you? While girls in my country on the way across the sea have to beg and plead for mercy; if they [the pirates] do not stop raping them, then please send them back to the boat with their husbands, parents, brothers; do not push them into the sea.⁴⁰⁰

Lisa’s passion and indifference with Du also resonate with Du’s childhood memories, which urges him to want to go home and be resistant:

I am floating on the river of memory. Although I am not old, I remember the past and love my childhood dearly. Remember it as if I am lovesick and suddenly I realize I lost a lifetime: the youth.⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁸ “[...] chỉ còn là một mớ quần áo rúm ró, tóc tai rã rượi, thân sắc tứ tán” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Ám bản*, 31.

³⁹⁹ “[...] ngọn đèn ... vẫn chưa thoi sáng.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Mười hai hoa cúc*, 58.

⁴⁰⁰ “Bao nhiêu gã đàn ông dúm vào tay em tờ giấy trăm thơm phức chỉ để động cõn với em một lần. Còn những người con gái xú tội trên đường vượt biển đã phải van xin, lạy lục như tể sao, cầu khẩn chúng rủ lòng thương, nếu không tha thì sau khi hành xác hãy trả về lại thuyền với chồng con, cha mẹ, anh em, đừng xô xuống biển.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Mười hai hoa cúc*, 46-47.

⁴⁰¹ “Tôi thả nổi theo dòng sông ký ức. Chưa già mà sao tôi hay nhớ về dĩ vãng, yêu tuổi thơ tôi một cách bệnh hoạn. Nhớ như thể tương tư và chợt hay tôi đã đánh mất một quãng đời: tuổi trẻ.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Mười hai hoa cúc*, 49.

The closing of the story marks Du's loss of memory when Lisa abruptly leaves him, which makes him fall into a state of confusion and despair.

Another version of the dark memories is the experience of the days of captivity in the homeland. The experience of living in captivity in re-education camps is as frightening and haunting as surviving the journey across the border or living in a refugee camp. In the short story *Nắng tàn trên cây kim vũ* (Sunlight dying on Kim Vũ tree), the mental trauma of Uncle Đạt, a Vietnamese refugee in Germany, is observed through the eyes of his grandson, Tâm. Uncle Đạt often walks around the park with Tâm and tells him stories about his homeland. Through broken stories between Tâm's parents and Uncle Đạt, Tâm begins to understand how horrible life in the refugee camp was:

Tâm found his uncle Đạt imprisoned in the darkest and coldest stone cellar. Hands clenched. The ugly scurvy mice crawled around. Black cockroaches on the uncovered barrels of feces. The worst of it is all the dreary darkness.⁴⁰²

The complex psychological disorders in the sentimental mind of Uncle Đạt, which are likened to “dimly revealing, like smoke”⁴⁰³, make Tâm hard to grasp. The “darkness”, the re-education camp and the homeland after 1975 are merged into the “light”, i.e. freedom or Germany. This means Uncle Đạt no longer knows how to distinguish between light and darkness, “they have merged into a vast *nichts*.”⁴⁰⁴ It is also the day Uncle Đạt is transferred to a psychiatric hospital, where he is confined in a mass of “immense memory.”

The influence of the memory is revealed in a remarkable detail when Tâm returns to his Uncle's old house and feels the darkness and loneliness:

He climbs up the rickety wooden stairs, sniffing the familiar moldy smell in an empty corridor. The loneliness like a mature person rushed to him, Tâm opens the door of Uncle Đạt's house, sitting alone in a cold kitchen. He looks outside, the clusters of snow flicker, and he remembered the

⁴⁰² “Tâm thấy chú bị giam cầm trong hầm đá tối và lạnh lẽo nhất. Chân tay cùm xích chặt chội. Những con chuột ghẻ lở xấu xí bò quanh quất. Bầy gián bu đen trên thùng phân không đầy nắp. Rõ rệt nhất là bóng tối thê lương.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Mười hai hoa cúc*, 71.

⁴⁰³ “mờ mờ tỏ tỏ, băng láng như sương khói.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Mười hai hoa cúc*, 68.

⁴⁰⁴ “chúng đã nhập thành một khối nichts rộng lớn” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Mười hai hoa cúc*, 73.

sunshine and the wings of the gray pigeons. Now, darkness fills up space.⁴⁰⁵

The absence of Uncle Đạt marks the lack of memories of homeland for Tâm. Uncle Đạt acts as a storyteller and conveys the memories of his hometown to Tâm, a representative of the second generation who has no memory or first-hand experience about Vietnam. The story ends with Tâm writing to Uncle Đạt, expressing his thoughts on his Uncle's past and revealing his understanding, albeit naive, about Uncle Đạt's void. This reveals how memory is mediated through narrated tales, which are credited with trusted family members and often repeated through intimacy among family members.

In short, the dark memories of the refugees in crossing the sea reoccur in Vietnamese diaspora literature. Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's works are no exception. He describes the psychological implications that refugees face on their journey, which makes his compositions more profound and humane. However, when writing about boat-crossing experiences, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng does not point out the reasons why people crossed borders nor does he explore the nature of the communist regime, which led to many Vietnamese making the journey after 1975. One of his rare explanations of the cause for crossing the sea is shown through the words of the heroine Thúy in the short story *Dòng chữ thiên thanh* (The blue words):

With Thúy and some friends who are in the same mood, there is only one obvious and unique reason: they go because they can not live under communism, that's it!⁴⁰⁶

The rarity of the character's explanation for their departure caused Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's writings on the transnational journey to become less documentary but full of literary values.

4. Nostalgia and its consequences

⁴⁰⁵ “Nó trôi lên những bậc thang gỗ ọp ẹp, ngửi lại mùi ẩm mốc quen thuộc trong dãy hành lang trống. Một nỗi hiu quạnh rất người lớn ủa tới, Tâm mở cửa nhà chú Đạt, vào ngồi một mình trong căn bếp lạnh lẽo. Nó ngó ra ngoài trời, từng cụm tuyết mỏng bay chấp chới và nhớ vô cùng những ngày nắng, cả đôi cánh đập xập xoè của lũ bồ câu lông xám. Giờ đây, bóng tối nhòa lấp.” Ngô Nguyễn Dũng, *Mười hai hoa cúc*, 69.

⁴⁰⁶ “Với Thúy và mấy người bạn cùng tâm trạng kia, chỉ có một nguyên nhân rõ ràng và độc nhất: đi tị tị vì không sống được dưới chế độ cộng sản, thế thôi!” Ngô Nguyễn Dũng, *Tiếng núi*, 121.

Nostalgia, memory and identity are recurring themes in Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's writings, in which the arguments for nostalgia and identity are established through the manifold manifestations of memory. For example, the way that Ngô Nguyễn Dũng depicts Saigon before 1975 shows the fragments and selectivity of the diaspora memory, which, ultimately, is nothing more than a subtle manifestation of nostalgia. The obsession with memory, which even leads to the violent behavior of refugees, will be shown to be the extreme manifestation of nostalgia. In addition, memory serves as a major factor in the ambivalence and hybridity of the refugees, which leads to their search for identity. The intertwining between nostalgia, memory and identity will be analyzed in detail in this section.

The creation of the homeland in memory

The fragmentary memories of the Republic of Vietnam are the most identifiable pieces of evidence of the diaspora's obsession with memory. In the works focusing on the recollections of the South Vietnamese, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng builds a type of male protagonists who are alien to the context of the South before 1975. These types of characters were born in middle-class families, living in good economic conditions such as the characters Nhượng in *Chốn tâm tình ẩn náu*⁴⁰⁷ (Where the feeling is hidden) or Duy in *Say trăng*⁴⁰⁸ (Drunk for Moon). These characters make it easy for readers to relate to the author himself, who was a young Vietnamese studying in Germany 1970s amidst the war in Vietnam. The Republic of Vietnam is remembered in different perspectives. The peaceful Republic of Vietnam is recalled in the form of the narrator's childhood memory. In the context of the dying Republic of Vietnam (from 1970 to 1975), Saigon paradoxically appears through the hysterical nights of disoriented youths who enjoy Western-style Christmas parties and picnics. These indifferent characters living on the sidelines of the era give an insight to the hysterical, vibrant and liberal atmosphere of Saigon before 1975, where passion was mixed with boredom, where love was mixed with sexual passion, where not only the departure to other countries but also remaining in Vietnam was a choice.

⁴⁰⁷ Ngô Nguyễn Dũng, *Dòng chữ tâm tình*.

⁴⁰⁸ Ngô Nguyễn Dũng, *Tiếng núi*.

Saigon in memory is a peaceful land, where the main characters enjoy a full and happy life. The short story *Say trắng* (Drunk for Moon) depicts the middle-class family of Duy in Saigon. In contrast to Hanoi in the post-1975 period, where nature is suppressed by human material needs⁴⁰⁹ the beauty of Saigon before 1975 is created by the harmony of nature and human beings, which is implicitly understood as the result of a peaceful and prosperous life. The narrator remembers the family's trip to Vũng Tàu on the Sunday holidays:

Leaving home when the sun isn't yet high. Passing by Long Thành to have noodles. Crossing the Front Beach of the town of Vũng Tàu, then running around the rocky mountains and stopping in the Back Beach. Playing with the waves until the seawater gets high, then going into the car, finding a place to have lunch outdoors. Usually under the shade of tamarind tree, next to the stone bridge. The mother spreads out the mat. There is bread, canned fish, sausages, pickled onions and freshwater. Just eating and hanging around the stone bridge. Listening to the sound of waves hitting shores.⁴¹⁰

When viewed through the memory of the diaspora, the scenery of the homeland evokes a special sympathy for the narrator, which is caused by the existence of these sceneries in the homeland:

The same sun, the same water currents which connect the Atlantic Ocean with the Pacific Ocean, the same wandering clouds from east to west from north to south, but when they stop in the homeland, there is something different. The otherness could not be explained by anyone.⁴¹¹

Saigon not only contains memories of a peaceful childhood. In the story *Chốn tâm tình ẩn náu* (Where the Feeling is Hidden), Saigon is portrayed as bustling and loud, full

⁴⁰⁹ See further in Chapter 3.

⁴¹⁰ “Rời nhà lúc nắng chưa sẫm màu. Ghé ngang Long Thành ăn hủ tiếu. Băng qua thị xã Vũng Tàu, bãi trước rồi chạy vòng ngọn núi đá và dừng lại ở bãi sau. Đùa với sóng cho tới khi nước dâng mới lên xe, chạy tìm một chỗ để ăn trưa ngoài trời. Thường là dưới bóng mát tàn me keo, cạnh cây cầu đá. Mẹ trải chiếu, mở giỏ bày thức ăn. Có bánh mì, cá hộp, giò lụa, hành tây cắt khoanh ngâm giấm và nước ngọt. Vừa ăn vừa thơ thẩn dạo chơi bên cầu đá. Nghe sóng khua bờ lách tách.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Tiếng núi*, 2007-8.

⁴¹¹ “Cũng vàng thái dương ấy, cũng dòng thủy lưu nổi Đại Tây dương liền với Thái Bình dương, vẫn những phiến mây giang hồ từ đông sang tây từ bắc xuống nam, mà sao khi chúng dừng lại nơi đất trời quê nhà, có một cái gì khác. Cái khác đó không ai giải thích nổi.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Tiếng núi*, 2007-8.

of middle-class youths, a generation wasting their time in seeking joy. Nhượng, a Vietnamese refugee in Germany, accidentally received a letter from a compatriot named Tâm. Because Tâm has the same name as Nhượng's girlfriend, Nhượng is touched by this woman's letter and all memory of his youth. Memory leads Nhượng back to his youth in Saigon, where he and his friends lived the life of the young bourgeois amidst the hot air of the city in the years before 1975. Nhượng represents the young Vietnamese generation who are influenced by American culture, listening to foreign music, going to parties, adding a half-English half-Vietnamese name to prove themselves. Between "the loud protests in the mornings"⁴¹² and the roar of gunfire signaling the city's frenzied transformation, Nhượng spent his time in books and the love affair with Tâm as a "protective way to escape from a bloody life."⁴¹³ In addition, another way of escaping for Nhượng is to study abroad:

Go, Nhượng goes, he must go! Find a December snowfall. There are warm candles in the window frames on Christmas Eve. And the rattle of the deer's carriage rumbled through the snow-covered field glistening under the moonlight. Go, Nhượng goes, he must go!⁴¹⁴

Paradoxically, when arriving in a land of snow he had dreamed of, Nhượng's mind embraces strange desires. His mind is like a film of memories, automatically rewinding the image of the past:

The bustle of Đồng Khánh avenue. Rainy nights before the curfew time. The shady garden in the outskirts of the city to the east. The narrow alleyway of the neighborhood.⁴¹⁵

More importantly, when no longer drowned in the cramped Saigon, Nhượng is aware of the loss:

⁴¹² "những sáng biểu tình dồn dập" Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Dòng chữ tâm tình*, 177.

⁴¹³ "thủ thế để khỏi lao mình vào cuộc sống đâm máu" Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Dòng chữ tâm tình*, 178.

⁴¹⁴ "Đi, Nhượng đi, phải đi! Tìm một nơi có tuyết tháng mười hai. Có những ngọn nến soi ấm áp trong những khung cửa kính đêm Giáng Sinh. Và réo rất tiếng nhạc chuông của cỗ xe nai băng qua cánh đồng tuyết phủ sáng lấp lánh dưới ánh trăng ngân nhũ. Đi, Nhượng đi, phải đi!" Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Dòng chữ tâm tình*, 179.

⁴¹⁵ "Về nhận nhíp xô bồ của đại lộ Đồng Khánh. Những đêm mưa bụi trước giờ giới nghiêm. Vườn cây êm rữ bóng mát ở miệt ngoài thành phố về phía Đông. Ngõ ngách chật hẹp của các khu xóm lao động." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Dòng chữ tâm tình*, 181.

No longer *réveillon* at any friend's home at Christmas. No longer afternoons watching the sunset offshore in Cáp.⁴¹⁶ There are no more summer holidays in Đà Lạt and the sounds of swallows chirping on the roof every morning.⁴¹⁷

He does not yearn for an old Saigon. What he craves for is his memories about it. He nourishes the memory of Saigon consciously when living as a refugee, longing to immerse himself in the love of his girlfriend Tâm, dreaming of experiencing the feeling of a hangover before his departure just because in such a moment, Nhượng learns how to cherish the lost Saigon. As soon as he sets foot in Germany, "Nhượng's heart is empty, the citadel of memory is broken into fragments."⁴¹⁸ Considering the emergence of diaspora's consciousness of memory, Boym states:

One becomes aware of the collective frameworks of memories when one distances oneself from one's community or when that community itself enters the moment of twilight.⁴¹⁹

As soon as he arrives in the host land, Nhượng begins his journey of searching for his memories.

Similar to the character Nhượng in *Chốn tâm tình ẩn náu*, the narrator "I" in the short story *Canh bạc* (The Gamble) is living on the margins of society. But while Nhượng seeks to escape the fierce war by studying abroad, the narrator in *Canh bạc* (The Gamble) buries his youth in poker and erotic adventures with two girlfriends, Nữ and Nguyễn. Nữ, a prostitute, is the one who satisfies the sexual desires of the protagonist, while Nguyễn evokes the feeling of love. His meaningless life is shown when he wins a bet, the only thing that bothers him is how to divide the money between the two girlfriends. The images of the protagonists in *Canh bạc* (The Gamble) or *Chốn tâm tình ẩn náu* (Where the Feeling is Hidden), who seek enjoyment in unstable societies, have many similarities with

⁴¹⁶ Cáp is a Vietnamese way of calling Vũng Tàu. Cáp means Cape Saint Jacques, the name was named by the French.

⁴¹⁷ "Không còn những giáng sinh ăn réveillon ở nhà bất kỳ một người bạn nào đó. Không còn những buổi chiều ngoài Cáp ngắm mặt trời lặn ngoài khơi xa. Mất cả những ngày hè Đà Lạt và tiếng chim én kêu hời hả trên mái nhà mỗi buổi sáng." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Dòng chữ tâm tình*, 181.

⁴¹⁸ "cõi lòng Nhượng trống không, vụn vỡ tang thương những thành quách kỉ niệm." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Dòng chữ tâm tình*, 181.

⁴¹⁹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 54.

the rebellious characters in the work influenced by the existentialism movement.⁴²⁰ Unlike the rebellious characters, the narrator in *Canh bạc* (The Gamble) is concerned about the human condition in the country. Giving half of the money to Nữ, he realizes this act is “like throwing his hometown into the hands of the incompetents.”⁴²¹ NỮ represents the generation who chose to stay and face difficulties. She also represents the poor class living at the bottom of society with many illusions about the new regime. The protagonist thinks of NỮ as someone who “is still clinging to a little illusion of splendor, a bit in love, along with the other compatriots in North and South Vietnam.”⁴²² The narrator not only feels pity for NỮ but also for himself because he escapes while the country is at risk:

I am just a prodigal son of the country, a shameless duddy living through the casinos, disguised whips. In the dying moment of the South, before I hastily climbed one of the last trains to separate Bạch Đằng wharf, after Dương Văn Minh announced his surrender, I gave NỮ the remaining money. Like throwing my hometown into the hands of the incompetents. I was teary-eyed at night, standing on the deck looking toward the capital, seeing the sky bloody red there.⁴²³

The story ends with the images of “I” being abroad and grieving for the fate of the country.

Writing about the memory of the Republic of Vietnam, Ngô Nguyên Dũng inevitably reveals the prejudices of a South Vietnamese writer towards the Northern

⁴²⁰ Existentialism, which was began in Europe, was introduced in Saigon in the 1960s. The meaningless lives of these characters are understood to be “rebellious reactions, enjoying the life of the frivolous youth who can not find a way in war”. Quoted in Huỳnh Như Phương, *Chủ nghĩa hiện sinh miền Nam 1954-1975*, <http://www.chungta.com/nd/tu-lieu-tra-cuu/chu-nghia-hien-sinh-mien-nam-1954-1975-2.html>, accessed on 8 December 2018. For further studies on existentialism in South Vietnam, please see Wynn Gadkar-Wilcox, “Existentialism and Intellectual Culture in South Vietnam,” 377-95.

⁴²¹ “như vắt cả quê hương vào tay những kẻ bất tài” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Ấm bản*, 58.

⁴²² “vẫn cố bám víu vào một chút ảo tưởng huy hoàng, vào chút tình đồng bào Nam Bắc” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Ấm bản*, 58.

⁴²³ “Tôi chỉ là một đứa con hoang đàng của tổ quốc, một thứ công tử lầy lắt qua các sông bạc lậu, các ổ điểm trá hình. Trong giờ phút lâm chung của miền Nam, trước khi tôi chen chân hồi hải leo lên một trong những chuyến tàu cuối cùng tách bến Bạch Đằng, sau khi ông Dương Văn Minh tuyên bố đầu hàng, tôi đã trao lại NỮ cả số tiền thắng bạc còn lại. Như vắt cả quê hương vào tay những kẻ bất tài. Tôi ứa nước mắt khi đêm xuống, đứng trên boong tàu nhìn về hướng thủ đô, thấy vùng trời nơi đó vấy máu đỏ ngầu.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Ấm bản*, 58.

regime. For example, in the short story *Canh bạc* (The Gamble), the narrator views the victory of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam over the Republic of Vietnam as “a python” gulping its poor prey. The memory of Vietnam only revolved around the time before 1975, i.e. the time of the Southern Republic of Vietnam. This was both the result of the author’s migration to Germany, which took place in late 1969, and of the author’s political position in recognizing the Vietnamese institution he supports. Ngô Nguyễn Dũng’s anti-communist views are shared by the authors who were boat people and had much love for Saigon as it was before 1975. For them, the historical event of April 30, 1975 is a milestone that marks the loss of the country. The breakdown and fragments of the boat people’s memories, which focus entirely on Saigon in the years before 1975, can be considered as the most obvious manifestation of reflective nostalgia according to Boym’s account. The diaspora’s fragmented but selective memories of the settled life in Saigon are both their property and a burden reminding them of a major historical period that led to their migration.

While repetitive memories of the Republic of Vietnam are the common manifestation of homesickness for nostalgic purposes but also for various immigration communities, the state of extreme loneliness as the result of remembering home is a clear expression of the nostalgic. The remembrance of past events is the normal ability of someone, which contributes to the person’s identity. Theodule Ribot underscores the role of memory in shaping the identity of an individual: “That is to say, our present state is associated with other states that, rejected and localized in the past, constitute our person as it appears at each instant [...] the identity of the self rests entirely on memory.”⁴²⁴ But insofar as the people “allow their memories of home and of a happier time to substitute for real experience”⁴²⁵ and cannot make sharp distinctions between the past and the present, so much so that they cannot be seen as normal individuals. The distinction of the nostalgics from the normal individuals is their inability to “strike the right balance between forgetting and remembering.”⁴²⁶ When the individuals collapse their consciousness between yesterday and today, there and here, they “fall behind the standards of a normal individual in Ribot’s sense.”⁴²⁷

⁴²⁴ Theodule Ribot, *Diseases of Memory*, 83.

⁴²⁵ Andreea Diciu Ritivoi, *Yesterday’s self Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity*, 20.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

Understanding nostalgia as the state of obsession with memory, which is demonstrated by the inability of someone to differentiate the past and present boundaries, serves as a key concept for me to analyze nostalgic expressions in Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's works. Particularly, I will analyze the characters' expressions such as extreme loneliness stemming from mournful memories of their homeland, which leads to their self-isolation, struggle to adapt and disintegration in their place of residence. I argue that the characters are affected by nostalgia "symptoms". Also, refugee life is proven to be responsible for the complex psychological expressions such as the main characters' isolation or alienation to their surroundings. I argue that the protagonists' loneliness or refusal to integrate reflects their failure to change their identity. In other words, they insist on their own-self, i.e Vietnamese versus their nationality, i.e German, as a way of preserving their personal core according to Diciu Ritivoi's argument.⁴²⁸ The "spiritual" preservation of Vietnamese identity is performed by the main characters through their making of homeland in memory. In their imagination, they envisioned Vietnam with beautiful scenes and full of love, which at first is paradoxical if considering the motives of Vietnamese political refugees. However, identity is not a fixed and immutable entity. The construction of a homeland in imagination will be proven counter-productive in certain circumstances, which leads to the refugee's dilemma. The refugee's homeland will be proven to be a no-man's-land, or an in-between-land, and the identity of the Vietnamese-German refugees is not Vietnamese or German but a scattered identity, an identity with a hyphen.⁴²⁹

Obsession with memory

Obsession with memory is the regular psychological state of characters in Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's short stories. The expressions of being haunted by memories are varied. This could be the protagonists' obsession with memories about their hometown and childhood in the short stories *Những dòng sông đi lạc* (The Lost Rivers) and *Di chúc* (The Testament). The obsession with memory is also manifested through the protagonist's

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 127.

⁴²⁹ Nguyễn Hưng Quốc argues the identity of the exile writers as those who live and write between different cultures, who live in the hyphen (-). See further in Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, *Sống và viết giữa các nền văn hoá*. Accessed on 8 December 2018.
<https://vandoanviet.blogspot.com/2014/11/song-va-viet-giua-cac-nen-van-hoa.html>.

ambiguity between the real and the dream in the short story *Mùa xuân thấp sao trời* (Lighting Star on the Spring Sky); in which the protagonists trace back to familiar places in the host land to elicit memory in *Lời quá khứ độ lượng* (The Tolerance of the Past) and *Mười lăm tháng giêng* (On the 15th of January). The short stories *Bên hồ nước* (By the Lake) and *Bên kia rừng* (On the Other Side of the Forest) demonstrate the protagonists' real return to their home countries as the result of their anguish about the political situation. The obsession with memory also manifests at the heavier level through the extreme loneliness of the main characters, which causes acts of violence, such as Mrs. Hạnh's committing suicide in *Căn phòng giữ mộng* (The Room that keeps Dreams), Mr. Jacob's murdering his children in *Đất câm* (The Dumb Land) or Chuột Xám's harassment in *Chuông đêm* (The Night Bell). In these manifestations, the psychological progression of the nostalgics approaches the expression of the melancholics. However, I will demonstrate that the mechanisms which trigger nostalgia and melancholy are different. In the case of the Vietnamese diaspora, what causes their deeply depressed mood is their longing for home, which is triggered by nostalgia instead of melancholy.

The memories of home are manifested throughout the two short stories *Những dòng sông đi lạc* (The Lost Rivers) and *Di chúc* (The Testament). The former tells the story about the encounter between three refugee brothers Hiếu, Hoán, and Hữu after their father's death. They all have different lives in Germany and make a lot of mistakes. After their father dies and the mother is taken seriously ill, they come back to their house, talking with each other and contemplating the mistakes they have made in life. Hoán, the main character, has the most love for his hometown in Vietnam. The family house in a small village has full of Hoán's memory of the childhood:

The dry and calm sun in the countryside. The coucal calling water flooding across the river in the house. The gray smoke scattered in the sunset on the rooftops of nipa palm. And much more ... The coldness of the high plateau at night in the summer of childhood in the peaceful country. The swarm of swifts in the early morning drew imaginary curves in the air. The sigh of wind over a thousand branches of a pine tree. Then space changes its color, and appears in Hoán's mind like the casuarinas that murmur along with the sounds of the wave. The fine white sand like the hill of wheat

flour. The blue sea like the mint water in fairy tales. Oh God, Hoán once again whispered, when will these images fade in his memory?⁴³⁰

The hometown is also a place that hides the secret love affair between Hoán and the maid Gấm: “A hard sleeping night, the masculinity in Hoán rises up. He defied everything, sneaked into her room, and laid down in her bed.”⁴³¹ Here the river, the image symbolizing the home country, is used as a metaphor to refer to the lives of the three brothers. The brothers’ mistakes that they experience throughout their lives are likened to the “wrong directions” taken by the lost rivers. And the memories of home are understood as the anchor strings that help the brothers get back on the right course again.

In the short story *Di chúc* (The Testament), the main character Tùng continuously dreams of returning home to meet his mother and sister. His disoriented dreams are the foreshadowing of the father’s death in his hometown. The death of his father surges his melancholy about the condition of the diaspora: “A stream of tears roll down Tùng’s face. Not only does Tung cry for his pain, but he also pours out his tears for the thoughts of the first generation of exiles.”⁴³² Tùng remembers his father’s letter, which reminds him of his childhood with his family:

I find myself dreaming about the summer in 1967, going with my father to Mỏ Cày to my grandmother’s funeral. I heard the duck beating its wings on the bank of the bright river. From the back of the house to the place where I lie, the boiling water can be heard. Flickering light licked on the wall. Far away, the cannon echoed.⁴³³

⁴³⁰ “Cái nắng khô khốc lặng lẽ miền quê ngoại. Tiếng bìm bịp gọi nước dâng mỗi chiều bên kia sông nhà nội. Những đợt khói xám tan mạn tan trong nắng hoàng hôn trên mái nhà lá chằm. Và nhiều nữa ... Còn những mùa hè ấu thơ lúc đất nước thanh bình là cái lạnh sắt se của đêm cao nguyên. Là bầy én sớm mai vẽ trong không trung những đường cong tưởng tượng. Là tiếng gió thổi dài trên ngàn cánh tay thông. Rồi không gian đổi màu, hiện ra trong tâm trí Hoán cánh rừng phi lao rì rào theo tiếng sóng. Cát trắng mịn như bột mì. Biển trong xanh như bát nước bạc hà trong chuyện thần tiên. Trời ơi, Hoán kêu thầm một lần nữa, biết đến bao giờ những hình ảnh ấy mới phai nhạt trong ký ức chàng?” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Tiếng núi*, 182.

⁴³¹ “Một đêm trần trọc khó ngủ, cái nam tính trong người Hoán trỗi dậy rạo rực. Chàng bắt chập tất cả, lén vào phòng chị Gấm, vén mùng nằm xuống bên chị.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Tiếng núi*, 183.

⁴³² “Khoé mắt Tùng bàng hoàng lẫn xuống một dòng lệ. Không những Tùng khóc cho niềm đau của riêng mình, mà còn xót xa đổ lệ cho cả những tư duy của thế hệ lưu vong đầu tiên.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Chuông đêm*, 113.

⁴³³ “Tôi thấy mình mơ về mùa hè một chín sáu bảy, cùng cha xuống Mỏ Cày đưa đám tang bà nội. Tôi nghe lại tiếng vịt đập cánh phành phạch ngoài bên sông rực sáng. Từ nhà dưới vọng lên

Moreover, his father's letter, which is a form of communicative memory by the refugees, also elicits the mission of a political refugee in Tùng's mind. In order to restore the lost country, people not only write but must also act:

Loving the homeland is not enough, we should have the courage to commit. I remember my fellow soldiers fighting in the remote borders of Cao Miên. I felt hurt when witnessing the tragedy on the sea. My words are broken when thinking about the second generation of refugees. But my soul is as narrow as a pond, how can I cover the sky with eagle wings?⁴³⁴

The ghost of the father in Tùng's dreams is a metaphor for the past clinging onto the present. Tùng realizes that he has to cut off from the past whereas he actively nurtures peaceful dreams with his father as a way to connect with his homeland:

The ghost of his father, the sound of the horrible past of the elders from 1946 to 1954 to 1975 until now in the host land, still echoes in the mind of the transitional generation. Tùng must cut off the echo, which is like destroying the part of his body. But he keeps nurturing peaceful dreams with his father, with his family, to nourish the love for his homeland.⁴³⁵

The expression of destroying the migrant's past while maintaining the love for the homeland shows the typical characteristics of memory. This is the feature of selective and flexible. We remember what we want to remember, and the act of remembering is a process of retranslation. David Gross once questioned the authenticity of memory:

In most acts of remembering, there is as much material from the present that is projected backward as there is material that comes authentically and indisputably from the past itself.⁴³⁶

chỗ tôi nằm, tiếng nước sôi lục sục. Ánh lửa chớp choạng liếm trên vách tường. Xa xa, tiếng đại bác dội lại âm ỉ." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Chuông đêm*, 115.

⁴³⁴ "Có một tấm lòng đối với quê hương chưa đủ, còn phải có can đảm dấn thân. Con bù nhìn nhớ tới những người bạn kháng chiến đóng ở miền biên giới Cao Miên heo hút. Lòng con quặn đau trước những thảm cảnh ngoài biển khơi. Chữ nghĩa con vụn nát bất lực khi nghĩ về thể hệ tị nạn thứ hai. Mà tâm hồn con thì chật hẹp như ao nước đọng, làm sao chứa trọn trời mây của một cánh đại bàng?" Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Chuông đêm*, 117.

⁴³⁵ "Bóng ma của cha, tiếng quá khứ tru đuổi ghê rợn của bậc đàn anh từ những năm một chín bốn lăm, qua một chín năm bốn, tới một chín bảy lăm và bây giờ, nơi đất khách, vẫn còn vang vọng trong tâm tư thể hệ chuyển tiếp. Tùng phải chặt đứt tiếng dội đeo đuổi ấy như đang tự hủy một phần thân thể mình. Nhưng chàng vẫn nuôi những giấc mộng êm đềm với cha, với gia đình để tri đường tình yêu quê hương." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Chuông đêm*, 121.

⁴³⁶ David Gross, *Lost Time: On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture*, 3.

For the diaspora, the act of evoking the past may reveal traumatic experiences and devastating loss. Therefore, their memories are reconstructed from original pasts and selected according to their demands in the present.

In addition, the obsession with memory is reflected through the protagonist's ambiguity between reality and dream, between the past and the present in the short story *Mùa xuân thấp sao trời* (Lighting Star on the Spring Sky). Nghị is a Vietnamese student studying chemistry in Germany. Every Lunar New Year's Eve he has the habit of writing a letter to his ex-girlfriend Diễm to review the old memories. Their beautiful love memories in Vietnam are always juxtaposed with the painful loss he experienced during his journey across the sea, which leads to Nghị suffering from a psychological disorder. He often remembers the days of traveling aboard on a shabby boat, but most especially the cruel death of Diễm on this boat. Diễm was among the Vietnamese who starved to death before being rescued. The horrible feature in Diễm's death is highlighted in detail as Nghị and Quỳnh, Diễm's younger sisters, in their hunger, ate Diễm's body to survive. This fictional detail was created by Ngô Nguyên Dũng to explain the unconscious closeness between Nghị and Quỳnh later on:

I do not know whether it is because of eating the same person that I and Quỳnh are close together when we were put on the island.⁴³⁷

Nghị even got confused between Quỳnh and her sister Diễm:

Sometimes I am suspicious of thinking that maybe you [Diễm] are only physically away from me, but your soul is still here, in Quỳnh's body. I was confused to the extent that in many dreams, I called your name and when holding Quỳnh in my hand, I occasionally whispered 'Diễm, Diễm',⁴³⁸

Ngô Nguyên Dũng used the fictional detail of people eating people to rationalize Nghị's haunting state of the past. He is not able to analyze the physiology of nostalgic minds. He can only explain the similarities among humans as a result of eating the same food source! (To say it clearly, he lets his male character understand crudely such a fact.) The

⁴³⁷ “Không biết có phải vì ăn thịt cùng một người không mà kể từ ngày được tàu đưa lên đảo, anh và Quỳnh gần gũi nhau không rời.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Chuông đêm*, 14.

⁴³⁸ “Đôi lúc anh ngờ ngợ nghĩ rằng, có lẽ em chỉ xa anh phần thể xác, còn linh hồn em vẫn còn hiện diện nơi đây, trong thịt da Quỳnh. Anh đã lẫn lộn tới độ trong nhiều giấc mơ, anh đã gọi tên em và khi ôm Quỳnh trong tay, thỉnh thoảng anh đã thầm kêu “Diễm, Diễm.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Chuông đêm*, 12

obsession with Diễm's image and the confusion between two sisters reveal the protagonist's failure to make a sharp distinction between the past, i.e Diễm and the present, i.e Quỳnh. The protagonist does not know both how to remember and to forget, as he acknowledges in the story:

I am a man who has not resolved with past obsessions; the past tied my memory with the string of time which is longer and longer day by day. At the top of this string is me, at the other end of this string is death.⁴³⁹

The story ends with Nghị's effort to cut off the ghosts of the past by burning the letter. However, memory does not only exist in the letters. It is stored in a state of mind, which is selective and not able to destroy.

The return to the old places to elicit memory is more evidence of the obsession with the memory of the nostalgic. The main characters in the two short stories *Lời quá khứ độ lượng* (The Tolerance of the Past) and *Mười lăm tháng giêng* (On the 15th of January) practice the same ritual, although the context in the two stories is different. They revive the past through their journeys. For example, in the short story *Lời quá khứ độ lượng* (The Tolerance of the Past), the narrator "I" and his mother travelled to Madeira. This is where he and his ex-girlfriend travelled and promised to live together for the rest of their lives. Even, the narrator rented a hotel where he and his ex-girlfriend stayed together as a way to review the old memory.

Similarly, the short story *Mười lăm tháng giêng* (On the 15th of January) emphasizes the role of memory in forming the identity of refugees, which is not easily eradicated or forgotten. The story focuses on Trạc's life, a Vietnamese refugee who lived in central Germany and has since moved to another city. Every year on the 15th of January (in the Lunar Calendar), Trạc arranges his belongings to return to Winterhof, where he lived during his first years of exile in Germany. Winterhof is a remote village in a small province. The village has a "soothing silence"⁴⁴⁰ that makes it like a "deserted island in the midst of a stormy sea."⁴⁴¹ More importantly, the village contains the memories of the years Trạc lived alone:

⁴³⁹ "Anh là một con người vẫn chưa dứt khoát được với những ám ảnh quá khứ; miền quá khứ cột chặt ký ức anh bằng sợi dây thời gian càng lúc càng dài thêm. Ở đầu này sợi dây là anh, ở đầu kia sợi dây là một cái chết." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Chuông đêm*, 12.

⁴⁴⁰ "nỗi sự im lặng tê thiếp" Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Dòng chữ tâm tình*, 81.

⁴⁴¹ "một đảo hoang giữa biển cả mênh mông bão nổi" Ibid., 81.

Trạc recalls ... recalls. During the winters he set the fire in a heater [...] At night, each person missed one thing [...] Remember the first Tết he was away from home.⁴⁴²

In order to review the past, Trạc did all of the things that he had done in Winterhof: revisiting his old acquaintance, even sleeping with a familiar prostitute just because this girl was accidentally involved in Trạc's memory. But a refugee's memory certainly was not just contained in the familiar scenes and people. Winterhof is just an excuse for Trạc to live the years of exile again because in those times he missed his hometown the most. Standing on a hill in Winterhof and looking down at the city, Trạc reminisces about the tragedy of his hometown, comparing them to the present life and questioning the meaning of life. Winterhof is where Trạc found his true identity, the identity of an exile.

Unconsciously feeling depressed for no reason. Trạc wants to throw all the material joy, happy family into a corner somewhere, anywhere. The personal sadness and joy could not compare with the suffering in the homeland. At the end of the year when approaching *Tết*, this time is like a warning bell, reminding him that his country is still writhing in *redism*. And he just goes on like a dementia sufferer here. Going in the mornings. Returning in the evenings. Everyday merging into a stream of vehicles in a freeway. Always a particle of dust in thousand specks of dust.⁴⁴³

The search for memory through immersing oneself into the right place at the right time shows the protagonist's perception of the relationship between memory, space and time, which is very close to Boym's view of restorative nostalgia. Nostalgia is understood by Boym as "an ache of temporal distance and displacement."⁴⁴⁴ And restorative nostalgia can "cure" this symptom in which "distance is compensated by intimate experience and the availability of a desired object."⁴⁴⁵ The return to Winterhof is a form of healing Trạc's

⁴⁴² "Trạc nhớ lại... nhớ lại. Những mùa đông đốt lửa lò sưởi [...] Khuya lạnh trần trọc mỗi người một mảnh nhớ quay về [...] Nhớ cái Tết đầu tiên xa nhà." Ibid., 87.

⁴⁴³ "Tự dưng Trạc cảm thấy chán nản vô cớ, muốn ném tất cả niềm vui vật chất, hạnh phúc gia đình vào một xó góc nào đó, bất kỳ nơi đâu. Những vui buồn cá nhân làm sao sánh được với nỗi đau khổ triền miên ở quê nhà. Cuối năm, cận Tết, thời gian này như tiếng chuông cảnh tỉnh, nhắc chàng chớ quên rằng quê hương vẫn còn quần quai trong chủ nghĩa đỏ. Riêng chàng, bên này sao cứ bước trong hôn mê. Sáng đi, chiều về. Ngày ngày nhập vào dòng xe tuôn chảy trên xa lộ rộng thênh. Mãi mãi là một hạt bụi trong muôn nghìn hạt bụi khác." Ibid., 89.

⁴⁴⁴ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 44.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 44.

feeling of displacement, and the village of Winterhof plays a role as a “desired object”, which represents Trạc’s home in Vietnam. Of course, this is proven to be ineffective. When Trạc starts searching for the memory, he experiences the first failure of homecoming. How does he cure the loss of home by means of foreign space and people? In fact, the frequent return to Winterhof every year on the 15th of January proves that Trạc’s ache of temporal distance and displacement is untreated. On the contrary, memory is a drug that draws him into the old memory, which fills his mind with the past instead of the present. Similar to the characters analyzed above, Trạc is a victim of the past.

The obsession with memory is not only manifested through a desire to return home, even as the imaginary journey. The short stories *Bên kia rừng* (On the Other Side of the Forest) and *Bên hồ nước* (By the Lake) show that for the refugees, the need to be sunk in the familiar space is accompanied with anguish on traumatic situations in the home country. The more love the refugees feel for the homeland, the more resentment they feel for the reality in their homeland. Hence, their lonely lives in the host land are lamented. As shown in the previous short stories, the characters’ search for familiar habitats serves as a temporary solution to ease their homesickness. In contrast, the protagonists of the upcoming short stories have even planned a true return, a manifestation of disorder due to the obsession with memory at a higher level. In the short stories *Bên kia rừng* (On the other side of the forest) and *Bên hồ nước* (By the Lake), the male characters are described as emotional but lacking commitment. Conversely, their close friends have a lot of love for the homeland and are determined to take action. These friends are the true victims of the past. In the short story *Bên kia rừng* (On the other side of the forest), Nghĩa, a friend of the protagonist “I”, experienced a hard life after 1975 in the South, which forces him to emigrate to Germany:

Nghĩa told me about political changes at home, about the harshness of life under the new regime, about long days at sea seeking freedom, about the short joyfulness and sadness while living on the island.⁴⁴⁶

Nghĩa’s thought helps the narrator to understand better the tragedy of the prisoners in re-education camps:

⁴⁴⁶ “Nghĩa kể tôi nghe những biến đổi chính trị ở quê nhà, về đời sống oan nghiệt dưới chế độ mới, về những ngày dài lênh đênh trên biển tìm tự do, về niềm vui nỗi xót xa của khoảng đời sống trên đảo ngăn ngui.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Mười hai hoa cúc*, 105.

The scene of the women, who, just for their survival, have to have sex with the officers to be able to bring their products safely to the north. The scene of the wives, who visited the prisons in reeducation camps, were cheated and bullied by the police, officers and many others who were waiting for the wives' carelessness to steal their products that the wives brought to their husbands.⁴⁴⁷

The question that Nghia poses at the end of the story, "How long does our homeland remain in a difficult time?"⁴⁴⁸ is the voice of the migrant community, those who care about the fate of the homeland, or those who still have memories.

Instead of asking the question, the character Khang in the short story *Bên hồ nước* (By the lake) has found his answer and that is to return to Vietnam, or any other country near Vietnam:

Many years I have lived in the host land is enough, now it is the time to do something positive. I have to return, Vĩnh. I do not know whether I can bear the life in the forests or mountains but I have to try once with the people I have only heard and seen in newspapers abroad.⁴⁴⁹

Khang's intention to return, perhaps to become a political activist as revealed in his confession, brings thoughts on fate and the duty of a refugee to Vĩnh's mind. The return, if any, of the refugees is due to neither their boast nor the specific obligation. They come back to end their lives as "a useless satellite flying around the earth,"⁴⁵⁰ to settle into the chaos of their homeland and live a true life. They return to find their identity. Of course, identity changes and is flexible over time. Returning home does not necessarily help the refugees to bring an end to their haunting memories. As I will demonstrate in the next sections, the identity of the immigrant is not formed in the host land or homeland but in-between, whereby memories and nostalgia will be a persistent affliction.

⁴⁴⁷ "Cảnh những người đàn bà vì miếng ăn, sự sống còn phải đánh đĩ với lũ cán bộ để được đem hàng ra Bắc trót lọt. Cảnh những người vợ thăm nuôi tù cải tạo bị lừa đảo, hắt hủi, hiếp đáp bởi công an, bởi cán bộ và biết bao nhiêu kẻ khác đang rình rập, chỉ cần sơ hở nhỏ để đánh tráo giật túi quà bánh mang cho chồng." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Mười hai hoa cúc*, 109.

⁴⁴⁸ "quê hương mình còn gian nan như thế bao lâu nữa?" Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Mười hai hoa cúc*, 110.

⁴⁴⁹ "Bao nhiêu năm sống ở xứ người, đủ rồi, bây giờ đã tới lúc phải làm một cái gì tích cực hơn. Tao phải về Vĩnh ạ. Dù chưa biết có chịu nổi đời sống ở bưng biển, trong rừng sâu núi thẳm không, nhưng phải thử một lần góp tay với những người mà từ trước tới giờ tao chỉ nghe nói tới và thấy ảnh đăng trên báo chí hải ngoại." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Chuông đêm*, 100-1.

⁴⁵⁰ "một vệ tinh vô dụng bay hoài huỷ quanh trái đất" Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Chuông đêm*, 103.

Violent behaviours

In the examples I have just analyzed above, nostalgia is proven as the longing for home. Homesickness becomes a spiritual impulse in which the protagonists, one way or another, can be liberated by themselves: by finding familiar spaces or people as a way to reconstruct their imaginary home. In other words, they can cure their nostalgia to some extent by themselves. However, nostalgia, as the research object of medicine, is proven not to be curable in any case. D. J de Larrey's research of the three stages of development of nostalgia shows that the sadness or regret of beautiful memories in the homeland are just initial signs in the series of more serious psychological symptoms for the victims/patients of nostalgia. In addition to the above symptoms, the patients also experience signs such as "high fever, irregular pulse, as well as sighing, constipation, and wandering pains in different parts of the body". In the second stage, the patient "falls into a state of torpor." During the third stage, the person "refuses to eat or drink, and displays suicidal tendencies."⁴⁵¹ The act of violence is a distinctive feature of the nostalgics when a person is so haunted with memories that he or she is unable to adapt to the surroundings. They feel alienated from their unfamiliar surroundings and their acts of violence are explained "as a way of shaking off their obsession."⁴⁵² The cases of violent behavior caused by the nostalgics are documented theoretically and practically in the study of D. J de Larrey and Karl Jaspers. In D. J. de Larrey's study, a patient committed suicide by stabbing himself nine times with a blunt knife.⁴⁵³ Similarly, the dissertation thesis of Karl Jaspers investigated the act of murdering the babies or committing arson by the two young women as a consequence of their homesickness.⁴⁵⁴ Elisabeth Bronfen interpreted these acts of violence as follows:

Because all vital powers have been cathected onto an idea, namely, the idealized concept of home and an obsessive notion of returning to this place, the register of the body and the mind begin to collapse into each other. The psychic imbalance of energy, a jamming whose somatic corollary is the paralysis of the body, can only be cured if fixed ideas can

⁴⁵¹ Barron D.J. de Larrey, *Surgical Essays*, 158.

⁴⁵² Andreea Deciu Ritivoi, *Yesterday's self Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity*, 17.

⁴⁵³ Barron D.J. de Larrey, *Surgical Essays*, 158.

⁴⁵⁴ Quoted in Andreea Deciu Ritivoi, *Yesterday's self Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity*, 17.

once again be made fluid. Having recourse to an act of violence, outside all categories of representation, seems to bring about such a way out of the psychic impasse.⁴⁵⁵

The pathological studies of violent acts as the characteristics of the nostalgics inspire me to analyze how the acts of violence are illustrated through literary figures. The nostalgics in Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's short stories also face an identity crisis, in which they are unable to recognize who or where they are. For them, the homeland and host land are either too far away or too close to comfort. Their acts of violence, either committing suicide like Mrs. Hạnh in *Căn phòng giữ mộng* (The Room that keeps Dreams), murdering his children like Mr. Jacob in *Đất câm* (The Dumb Land) or the harassment like Chuột Xám in *Chuông đêm* (The Night Bell), illustrate the protagonists' "disturbance in the imaginative capabilities" in Bronfen's interpretation and their failure to change their identities.

Mrs. Hạnh, the heroine in the short story *Căn phòng giữ mộng* (The Room that keeps Dreams) is an illustration of how the obsession with memory can lead someone to destroy themselves. Mrs. Hạnh is an unemployed Vietnamese refugee, living with social assistance, with barely any knowledge of German, so she has little contact with her neighbors. The narrator "I", a Vietnamese interpreter, is contacted by a social worker and offered to pay a visit to Ms. Hạnh's house because they feared "something bad happened"⁴⁵⁶ with Mrs. Hạnh. When they arrived at Mrs. Hạnh's house, both witnessed a horrible scene. The woman was dying in bed. Without the narrator's visit, perhaps she would have died.

In front of us, on a crumpled mattress, a woman is crouching. The body is thin. The clothes are wrinkled. Her hair is squeezed together scattering over the stained pillows. The face turns to the wall. The shape of the body is curled upward, looking like a chrysalis quivering in a tight cocoon. The white wall is covered with fingerprints that look like human feces.⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁵ Elizabeth Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and Its Discontents*, 273.

⁴⁵⁶ "có chuyện không hay xảy ra" Ngô Nguyễn Dũng, *Ấm bản*, 76.

⁴⁵⁷ "Trước mắt chúng tôi, trong chiếc giường chăn nệm nhàu nát bừa bãi, một người đàn bà nằm co rút. Thân thể gầy đét. Quần áo nhăn nhúm. Tóc bện vào nhau rớt vãi trên trũng gối bê bết vết bẩn. Mặt xoay vào tường. Dáng cong quắp, trông như con nhộng nằm quắt queo trong vỏ kén chặt. Tường sơn trắng vẫn vện dấu vân tay cây trét, trông như phân người." Ngô Nguyễn Dũng, *Ấm bản*, 81.

Mrs. Hạnh got the symptoms of a nostalgic in the third stage according to D. J de Larrey's studies. She isolated herself from her surroundings to commit suicide:

Shut the door, pull up the screen, stop the light. At first, she just has a meagre meal, then she only drinks tap water. The first week she still moved sneakily through the confined house for fear of noise, then hardly crawling due to exhaustion. Finally, laying on the bed to wait for the sleep to bring her home.⁴⁵⁸

When interviewed by doctors to diagnose the disease, Mrs. Hạnh cannot clarify why she cut herself off from her surroundings. But she is able to explain her thoughts during that time. Her mind was filled with the sounds, images, and language of the native home. This is an ability that Swiss scientists have also noted with regard to Swiss soldiers who displayed symptoms of nostalgia. In this research, the nostalgics can remember "sensations, tastes, sounds, smells, the minutiae and trivial of the lost paradise."⁴⁵⁹ The same happens with Mrs. Hạnh. In her imagination, she tastes all the feelings of fear and delight in her childhood, of her life being haunted after 1975, the miserable journey of crossing the border and the extreme loneliness in the host land:

The fear and anxiety follow me, turning into nightmares. I see myself being chased. The violent mouth of a wave swallows the boat across the border and hands desperately wave in the water. Seeing the great sailboat glittering with bright lights, echoing melancholy music, slowly gliding and disappearing into the fog ahead, like a ghost ship in fiction. There is only a single cold moon on the surface of the mercury water. Seeing me as a child sneakily raising my hand to catch the dragonfly landing on the grass in the countryside. Seeing me as a widow sitting on a refugee island overlooking the dying sun with tears. Seeing me patiently building a corner in which to settle.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁸ "Đóng cửa, kéo màn, ngăn ánh sáng. Lúc đầu còn ăn uống qua loa, sau chỉ uống nước máy. Những tuần lễ đầu còn di chuyển rón rén trong ngôi nhà chật vì sợ tiếng động, sau chỉ còn bò lóp ngóp vì kiệt sức. Cuối cùng nằm vật ra giường chờ giấc ngủ đưa về quê nhà." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Ám bản*, 82.

⁴⁵⁹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 4.

⁴⁶⁰ "Cái sợ, những lo toan dần vật theo tôi vào giấc ngủ, bật thành những giấc mơ kinh dị. Thấy mình bị rượt bắt. Thấy miệng sóng hung bạo nuốt chửng con thuyền vượt biên và những bàn tay quơ vẫy tuyệt vọng trên mặt nước phần nộ. Thấy chiếc du thuyền vĩ đại giăng đèn sáng rực, vọng lại tiếng nhạc du dương, lướt qua chậm chạp rồi mất hút vào đám sương mù phía trước,

The character's state of mind is the result of her obsession with memory, which is so vivid that the person cannot draw the boundary between past and present. As a result, her mind is solely occupied by the image of home. Moreover, her condition is caused by her inability to forget, which is as important as remembering. The inability to adapt to the surroundings is another sign of the protagonist's crisis of identity. She feels there is no home for her and the host land is just a sojourn. Consequently, her self, which is transplanted in such unfamiliar surroundings, is fundamentally alienated. The loss of the homeland is undoubtedly bad, but the loss of identity is even worse:

I always talk to myself that this place would be my second home, but when I step outside, I feel strange and lost. The eyes of the Westerners are empty. Cold, extremely cold. I gave up everything, surpassed all difficulties to come here, to see that I was left alone. Loss of everything. Hometown and family. Regret? Not. But I bought the freedom for an expensive price.⁴⁶¹

The character Mr. Jacob in *Đất câm* (The Dumb Land) murders his child, which is another example of violent behavior as a result of nostalgia. However, the longing for home in Mr. Jacob's case is different from that of Mrs. Hạnh. While Mrs. Hạnh dreams of a native home, a specific place, Mr. Jacob recollects an ideal home that is superimposed universally in both native and foreign lands. Not surprisingly, his "journey home" is linked to many utopias. Mr. Jacob's life is told through the eyes of a 9-year-old Vietnamese boy. Curious about the seclusion of his eldest neighbor, the protagonist finds out about the tragedies that befell his neighbor. Prior to becoming the boy's neighbor, Mr. Jacob was sentenced to several years in prison for murdering his two children. Although he pleaded not guilty, the evidence of his crime was found to be an act of revenge for his wife's adultery. Mr. Jacob's murder particularly appealed to the

như con tàu ma trong tiểu thuyết giả tưởng. Chỉ còn lại ánh trăng đơn lạnh trên mặt nước thủy ngân. Thấy tôi là đứa trẻ se sẽ gơ tay bắt cánh chuồn chuồn đậu trên nhánh cỏ miền quê ngoại. Thấy tôi là góa phụ ngồi trên đảo tị nạn nhìn ra khơi hấp hối ánh hoàng hôn với hai hàng nước mắt xót. Thấy tôi nhẫn nại xây cho mình một chỗ hẹp để nhập thất." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Ám bản*, 86.

⁴⁶¹ "Tôi luôn luôn nhủ lòng, chốn này có thể sẽ là quê hương thứ hai của mình, Nhưng mỗi khi bước ra ngoài, tôi lại cảm thấy xa lạ, lạc lõng. Những ánh mắt tây phương trống rỗng. Lạnh, lạnh lẽo vô cùng. Tôi đã từ bỏ tất cả, vượt mọi hiểm nghèo sang đây, để thấy rằng tôi chỉ còn lại một mình. Mất hết. Quê hương và gia đình. Ân hận? Không. Nhưng tôi đã mua tự do bằng cái giá quá đắt." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Ám bản*, 85.

protagonist. By observing Jacob's daily life, the boy sees the old man's kindness and love for nature. He witnesses Mr. Jacob's joyful moments, jumping up and down in the puddle of water after the rain or sitting indifferently in the house looking at the clouds in his sad times. In particular, Mr. Jacob's love for nature and the Earth makes the boy sympathetic:

And then I saw him leaning back to the wet ground in the shade. He turned his face to one side, then to the other. His arms spread wide as if he wanted to hug nature in his heart. Ten fingers scratched on the grass. He struggled like a turtle in spawning season, digging sand to make a cave. The turtle suddenly turned into a gentle old horse, as he peeled some grass to put into his mouth. Chewing and belching. Chewing again. Then belching again.⁴⁶²

The boy secretly goes to Mr. Jacob's house to clear up his suspicion about this strange man. Surprisingly, upon contact with Mr. Jacob, the boy does not see a cold and vicious killer. Instead, Mr. Jacob appears to be a kind gentleman, preferring to drink green tea with honey. This old man always immerses himself in his loneliness because of his dissatisfaction with human tragedy:

No matter whether I understand or not, the old Jacob raised hands to talk about the collapse of the Eastern European Communist bloc. About 40 years of living in the unreasonable and futile regime of the East Germans on the other side of the wall. About the suffering of the Tibetan people in the harsh and shackling regime in China. About the Nobel Peace Prize for the living Buddha – Dalai Lama. About environmental pollution getting more serious. About the disagreement between man and nature, between man and other animals, between man and the universe.⁴⁶³

⁴⁶² “Rồi tôi còn thấy ông khoan khoái ngã người xuống mặt đất vui đập trong bóng mát ẩm ướt. Ông hết quay mặt sang bên này, rồi quay mặt qua bên kia. Hai cánh tay ông dang rộng như muốn ôm cả thiên nhiên vào lòng. Mười ngón tay cầu trên cỏ đất. Ông trần trụi loay hoay như con rùa tới mùa đẻ trứng, tổng chân đào cát làm hang. Con rùa chột hoá thành con ngựa già hiền lành, khi ông bóc vài cọng cỏ đưa vào miệng. Nhai rồi phun ra. Lại nhai. Lại phun ra.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Ấm bản*, 12.

⁴⁶³ “Chẳng cần biết tôi hiểu hay không, ông già Jacob hươ tay bàn về sự sụp đổ của khối cộng sản Đông Âu. Về 40 năm sống trong vô lý và vô vị của người dân Đông Đức bên kia bức tường chủ nghĩa. Về nỗi khổ của người dân Tây Tạng trong chế độ cùm kẹp ngang ngược của Trung cộng. Về giải Nobel hòa bình dành cho đức Phật sống Dalai Lama. Về sự ô nhiễm môi sinh ngày càng thêm trầm trọng. Về sự bất hòa giữa người với thiên nhiên, giữa người với các động vật khác, giữa người với sự tuần hoàn vũ trụ.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Ấm bản*, 23.

He is dissatisfied with man's avarice for natural products. He suffers from the destruction of nature caused by mankind, considering it as the cause of human destruction:

South American jungles, Oh God, Mr. Jacob's desperate old man cried out, was almost completely devastated by human beings. A hundred-year-old-tree was felled within a few hours. Both the northern and southern icebergs were also being exploited wastefully. The bacterium-man is greedy for cutting the bone of nature, making heaven and earth imbalanced. The atmosphere is not pure anymore. Many creatures are extinct. Anyone notices that the spring has begun to lack butterflies [...] We are destroying our own values without knowing, because nature is the mirror that reflects the face of human life.⁴⁶⁴

Mr. Jacob becomes aware of the foolishness of human beings whilst living in the polluted environment. For him, people are all diasporic communities and their homeland is nature. Without nature, there is no place called home. His awareness of the finite features of human life, and above all, the desire to be a child of Mother Earth lead to his negative solution to end the longing for an imaginary land. After killing his son, he burned his house down, it is unknown whether he is alive or dead. Similar to the persistent disagreement between man and nature, the tragedy of the old man is also an irreconcilable conflict between a persistent desire for utopia and real life. In essence, he is also the nostalgic in his land.

The behaviors of the nostalgic, such as their extreme acts as the result of the obsession with memory, are similar to those of the melancholics. As described by Freud, melancholy is "a deeply painful bad mood", "a suspension of interest in the outside world", "the loss of ability to love" and "the denigration of the feeling of self".⁴⁶⁵ The melancholics share with the nostalgics their bad mood and failure to adjust themselves to

⁴⁶⁴ "Những khu rừng già Nam Mỹ, thượng đế ơi, ông già Jacob tuyệt vọng kêu lên, đang bị con người tàn phá gần như trọn vẹn. Một thân cổ thụ trăm năm bị đốn ngã trong vòng vài tiếng đồng hồ. Cả vùng băng sơn ở Bắc và Nam địa cầu cũng đang bị khai thác phung phá. Con vi khuẩn người đang tham lam đục khoét mớ xương tủy của thiên nhiên, làm trời đất chệnh lệch. Bầu khí quyển không còn tinh khiết nữa. Nhiều sinh vật bị tuyệt chủng. Có ai để ý không, mùa xuân đã bắt đầu vắng đi những cánh bướm [...] Chúng ta đang hoại diệt giá trị của chính chúng ta mà không hay biết, vì thiên nhiên là tấm gương soi lòng lộng khuôn mặt của đời sống con người." Ngô Nguyễn Dũng, *Ám bản*, 24.

⁴⁶⁵ Quoted in Wolf Lepenies, *Melancholy and Society*, 152.

the surrounding world. However, as explained by Ritivoi, the mechanisms which trigger nostalgia and melancholy are different:

The melancholics want to sever themselves from their surroundings, they want to escape the tedium of the small town or to take refuge away from a state in disarray. The nostalgics, on the other hand, have already been severed from their initial surroundings, and they keep wishing for a reattachment.⁴⁶⁶

In the two cases of Mrs. Hạnh or Mr. Jacob, their violent behaviors not only come from the resentment of reality but also by the longing for utopias in the past. But the longing for utopias is so strong and persistent that they would rather break with the present by ending their lives in order to be fully attached to their homeland in memory. I call their homes utopias due to the imaginary nature of their homelands, which no longer exists. While the melancholic wants to remain in their silent states, the nostalgic just wants to return.

The character Chuột Xám in the short story *Chuông đêm* (Night Bell) does not perform any acts of violence like those of Mrs. Hạnh or Mr. Jacob. However, his harassing behavior is also listed as a type of “disturbance in the imaginative capabilities” in Bronfen’s interpretation, which reflects the malfunction of the protagonist’s mind. The story of Chuột Xám (Gray Mouse) is narrated by the third-person narrator David, who receives Chuột Xám’s phone calls at night. David is an operator in the call center Tâm Phúc. His job is to listen to customers who have psychological problems. Basically, he helps them to relieve their loneliness, a disease in modern society.

Once, David receives a phone call from a boy naming himself Chuột Xám. The boy told David about his lonely life in the family, where he was cared for mainly by a nanny and his mother who worked night shifts. Through several conversations, David gradually comes to know about Chuột Xám’s personal life. The boy is a mixed-race son of a Vietnamese woman and a black man. He craves his mother’s love while all she can do is working hard to have savings for him. As the relationship between David and the boy becomes more intimate, the boy stops calling. The boy’s silence makes David worry until he receives another call, this time from the supervisor at the boarding school in the province. It turns out that all Chuột Xám’s stories about his mother, nanny or friends were

⁴⁶⁶ Andreea Deciu Ritivoi, *Yesterday’s self Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity*, 28.

fake. Chuột Xám is not even a real name. Dan, the boy's real name, is actually a Vietnamese orphan. His parents are Vietnamese boat people who died at sea before being rescued by the boat Cap Anamur. Dan often makes calls to strangers, making up his family's stories as a way of relieving his loneliness and desire to have a real family. Dan's story is reported by the supervisor:

Daniel has a strange game, i.e. sneaking into my office [the supervisor's one] at night, using the phone, calling one person to another to tell the stories. [...] After a few times of observation, one night I caught Dan calling a stranger. Upon questioning, Dan said he did it just because of loneliness, longing for a family home like other children who visited their home every week.⁴⁶⁷

Dan's harassing behavior does not lead to the acts of physical destruction like in the case of Mrs. Hạnh or Jacob. But the nature of Dan's behavior is not so different from theirs. The longing for home can lead victims to display abnormal behaviors: murder, suicide or the harassment of others. In Dan's case, the motivation of calling strangers is not only the longing for the security and safety of a family. Rather, it comes from the desire to find a mother, i.e. the metaphorical image of the motherland. In his fake story that he shares with David, Dan reveals the linguistic disagreement between himself and his mother. The former just knew German while the latter only spoke Vietnamese. As long as he only spoke German, he will not find the mother he desires. Thus, the journey to find his mother is really a journey to learn his mother language, which is integral to understanding his past and forming his identity in the future. The subtle relationship between language and mother opens a new way of understanding the concept of home. For the diaspora people, language and mother are one. And with their languages, they have both their mother and their home.

To conclude, it is worth noting here how diaspora literature is identified both by its geographic origins and its contents. The narratives of diasporic works emphasize the experiences of protagonists living outside the presumed homeland or under foreign rule⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁷ “Daniel có một trò chơi lạ, hay lên vào văn phòng tôi [người giám thị] ban đêm, sử dụng điện thoại, gọi hết người này tới người kia để kể chuyện vu vơ. [...] Sau vài lần rình rập, một đêm nọ tôi bắt gặp quả tang thằng Dan đang gọi một người lạ. Tra vấn mãi thì Dan khai thật, cậu làm như thế chỉ vì cô đơn, khao khát một mái ấm gia đình như các đứa trẻ khác cứ mỗi tuần lại được về thăm nhà.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Chuông đêm*, 80.

⁴⁶⁸ Martien A. Halvorson-Taylor, *Diaspora Literature*,

and how the characters identify themselves in the in-between-ness. It is interesting to note how often Ngô Nguyễn Dũng expresses unrealistic dreams through stories in the early stage of his writing (1988) which he himself cannot fulfill. He did not serve in the South Vietnam army. He did not flee Vietnam by boat, instead, he is a former Vietnamese student. He is not actively engaged in the war against the SRV regime. But the way he keeps writing about un-accomplished dreams of his characters, who committed fighting against the current regime, expresses sympathy towards the boat people and the beautiful memories of homeland just like other diasporic writers. This is memory, “the privileged carrier of diasporic identity”, “the ultimate proof of the diasporic status of a certain community”⁴⁶⁹ It is no coincidence that

the right to remember, the responsibility to recall and the sense of dangers involved in forgetting are central issues of debate within diasporic communities and in their relation to their cultural and political surroundings. No diaspora exists without memory as forgetting the trans-local diasporic connections means the ultimate disbandment of diasporic identity.⁴⁷⁰

In this sense, the way Ngô Nguyễn Dũng creates unrealistic dreams through his characters, or the reflection of memory in his works, can be seen as the creation of attachment to the past and the formation of identity in diaspora culture, where “territory is decentered and exploded into multiple settings.”⁴⁷¹

5. Hybridity and the search for identity

In his essay *The Condition We Call Exile*, Joseph Brodsky, an exiled Russian-American poet, compared the life of the exile with a book in which your fate in “book-form” is “being lost on the shelf among those with whom you share the first letter of your surname.”⁴⁷² As a book, the best possible scenario is that it is stored in a glittering and magnificent bookstore and picked up by somebody. In the worst scenario, it becomes dusty among others and is only known by dutiful librarians. The same happens with the

<http://www.bibleodysey.org/en/people/related-articles/diaspora-literature>, accessed on 28 June 2019.

⁴⁶⁹ Kim Butler, *Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse*, 192.

⁴⁷⁰ Marie-Aude Baronian, Stephan Besser and Yolande Jansen, “Introduction”, 11-12.

⁴⁷¹ Anne-Marie Fortier, *Diaspora*, 184.

⁴⁷² Joseph Brodsky, *On Grief and Reason Essays*, 31.

diaspora. The search for identity, or what is called by Brodsky as “the quest for significance”, is what constitutes the whole journey of the diaspora, no matter if they turn back on their native land or not. In fact, the longing for recognition is not only the cause but also the consequence of the diasporic community. First and foremost, the member of the diaspora is characterized by their search for identity.

For the members of the diaspora, especially diasporic writers, the search for identity is never easy. The diasporas are described as those who have “a double destiny or a half destiny.”⁴⁷³ In the daytime, these people try to absorb the culture of the host land as an attempt to demonstrate their ability to integrate and to enjoy the ultimate power, i.e. freedom. On the contrary, they themselves are stripped of their freedom at night by their desires about memories and the longing for home, about their astonishment to recognize for not just one but two identities. Or even worse, they see themselves as the otherness.

The ambivalence, hybridity and the search for identity have been core issues in diaspora studies that take into consideration the preservation and development of culture and identity of the diaspora communities. Ngô Nguyễn Dũng is one of the few Vietnamese writers in Germany who is deeply interested and delicately presents the issue of Vietnamese identity in his works. This section will focus on the matter of identity for the Vietnamese refugees in Germany, namely the confused state of the main characters in the relocation of identity in the host land. The protagonists’ ambivalence and hybridity are manifested in complex ways. The examples given in Ngô Nguyễn Dũng’s stories show that the process of self-inquiry often occurs in female characters, especially those who have interracial love affairs with foreign partners. The physical intimacy with German lovers does not erase the cultural differences between them, which reveals the expression of hybridity for the female protagonists. The process of self-inquiry about identity simultaneously signals to the autonomy of the characters, in which the protagonists are no longer inferior but equal and autonomous with their partners.

Hybridity is a concept that changes pragmatically and contextually. The concept of hybridity even implies the existence of a pure culture, which has been questioned by Vittoria Borsò.⁴⁷⁴ Even Homi Bhabha, one of the leading theorists of hybridity, called

⁴⁷³ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 256.

⁴⁷⁴ See further in Vittoria Borsò, “Hybrid Perceptions, a Phenomenological Approach to the Relationship Between Mass Media and Hybridity”, 39-66.

hybridity a camouflage, or a heresy.⁴⁷⁵ This is due to its contradictory and complex nature. The concept of hybrid has been used by the Greeks and Romans in history. *Hybrida* means “the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar, child of a freeman and slave”⁴⁷⁶ in Latin, later expanding to refer to the descendant resulting from a Roman man and a non-Roman woman. This term began to be used in England from the 17th century and prevailed in the nineteenth century, especially in the experiments involving Charles Darwin’s cross-fertilization in plants. The hybridized cultures used by the Greeks and Romans, which were borrowed from the civilizations of the Egyptians and Persians, were considered as unfavourable biological hybrids. Biological hybridity was seen as a source of racial degeneration and social disorder by Aristotle, Plato, and Pericles. It was also condemned within the Roman Empire throughout the Middle Ages and up until the 19th century in Europe. The racist pseudo-scientific discourses, which raised the concerns of the hybridity and fear of racial degeneration caused by the mingling of Europeans and non-Europeans, were found in the author Joseph Arthur’s *Gobineau’s Essai sur l’être des races* and Joseph-Ernest Renan’s *L’ Education culturelle et morale*.⁴⁷⁷

The second developmental phase in the history of hybridity is associated with the emergence of post-colonial discourse. Hybridity is understood by theorists Homi Bhabha, Néstor Garcia Canclini, Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak, and Paul Gilroy as the effect of the mixture of identity and culture. Homi Bhabha, the most influential theorist of hybridity, views hybridity as not a fixed object but a process produced by colonization. He emphasizes the interdependence and the mutual construction of both colonizer’s and colonized’s subjectivities to create new transcultural forms. The result of the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized represents the entry of a formerly-excluded subject into the mainstream discourse. This is a subject that is both familiar and different, which plays a role as a counter-narrative, a critique of the canon and its exclusion of other narratives.⁴⁷⁸ Also, hybridity as a process opens up the space of thirdness in which

⁴⁷⁵ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 193.

⁴⁷⁶ This definition is taken from the Oxford dictionary, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/hybrid>.

⁴⁷⁷ Quoted in Amar Acheraïou, *Questioning Hybridity, Postcolonialism and Globalization*, 13.

⁴⁷⁸ Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, “Tính lai ghép trong văn học Việt Nam”, <http://tienve.org/home/activities/viewTopics.do?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=7762> accessed on 8 December 2018.

meaning is always found in between and never stable.⁴⁷⁹ In general, hybridity in Bhabha's argument points to the subversion of the colonized narrative towards the narratives of colonial power and dominant culture. In the process of hybridization, colonized subjects reveal themselves as the representatives of otherness rather than reflections of the colonizer. This otherness is even seen to contaminate the dominant culture with its racial differences.

Taking hybridity into consideration as the discourse referring to the relationship between the colonized and the colonizing, I will analyze two relationships between characters in Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's texts. The first is the relationship between the Vietnamese refugees and their foreign partners. The second is the relationship between Vietnamese refugees and their home. The matter of identity for the Vietnamese refugees here will be shown to be complicated and flexible. In the sexual relationships between the Vietnamese refugees and their foreign partners, the Vietnamese show their autonomy and control towards the foreigners. The term of hybridity is also used to analyze the quest for identity by the immigrants, who gain a perspective through their act of moving. In the protagonist's story, the protagonist is re-defined by their longing for home in which the essence of the diasporic identity is revealed. Diasporic is no longer the state of being scattered geographically but the state of mind. As a result of hybridization, the protagonists are characterized by their hybridity and ambivalence, where the refugees question the concept of homeland and identity.

5.1 Hybridity through interracial love affairs

The hybridization of the female characters is shown in various manifestations. At the lowest level, hybridity is expressed through a sense of suspicion or questioning about the meaning of life, as seen in the characters Hằng Châu in *Ý nghĩ bên khung cửa mở* (The thought at the open door) and Ri in *Nhật kí mùa phượng vĩ* (The Diary in the Poinciana Season). At a higher level, the female characters feel disconnected from their husbands or lovers, such as Thuý in *Dòng chữ thiên thanh* (The Blue Word) and Thảo in *Điểm tâm ở Nữu Ước* (Breakfast in New York). In this case, their disconnection is considered to be the consequence of their obsession with memory and questioning about their identity. The heroines even demonstrate their self-reliance as a way of looking for identities, such as

⁴⁷⁹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 36-9.

the autonomous Vietnamese woman in *Tiếng suối đêm giao mùa* (The Sound of Stream in Changing Season at Night). All manifestations such as self-doubt, obsession with memory, or identity-seeking are manifold manifestations of hybridity, where the refugees are not passive subjects controlled by their partners but trying to find their places.

The emergence of the identity of Hằng Châu in the short story *Ý nghĩ bên khung cửa mở* (The thought at the open door) is manifested through her rejection of Western medicine as a means of treating her depression. Hằng Châu is a Vietnamese girl who marries a foreigner and lives in Italy. In a letter to her friend, she confides that she was depressed during the years spent away from Vietnam. She suffers from insomnia, thinking too much and is depressed and upset. However, instead of visiting a psychiatrist as suggested by her husband Marcello, Châu looks to the Buddhist philosophy as a psychological solution:

Every time Marcello, Châu's husband, saw Châu's restlessness and advised me⁴⁸⁰ to find a psychiatrist, Châu protested. Being afraid of the psychology of the West, not wanting to be an animal that is analyzed by troublesome psychology in Sigmund Freud's worldview, or with Carl Gustav Jung's thoughts of sex. Châu wished to see myself as a leaf of grass, a house wrapped up the soul of the East. The leaf of grass has withered due to the lack of water needed to nourish the chlorophyll. The house is dull because of the closed doors. Let's open them, dear, Châu must find a way to open them. The Buddhist scriptures have helped Châu to unleash the iron locks closing thoughts that have rusted for so long.⁴⁸¹

The act of rejecting Western medicine reveals the protagonist's tendency to resist becoming a passive and weak object, even if she is sick. The belief in Buddhist

⁴⁸⁰ The character uses her last name Châu to call herself. So Châu means "I" here. That is why we keep this in the translation.

⁴⁸¹ "Trước đó, mỗi lần Marcello, chồng của Châu, thấy Châu trần trọc thao thức lại ứa nước mắt khuyên Châu đi tìm một ông bác sĩ tâm lý, Châu phản đối. Châu sợ khoa tâm lý học của Tây phương, không muốn trở thành một động vật bị phân tích bằng những tâm tính rắc rối bởi nhân sinh quan của Sigmund Freud, hay với những tư duy no ứ dục tính của Carl Gustav Jung. Châu muốn mình là một ngọn cỏ, một ngôi nhà gói ghém trọn vẹn tâm hồn Đông phương. Cỏ héo úa vì thiếu nước nuôi dưỡng diệp lục tố. Ngôi nhà tối ám vì những cánh cửa đóng kín. Phải mở chúng ra, anh ơi, Châu phải tìm cách mở chúng ra. Những trang kinh Phật đã giúp Châu tháo tung khoá sắt nhốt kín trạng thái tâm tình mình hoen ỉ từ bấy lâu nay." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Chuông đêm*, 25.

philosophy serves as a remedy and shows the protagonist's effort to liberate herself in her own way.

The character Ri in the short story *Nhật ký mùa phượng vĩ* (The Diary in the Poinciana Season) is a clear literary representation of hybridity. She is the daughter of a Vietnamese mother and a French soldier in Vietnam. Growing up with the love of the Vietnamese mother but the blood of the French makes her feel conflicted:

She felt that she did not belong to any country. Her spirit lost its balance. Maybe the grandparents felt so, hence they talked to her mother and sent the girl to Saigon to attend a Catholic school. She began to familiarize herself with the identity of her father.⁴⁸²

Gradually, she absorbs the French language, literature, and culture. Due to the failure of the French army in Vietnam, which led to their withdrawal from Vietnam, Ri also followed her husband, a French officer working in the embassy, to go to France. While in Vietnam, her French origin makes Ri felt like the Other compared to the Vietnamese, the memories of Vietnam haunt her while living in France. She sees the image of rural Vietnam in the countryside of France:

Here, in the suburb with many trees, in the peaceful Sunday morning, I heard the echo of the church bell. This sound stirred my memories. Each memory of the motherland stirred, gradually strengthened, then gathered into a chain of psychological shocks, cracking and burning in the fire. I remembered the sound of oars rowing in the early morning outside the awakening river. I remembered scented incense scattered in the worship room in my grandmother's house. I remembered the odd mottled star with full confidence in the horizon beyond the vast land. I remembered the sound of slippers on the Chinese brick floor [...]⁴⁸³

⁴⁸² “Cô tự cảm thấy mình không thuộc về ai, đất nước nào. Tinh thần cô mất thăng bằng. Có lẽ ông bà ngoại cảm thấy được chuyện đó, nên bàn với má, gởi cô lên Sài gòn trọ học trường bà sơ. Cô bắt đầu làm quen với bản sắc quê cha...” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Nhật ký mùa phượng vĩ*, <http://damau.org/archives/13518> accessed on 14 July 2018.

⁴⁸³ “Nơi đây, miền ngoại ô nhiều cây xanh, những sáng chủ nhật yên ả, tôi nghe vọng hồi chuông giáo đường giục giã. Âm thanh khuấy động trí nhớ. Từng lớp kỷ niệm nơi quê mẹ cựa quậy, mạnh dần, rồi gom thành chuỗi chấn động tâm lý, xoi đất, trào thành lệ lửa phồng da. Tôi nhớ tiếng chèo khua nước tăng sáng ngoài sông thức. Tôi nhớ hương nhang tản mạn trong gian thờ nhà ngoại. Tôi nhớ đóm sao mai lẻ loi đầy tự tin tím tắp nơi chân trời bên kia ruộng nước mênh mông. Tôi nhớ tiếng dép lệt xệt trên nền gạch tàu.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Nhật ký mùa phượng vĩ*, <http://damau.org/archives/13518>, accessed on 14 July 2018.

The roar and the demand for memory signal the resurgence of the need for repositioning identity. The main character recognizes that she cannot be purely French, even though she deliberately hides her Vietnamese identity.

The blood from the minority country which is also half of me and my identity, strangely, is often up against the other half which is full of contempt.⁴⁸⁴

As a result, Ri feels disconnected from her husband. This disharmony in the husband-wife relationship is a common way for Ngô Nguyễn Dũng to describe cultural disagreements and the need to reposition identity. The process of sexual activity is described as the process of resistance of Vietnamese identity towards the French identity:

I find my spiritual life so narrow and cramped. I lost my pleasure in bed. To pamper my husband, I satisfied his sexual needs but with coldness and inertia. This white conscient person does not recognize the physiological changes in me. I also did not know myself, because when my body communicated with him, my brain was frozen, as if it had been cut into two parts. At first, I was extremely confused. But slowly, I knew the other half in me was getting up, outburst reaction, because I was sluggish, not expressing my attitude. It forced me to speak out.⁴⁸⁵

And the final consequence of the quest for identity is the heroine's recognition of herself as the Other, a no-where person who has lost her identity:

I am nothing in society. I am trivial but not as ordinary as people. I become the one standing on the sidelines of all activities.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸⁴ “Dòng máu tiểu quốc này cũng là một nửa phần xác và bản sắc tôi, kỳ lạ thay, vẫn thường vùng dậy đối chọi với nửa kia đầy những toan tính.” Ngô Nguyễn Dũng, *Nhật kí mùa phượng vĩ*, <http://damau.org/archives/13518>, accessed on 14 July 2018.

⁴⁸⁵ “Tôi thấy ra đời sống tâm linh mình chật hẹp, tù túng đến rợn người. Tôi mất lạc thú trong chuyện chăn gối. Chiều chồng, tôi vẫn đáp ứng những nhu cầu thân xác của ông, bằng tâm trạng trơ lạnh. Người da trắng có lương tâm không nhận biết những thay đổi sinh lý trong tôi. Ngay chính tôi cũng không biết, vì khi thể xác tôi giao tiếp ông, não bộ tôi đông cứng, như bị vết chém phân hai. Thoạt đầu, tôi bối rối vô cùng. Nhưng từ từ, tôi biết cái nửa kia trong tôi đang ngời dậy, bộc phát phản ứng, vì tôi đã nhát nhúa, không tỏ thái độ. Nó buộc tôi lên tiếng.” Ngô Nguyễn Dũng, *Nhật kí mùa phượng vĩ*, <http://damau.org/archives/13518>, accessed on 14 July 2018.

⁴⁸⁶ “Tôi không là cái gì trong xã hội. Tôi tầm thường, nhưng không còn bình thường như mọi người. Tôi trở thành kẻ đứng bên lề mọi sinh hoạt.” Ngô Nguyễn Dũng, *Nhật kí mùa phượng vĩ*, <http://damau.org/archives/13518>, accessed on 14 July 2018.

The heroines in the short stories *Dòng chữ thiên thanh* (The Blue Words) and *Điểm tâm ở Нью У́ớc* (Breakfast in New York) reveal the hybrid nature at different levels. With the protagonist Thuý in *Dòng chữ thiên thanh* (The Blue Words), the expression of the hybridity is expressed by the ambivalence in living her exile life. Being aware of the duty of the exile to the destiny of the country, Thuý paradoxically reveals her weakness, despair, and desire for personal happiness. Her ambivalence leads to the disharmony with her foreign husband, Peter. With Thảo in *Điểm tâm ở Нью У́ớc* (Breakfast in New York), hybridity is revealed through the initiative of the girl in the relationship between the two men, her German husband and her Vietnamese lover. Like Thuý, Thảo also encounters disillusionment with her German husband. But unlike Thuý, Thảo finds some part of her personal identity in this relationship.

In *Dòng chữ thiên thanh* (The Blue Words) the character Thuý is a Vietnamese refugee living in Germany. Thuý's hasty crossing of the border gives her a psychological shock and makes her careful in her relationships. Thuý devoted a deep love to Lữ, the Vietnamese interpreter who helped her during her days in the refugee camp. Lữ reminds Thuý of her beautiful memories in Saigon. Paradoxically, Lữ is an impotent guy, which is explained as the consequence of Lữ's concerns about the country. To Lữ's misfortune, Thuý had no choice but accepted Peter's sincere affection. Thuý's expression of hybridity is manifested in the way that she maintains the strange relationship between the two men. She lives with Peter but still spends time visiting Lữ every week. Peter brings her a peaceful material life, while Lữ evokes unpleasant memories of the homeland. And Thuý needs both of them to maintain her identity:

She chose Lữ, though he did not bring her sexual happiness, to Thuý, Lữ was a miserable homeland scattering in the hostland[...] Many times, in Peter's arms, Thuý thought of Lữ. [...] Thuý wandered between the two men.⁴⁸⁷

The dilemma in choosing between two men reveals Thuý's duality. She is aware of her status as an exile while sticking to her life with the foreign man. She feels sorry for the

⁴⁸⁷ “Nàng chọn Lữ, dù chàng không mang lại cho nàng những hạnh phúc xác thịt, nhưng đối với Thuý, Lữ là mảnh đất quê nhà bất hạnh sống dật dờ nơi đất khách [...] Nhiều lúc, nằm trong vòng tay Peter, Thuý miên man nghĩ đến Lữ [...] Thuý phân vân sống giữa hai người đàn ông.” Ngô Nguyễn Dũng, *Tiếng núi*, 142.

tragedy in her homeland but she could not help but find Lữ, a refugee, as a way to release her feelings:

I feel so helpless and weak, like a wounded little bird lying cheerlessly in a cluster of snow. Please, Lữ promises to help me to heal this small bird! Please blow fire into my life, give me more courage and perspicacity against the paradox of life. Leaving home is a temporary solution to fight against tyranny, don't you know? ⁴⁸⁸

Thúy's letters to Lữ, instead of being a solution for Thúy's psychological problem, contribute to forming the hybridity of the refugee.

In contrast, Thảo in the short story *Điểm tâm ở Nữ Uớc* (Breakfast in New York) is a rebel version of Thúy. She is completely active in the relationship with the two men Đông and Max. Thảo lives with Max as a way of thanking him because he saved her life. With Đông, Thảo enjoys full happiness. The strange triangular relationship between Thảo, Đông, and Max is the expression of the hybridity for the characters. The images of characters are used as symbolic images for the country. Max, a tolerant and generous German, is the metaphor for the host land which satisfies the refugee's need for material life. Even, Max proposes that Thảo has a child with Đông to gain the legal inheritance of Max's property after his death. Đông, on the other hand, is a manifestation of the homeland, which contains the refugee's love. Thảo's dilemma is described boldly in her sexual relationship with two men, which shows the autonomy of the Vietnamese girl:

Her senses become strange, feeling in Đông's sweat the sweat of Max, in Đông's body the body of Max, in Đông's greatness the cessation of Max. Thảo receives the living germ of Đông, learning that the child who will be formed in her body will crystalize the generous love of Max. ⁴⁸⁹

Like the protagonist in *Điểm tâm ở Nữ Uớc* (Breakfast in New York), the autonomy of the heroine in *Tiếng suối đêm giao mùa* (The Sound of Stream in Changing

⁴⁸⁸ “Em cảm thấy mình bất tài và yếu đuối quá, như cánh chim nhỏ bị thương nằm ủ rũ trong cụm tuyết mùa đông. Lữ hứa giúp em chữa lành chim nhỏ đi! Anh hãy thổi vào đời sống em luồng lửa nóng, giúp em thêm can đảm và mình miễn chống lại những nghịch lý của đời sống. Là bỏ quê hương chỉ là giải pháp tạm thời, để có đủ phương tiện và môi trường hoạt động chống lại bạo quyền, phải không anh” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Tiếng núi*, 146.

⁴⁸⁹ “Giác quan nâng trở nên lạ lùng, cảm nhận trong mồ hôi Đông có lẫn mồ hôi Max, trong thân thể Đông có ẩn thân thể Max, trong cường tráng Đông có suy diệt Max. Thảo đón lấy mầm sống của Đông truyền sang, biết rằng đứa con sẽ tượng hình trong bụng mình là kết tinh của tình yêu độ lượng Max.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Ngôn ngữ tuyết*, 176.

Season at Night) shows her autonomy in relation to their foreign husband. The Vietnamese women were no longer inferior to their Western husbands. Instead, they reveal their initiative and power. Their identity is showed in their consciousness of their personal position not only as a wife in their relationship but also as the refugees in their immigrants-locals relationship. In *Điểm tâm ở Nữ Ước* (Breakfast in New York), Ngô Nguyễn Dũng addresses two major themes in literature: love and death. The story begins with a brief visit by a Vietnamese woman at a small temple in Mai Village in Lunar New Year Eve. Through her conversation with the abbot Master Trí, the anonymous protagonist tells the abbot about the strange relationship between her and the foreign husband. At first, their love story follows the motif of colonizer-colonizing love stories: the foreigner came to a foreign country, met a native girl, got married and took the wife back home. But their story has paradoxes, marking a shift in power in the post-colonial relationship. Bearing sorrows for his ex-wife's death, Jan, the husband, comes to Vietnam as a volunteer in the hope of relieving his melancholy. His job in Vietnam signals the role of the supporter rather than the "colonizer". The girl becomes his assistant. Jan is 40 years old, and the girl is only 19 years old when they meet.

Indeed, the representative of the foreign man coming to Vietnam to release melancholy is a reverse colonial version of the interracial love affair. From the beginning, the man was marked by his weakness, humility, and vulnerability. Jan's inferiority is emphasized when Vietnamese soldiers raid his room during his visit to the Vietnamese girl's inn. At night, the house is ransacked by Vietnamese soldiers, demanding to examine his papers:

He only wears pantyhose and three-hole t-shirts. I [the woman] wrinkled in his oversized pyjamas. Two men, wearing rubber slippers and trousers, short sleeves which are put outside the trousers, point a short gun at us. Jan's shaking voice explained in English: 'I am German, no American, no GI.'⁴⁹⁰

The man and the Vietnamese girl meet each other in the war in the Lunar New Year in 1968. They had sex in a house amidst "the sound of the hustle and bustle of the

⁴⁹⁰ "Chàng chỉ mặc mỗi cái quần cụt, áo thun ba lỗ. Tôi nhăn nhúm trong bộ quần áo ngủ rộng quá khổ của chàng. Hai người đàn ông, chân mang dép cao su, quần dài, áo sơ mi cụt tay bỏ ngoài quần, lăm lăm họng súng ngấn chĩa vào hai chúng tôi. Jan run giọng giải thích bằng tiếng Anh: 'I am German, no American, no GI.'" Ngô Nguyễn Dũng, *Ngôn ngữ tuyết*, 190.

people, the sound of people shouting, the sound of the machine guns exploding in the empty alley”⁴⁹¹. In such circumstances, the foreigners, regardless of American or German, were subjected to the suspects by Việt Cộng. In other words, the guy becomes the Other. Paradoxically, during her first time having sex, the girl feels herself being exiled in her country:

I am confused between the pleasures of the body and the guilt of being outside, irresponsible to the grievances of the country.⁴⁹²

Here, the confused mood of the girl marks the first manifestation of the hybridity of the subject in a foreign relation. The love affair between a young Vietnamese girl and a foreign man not only brings her a feeling of pleasure. It makes her question the authority and role of the individual, as a native of the country, in an extramarital relationship. The girl’s feeling of being an outsider whilst enjoying sensual pleasures with the German man, which leads to the marriage and exile life of the girl, reveals a counter-narrative for the native in her multi-racial relationship. She is not a passive subject, who is willing to accept a new love affair, new life, and a new identity, i.e Vietnamese-German identity. In contrast, she feels ambivalent, which is shown in her self-questioning and reflection.

The woman’s ambivalence, which marks her as a product of hybridity, is depicted in her strange relationship with two men: her husband Jan, who is 21 years older than her and Danny, the son of Jan, who is three years younger than her. Her happy life with Jan does not last long. During their happy times, they are both haunted by memories. With Jan, the memory takes the form of his family tragedy of the genocide. His memory reminds him that he is indeed an exile, an outsider in his own country. In particular, when Jan has a car accident, sits in a wheelchair and lives a vegetative state, he also suffers from his memories of his ex-wife’s death. Since she died at the small stream near their house, the sound of the stream flowing reminded him of the loss and suffering he feels every season. Jan’s silent life is observed by his Vietnamese wife:

I do not know it could be called a life, because Jan does not seem to feel anything, and has absolutely no demands. No appetite, no need to drink,

⁴⁹¹ “tiếng chân thình thịch hồi hã, tiếng người quát tháo, tiếng liên thanh chát chúa từng tràng ngoài hẻm vắng.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Ngôn ngữ tuyết*, 184.

⁴⁹² “Tôi hoang mang giữa khối lạc thân xác và mặc cảm tội lỗi là kẻ đứng ngoài, vô trách nhiệm trước những tang thương dồn dập trên đất nước.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Ngôn ngữ tuyết*, 190.

does not know when to excrete. He sleeps with both eyes open. Strangely, every year during the vernal equinox, when the stream near the house changes its season and echoes its sound, I hear Jan's calling⁴⁹³

Her husband's accident, which leads to a sudden (but natural) moment of closeness between the woman and Danny, her husband's son, also marks the rise of the woman's identity. The secret affair between her and her husband's son signals the autonomy of the Vietnamese woman with not one but two men. She shares her emotions with both of the men. She gives Jan's great sympathy for the unhappiness of his life. With Danny, she experiences both sexual pleasure and love. Both men also see her as an attractive, young and sensitive woman. More importantly, the sudden new sensation that arises in her simultaneously awakes the woman's consciousness of her role and status in the heterosexual marriage, or more generally in the status of an exile. The rise of her consciousness also shows that memory not only affects the man but also the woman. She remembers her miserable homeland that she left behind for the call of her heart:

I had the impression, as I walked into the door of Jan's house that I was starting a second life, leaving behind the fragmented memories of the past. The pieces of home submerge in the tropical sun. The destiny of the small country is full of uncertainties. The dreams of light flare on the bumpy road.⁴⁹⁴

Memory forces her to look back to the heterosexual marriage which is not seen as sweet but a waste of her youth:

Who, what did rob the best time of my life? There were not many directions for me to choose from. I used the time of my girlhood for sensational activities. I have lived, not for myself.⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹³ “Không biết có thể gọi đó là đời sống, vì Jan hình như không còn cảm nhận được gì, hoàn toàn không có những nhu cầu. Không thèm ăn, không đòi uống, không biết khi nào phải bài tiết. Chàng ngủ với hai mắt mở. Có điều lạ lùng, hàng năm tới độ xuân phân, con suối ngoài vực cạn chuyển mùa, cửa mình vọng tiếng, tôi lại nghe Jan ú ớ lay gọi.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Ngôn ngữ tuyết*, 200-1.

⁴⁹⁴ “Tôi có cảm tưởng, khi tôi bước qua ngạch cửa nhà Jan là tôi đang khởi đầu một đời sống thứ hai, bỏ lại sau lưng thời quá khứ vụn vãi những ký ức. Mảnh quê nhà ngập nắng nhiệt đới. Thân phận tiểu quốc đầy bất trắc. Những giấc mơ loà ánh sáng hoà châu lên mặt đất mấp mô.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Ngôn ngữ tuyết*, 187.

⁴⁹⁵ “Ài, cái gì đã cướp đoạt quãng thời gian tươi đẹp nhất của đời tôi? Đã không có nhiều hướng đi cho tôi chọn lựa. Tôi đã tiêu dùng thời con gái mình bằng những sinh hoạt bị cảm tính xách động. Tôi đã sống, không phải cho mình.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Ngôn ngữ tuyết*, 198.

To summarize, the hybridity as expressed in the case of Vietnamese women is manifold. First, it is shown in the special triangular relationship between Vietnamese women and two German men. She struggles to define happiness between the two men. More importantly, the journey of finding personal happiness is the active and conscious act of the woman. At first, she chooses Jan to escape from home. When falling into a cramped state in a marriage, she proactively chooses the second man, Danny, after her husband's death. She revisits her journey as an exile, expressing her pity for the land of misery, and concerning the real meaning of life in the host land. This process of perception expresses the state of the subject's hybridization, where the refugee is in the middle of assimilation or resistance, where they find themselves in the dilemma of re-defining their identity and the meaning of life.

In conclusion, hybridity has been shown through the relationship between Vietnamese immigrants and their foreign partners. I have demonstrated how the disharmony in the interracial love affairs causes the female protagonists to display hybrid identities. In these cases, hybridity is explained as the result of the heroines' obsession with memory as well as their consciousness about their double identities or their in-between-spaces. Hybridity also signals the protagonists' autonomy to become the active subjects in relation to their foreign partners and the search for their places.

The following section will focus on the relationship between the Vietnamese refugees and their home countries to explore the protagonists' search for identity. While the quest for identity in the female characters resurfaces when they experience disagreement in their emotional life, the quest for identity in the male characters is demonstrated as a way to release the urge of the boredom of life in the host land (the character Thuận in *Đóng lại dùm tôi cánh cửa sau cùng* (Please help me to close the last door)). The quest for identity is also proven to be a conscious response that refugees experience through their moving to new lands (the character Thụ in *Ngôn ngữ tuyết* (The Language of Snow) or through the protagonist's collisions with new cultures in the host land (Hoàng in *Xứ tưởng* (Utopia Land)). Through their acts of moving and experiencing new lands and cultures, the migrants in Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's stories re-define the essence of diaspora, which is more about the state of mind rather than the actual state of being

scattered. Memory and hybridity are expressed in a mixed form to demonstrate the protagonists' "quest for significance"⁴⁹⁶ in the host land.

5.2 In search of identity

In the short story *Đóng lại dùm tôi cánh cửa sau cùng* (Please help me to close the last door), the search for identity is expressed through character Thuần's interpretation of the dark patches in Paul Gauguin's painting. The tragic events in this painter's life are hidden in the lines and colors in his paintings, and Thuần's exploration of Gauguin's works is a metaphor for the protagonist's search for identity. Thuần is a Vietnamese refugee, considering his job, a gallery employee, as a livelihood rather than a job he does because of his passion for the arts. During his time at the gallery,

Thuần never sees himself as an insider, not integrated into the world of photography, of abstract sculptures, wooden frames, oil paintings or light color on precious papers. Thuần is like a person standing on the sidelines, separated by a strict rule, just taking a glance sometimes.⁴⁹⁷

He is satisfied with the simple and calm family and with the life of an "outsider" until the gallery opens an exhibition of Gauguin's paintings. At the exhibition, Thuần meets a Vietnamese girl who is passionate about these works of art. Initially, Thuần's search for Gauguin's compositions comes from his curiosity towards his fellow countrymen. Gradually, Thuần finds many similarities with his own life in Gauguin's work and life.

Gauguin was born in Peru but lived in southern France and Tahiti. Through his paintings, Gauguin expresses his search for the memories of his childhood, a paradise filled with sunlight in South America. His paintings reflect his unstable mood, the happiness to see into the shadow of his childhood or the desperation when he realizes he lost his paradise. The feelings portrayed through Gauguin's paintings are also thoughts that have been buried in Thuần's boring life:

⁴⁹⁶ Brodsky's term. See further in Joseph Brodsky, *On Grief and Reason Essays*.

⁴⁹⁷ "Thuần chưa hề có cảm giác là một người trong cuộc, chưa hội nhập vào thế giới của nhiếp ảnh, những đồ vật điêu khắc trừu tượng khó hiểu, những khung gỗ, tranh vẽ sơn dầu hay màu nước nhoà nhạt trên giấy quý. Thuần như kẻ đứng bên lề, tự mình tách ra khỏi một quy luật nào đó đã đóng khung, chỉ lâu lâu ghé mắt nhìn thoáng qua." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Dòng chữ tâm tình*, 48.

Just like Gauguin who lost his childhood, being incredibly skeptical of life, and urgently seeking a sublime realm, which he thought as ‘le paradis perdu’; Thuần also leaves his homeland behind and looks for the way to ‘a lost paradise’.⁴⁹⁸

Thuần finds his life, his ego and the rest of his life in Gauguin’s tragic life. He even envisions himself and his childhood in his imagination, as inspired by Gauguin’s paintings:

Though in this land the walls are gray, the roofs are dark, the days are cloudy in winter, but there is still a trail of sun deep down in Thuần. Since then, he does not need to be a talented painter but he can still paint. Red hibiscus flowers. Orange sunset. Brightful yellow. Fresh green peel of betel palm. Blue sky mixed with sunlight. Indigo dresses in villages. Purple paper flowers smiling in the sun at noon.⁴⁹⁹

The moment Thuần himself painting the picture of his own life marks by his engagement in the quest for identity of an exile, as Gauguin did. He realizes shockingly his space in no-where during his boredom life in Germany. The beautiful past is gone, the future is dim and gloomy:

My childhood fled quickly like the stream of sunshine. My youth also glimpsed silently. I am like the traveler sitting on the train to engage in a new journey, waving a station, leaving remaining people, saying goodbye to the gray smokes of nostalgia ... I just look back. The way, which I am going to go, does not stretch out.⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁸ “Nhu Gauguin đã lạc mất tuổi thơ, hoài nghi vô cùng trước cuộc sống, ráo riết đi tìm một cõi thăng hoa, chốn mà có lẽ ông đã nghĩ là ‘le paradis perdu’; Thuần cũng đã bỏ lại sau lưng một quê hương, đang mờ mịt trước lối tìm tới ‘một thiên đường đã đánh mất.’” Ngô Nguyễn Dũng, *Dòng chữ tâm tình*, 54.

⁴⁹⁹ “Dù nơi này bờ tường có xám, những mái nhà gạch ngói đen đui, ngày mùa đông mây giăng lê thê, nhưng tận cùng tâm tưởng Thuần mãi mãi chói sáng một vệt nắng. Từ đó, chàng không cần phải là một họa sĩ tài ba, cũng có thể pha màu vẽ nên bức họa. Màu đỏ hoa dâm bụt. Màu cam ráng chiều. Màu vàng chanh rực rỡ. Màu lục vỏ cau tươi. Màu lam khung trời mây pha nắng. Màu chàm những tà áo dân quê. Màu tím giàn hoa giấy vui cười trong nắng ban trưa.” Ngô Nguyễn Dũng, *Dòng chữ tâm tình*, 55.

⁵⁰⁰ “Tuổi thơ tôi trôi nhanh như một dòng nắng. Tuổi trẻ tôi thoáng qua lẳng lặng lúc nào không hay. Tôi như người lữ khách ngồi trong chuyến xe lửa dần thân vào cuộc du hành mới, vẫy tay chào sân ga, từ giã người ở lại, cáo biệt làn khói xám hoài niệm... Tôi chỉ nhìn lại. Đoạn đường tôi đi tới chưa trải ra.” Ngô Nguyễn Dũng, *Dòng chữ tâm tình*, 57.

The story ends with the grumbling voice of the character who realizes that he is on the sidelines of life, forever feeling nostalgic for the childhood memories as a way of maintaining identity. But the act of embracing the unreal memories of childhood is a sign of showing the Otherness of the protagonist:

I have considered myself as the exception of the life, the one who forever stands on the margin of the game, putting the hands behind my back to look at the chaos in the cycle of depression ... I am skeptical, living with many fragmented dreams. I lock myself in a rectangular frame, hanging up with the colors of the world of immaterial form, swimming in the stream of destiny. But there are still personal relationships, the emotional arcs I have built, the bumpy bridges spanning the sexual soggy water I was immersed passionately, the seeds of the birth I sowed and the obligations were arisen from grimy mud.⁵⁰¹

The train and the long journey are frequently used as metaphors for the refugee's quest for identity in Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's stories. They imply the mobility of the subjects, a characteristic associated with the journey of the exile community. The search of identity has been proved to be the desire of the refugees who experienced dull and dreary lives in the host land, such as the lives of Thuận in *Đóng lại dùm tôi cánh cửa sau cùng* (Please help me to close the last door), Thụ or Khôi in *Ngôn ngữ Tuyết* (The Language of Snow). In the latter story, Thụ and Khôi are two close friends from Vietnam. However, both fall in love with Hoàng, who later becomes Khôi's wife. Khôi is intelligent and lucky enough to study abroad in Germany right after his graduation. In contrast, Thụ drops out of the college examination and joins the army. Later, Thụ also comes to Germany as a refugee. The story focuses on the lives of Thụ, Khôi, and Hoàng when they were in Germany. Khôi, who used to desire to discover the world, finally compromises with the exploration of the world through books. He is satisfied with being a librarian in the city library. On

⁵⁰¹ “Tôi đã tự xem mình như một ngoại lệ của đời sống, kẻ mãi mãi đứng bên lề cuộc chơi, người chấp tay sau lưng rào bước nhìn vào cõi hỗn mang trong vòng trầm luân... Tôi hoài nghi miên man, sống với nhiều giấc mộng chấp nối. Tôi nhốt mình tàn tạ trong khung hình chữ nhật, treo lên bằng sợi sắc không, bơi lội bênh bồng trong dòng định mệnh. Nhưng vẫn còn đó những liên hệ cá nhân, những vòng cung tình cảm tôi gầy dựng, chiếc cầu gập ghềnh bắc qua con nước ướt sũng dầm dật tôi đã chìm đắm say mê, những hạt giống di sinh tôi đã gieo và những bồn phận nhú hoa từ đất bùn nghiệt ngã.” Ngô Nguyễn Dũng, *Dòng chữ tâm tình*, 58.

the contrary, Thụ enjoys his freedom by taking several trips around the world. The more he interacts with different cultures, the more he feels lonely:

As I sit and wait for the clouds to change their colors on the Tibetan plateau. Or, as I calmly walk down the rocky ridge of the Irish coast, looking out into the smoky Atlantic Ocean. At those moments, I learned that I was lonely, extremely lonely. The true hometown, I was far away. The hometown of the exiled, I do not want to return.⁵⁰²

The journey as the metaphorical search of identity reveals a new understanding of the diaspora. The loss of home ceases to be the refugee's source of nostalgia for a particular place, although the refugees still depend on the materiality of place. They still need the sense to smell or a sound to hear. But what makes someone "exported into diaspora" is less a specific place than a social context.⁵⁰³ The protagonist Thụ proposes this concept of an extended home as follows: "Homeland is the whole Earth. Mother tongue is the voiceless arrogant language of nature, regardless of skin color, race, religion or any concept of human life."⁵⁰⁴ The character sees his homeland in every place he has been. He listens to the language of nature like listening to his mother tongue. Even as the exiled, residing in a particular land is stranded. Thụ's longing for home is revealed in his delirium:

Thụ sees himself taking off his blanket, shoving the door to the furious land. He feels like a polar bear returning to the old icebergs, lifting his neck to roar joyfully. At the top of the cold earth is the place to hide the desires of the guy in his spring youth. Go and live, becoming a man who does not belong to any land.⁵⁰⁵

⁵⁰² "Như lúc anh ngồi chờ mây trời đổi màu trên bình nguyên Tây Tạng. Hay lúc anh bình tâm thả bộ sườn núi đá ven biển Ái Nhĩ Lan, trông ra Đại Tây Dương mờ khói sóng. Ngay trong giây phút đó, anh mới hay rằng mình là kẻ cô đơn, vô cùng cô đơn. Quê hương thật sự, anh đã xa. Quê hương lưu vong, anh không muốn trở lại." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Ngôn ngữ tuyết*, 22.

⁵⁰³ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 258.

⁵⁰⁴ "Quê hương là nguyên cả mặt đất này. Tiếng mẹ là thứ ngôn ngữ ngao mạn vô âm của thiên nhiên, không phân biệt màu da, chủng tộc, niềm tin hay bất kỳ quan niệm nhân sinh nào." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Ngôn ngữ tuyết*, 22.

⁵⁰⁵ "Thụ thấy mình thốc mèn, xô cửa chạy ra vùng đất trời đang nổi cơn thịnh nộ. Chàng thấy lòng rạo rực như con gấu tuyết trở lại chốn băng sơn cũ, ngẩng cổ rống tiếng hoan lạc. Nơi đỉnh địa cầu giá lạnh ấy là chỗ cất giấu những vọng ước chàng thời xuân xanh. Đi và sống, là một kẻ không tùy thuộc vào miền đất nào" Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Ngôn ngữ tuyết*, 22.

For the diasporics, *home*, which has been displaced and reimagined, is both actual and imagined, literal and metaphoric.

The writer Hoàng in the story *Xứ tưởng* (Utopia land) is one of the most prominent examples of the quest for identity by the refugees. Like the character Thụ in *Ngôn ngữ tuyết* (The Language of Snow), Hoàng actually undertakes the journey with two main purposes: to retrieve the old memory and to search for identity. *Xứ tưởng* (Utopia Land) has a familiar motif that appears in several of the short stories written by Ngô Nguyên Dũng in which main characters return to the old land to find their memories. Mr. Hoàng goes back to Madeira, a tourist attraction he had visited, renting the hotel he had once stayed at, travelling the landscapes that he had come. However, this short story delves deeper into the second journey of the male protagonist, which is the quest for identity. Like many main characters in Ngô Nguyên Dũng's short stories, Mr. Hoàng is also a victim of the obsession with memory. The memory forces him to return to his old place, Madeira. The memory forces him to face his real gender. Last but not least, the memory haunts him through the nostalgia of his homeland. The search for memories in the homeland is the most important narrative in the story:

The Mediterranean wave drowns me in the dream of nostalgia. There are many sounds there. The images from the past smoldering throughout the half-past century got up from the subconsciousness. 'Danh, wake up to school my son!' The call of my father waked me up every morning several decades ago. I opened my sleepy eyes. The clock rang seven hours, the Saigon sky was still grey. The rainy and sunny seasons in the wartime of the city. In the streets, I went back and forth every morning.⁵⁰⁶

The peaceful memories of the hometown reveal one of the reasons leading to the character's hybridity. For him, the hometown contains beautiful memories of his childhood and his relatives. Hometown is the first and foremost topic appearing in the exiled literature of the writer Hoàng:

⁵⁰⁶ "Tiếng sóng địa trung hải chìm tôi vào giấc chiêm bao hoài niệm. Văng vẳng đâu đây nhiều tiếng cười nói. Những hình bóng quá khứ âm ỉ suốt nửa thế kỷ từ tiềm thức ngoi dậy. «Danh, dậy đi học con!» Giọng cha gọi thức mỗi sáng của nhiều thập niên trước. Tôi hé mắt ngái ngủ. Đồng hồ gõ bảy tiếng, trời Sài gòn còn xám ngoét khuôn mặt chưa trang điểm. Những mùa nắng mùa mưa trong thành phố thời chiến. Những con đường đi về mỗi sáng trưa." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Xứ tưởng*, <http://vanviet.info/van/xu-tuong/>, accessed on 28 June 2018.

In the first short story of the exile, I recalled the experience of returning to my grandmother's home. The hometown of my father was the area of brackish water which was not far away from the floodplain, frayed in wartime, lurked among the streams of the red Cửu Long river, interweaved the swamps of malaria. Poor like a cup of white porridge. Thin like a hungry mosquito. Rạch Miễu, Mỏ Cày, Giồng Luông, Ba Tri ... The places were not forgotten in my memory, they opened in me every page of fairy homeland.⁵⁰⁷

However, the protagonist's memories of the homeland are fragmented, like the other refugees'. The peaceful memories of childhood are mixed with the tragedy of war and the fleeing from home. The fragmentary feature of the memories signals the protagonist's perception of the properties of the illusion and imagination of the homeland-in-memory.

The rubbish armistice agreement. The death of the country, which forced him to choose exile. The tragedy of the boat people on the East Sea. The 'umbilical cord' with his hometown that got cut. The doors of the past were closed. When deciding to start his life again, he realized his age was approximately thirty. In front of him is the blind turns. He deliberately seeks to redefine the word *hometown*.⁵⁰⁸

In his conversation with the tour guide, Mr. Hoàng expresses his understanding of the homeland and the state of being in exile, which is very close to the nature of the exiled in modern times. Before the surge of immigration by the Vietnamese in 1975, the Vietnamese experienced many different migration routes from north to south, from one

⁵⁰⁷ “Trong đoạn văn tha hương đầu tiên, tôi hồi tưởng những trải nghiệm trong lần về quê nội đưa đám bà tôi. Quê cha là một vùng nước lợ cách biển đất bồi không xa, rách nát thời chiến tranh, lẩn khuất giữa những mạch sông của dòng Cửu long xuất huyết, chằng chịt đầm lầy sốt rét. Nghèo như một chén cháo trắng. Ôm như một con muỗi đói. Rạch miễu, Mỏ cày, Giồng luông, Ba tri, ... Những địa danh chưa quên trong ký ức, mở ra trong tôi từng trang cổ tích quê hương.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Xứ tương*, <http://vanviet.info/van/xu-tuong/>, accessed on 28 June 2018.

⁵⁰⁸ “Đại lộ kinh hoàng tổng công kích lần hai. Hiệp định đình chiến rác rưởi. Cái chết không người vượt mặt của đất nước, buộc ông chọn kiếp lưu vong. Thảm kịch thuyền nhân trên biển đông. Cuống rún quê nhà đứt lìa. Những cánh cửa quá khứ khép lại. Khi quyết định làm lại từ đầu, bất giác ông nhận ra, tuổi đã xấp xỉ ba mươi. Sau lưng là mười chín năm mưa nắng hai mùa, trước mặt là những ngã rẽ mù cảm. Ông đắn đo tìm cách định nghĩa lại hai chữ *quê hương*.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Xứ tương*, <http://vanviet.info/van/xu-tuong/>, accessed on 28 June 2018.

region to another. Correspondingly, each group of Vietnamese migrants living in Germany possesses different backgrounds and political tendencies. The homeland for them evokes various memories and reminiscences. Hence, the writer Hoàng considers home to be an interior state rather than a geographical boundary:

My hometown, as well as my fatherland, is just an illusion, a noun that caused so many bloody conflicts, like any dislikes for religious or political reasons. I think that the homeland is not a geographic boundary but an internal state.⁵⁰⁹

The action of redefining the homeland of the protagonist has also brought new insights into the notion of exile. No matter where you were born, as long as you see yourself as the Other, you could be exiled even in your land. That is what the protagonist feels about his destiny:

Maybe I should say this, the hometown is the inner state depending on the context. The circumstances of my life and yours are not the same. I have been in exile for decades. My fatherland is no longer the same. My relatives were scattered everywhere. I was left home at the age of nineteen. When returning at the age of sixty, I found out my heart was not like before. The language, the food, the weather, and the land are still there, but I do not know why my heart kept remembering. For what or who, I do not know. I just know that my heart keeps filling up with memories as if I went to the wrong place and address. Yet when I have the chance I still return to see myself as the Other, a no-fatherland creature.⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰⁹ “Quê hương cũng như tổ quốc đối với tôi chỉ là một ảo tưởng, một danh từ đã gây ra nhiều xung khắc đâm máu, không thua những hiềm khích vì tôn giáo hoặc chủ nghĩa. Tôi nghĩ rằng, quê hương không phải là một biên giới địa lý, mà là một trạng thái nội tâm” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Xứ tương*, <http://vanviet.info/van/xu-tuong/>, accessed on 28 June 2018

⁵¹⁰ “Có lẽ tôi nên nói như thế này, quê hương là trạng thái nội tâm tùy thuộc vào ngoại cảnh. Hoàn cảnh sinh sống của tôi và của anh không giống nhau. Tôi là người lưu vong từ nhiều thập niên nay. Quê cha đất tổ tôi hiện nay không còn giống trước. Họ hàng thân nhân tôi tứ tán viễn phương. Tôi xa nhà lúc tuổi vừa mười chín. Trong lần trở lại, khi tuổi đời gấp gần sáu mươi, tôi mới thấy ra, tâm tình mình không còn như trước. Ngôn ngữ, món ăn, lần thời tiết cùng đất đai vẫn còn đó, nhưng không hiểu sao lòng tôi cứ quay quắt nhớ. Chuyện gì, ai, tôi không biết. Chỉ biết, cõi lòng tôi cứ canh cánh những khắc khoải, như thể mình đi lầm nơi, tới sai địa chỉ. Vậy mà, có dịp, tôi vẫn quay lại, để thấy mình là một tha nhân, một sinh vật vô tổ quốc.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Xứ tương*, <http://vanviet.info/van/xu-tuong/>, accessed on 28 June 2018.

In summary, the search for identity is demonstrated in the refugees' demands caused by the act of moving and interacting with new cultures. The protagonists in Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's short stories not only share their obsession with the memories and their concerns for the tragedies in the homeland but also their "quest for significance" in living in foreign countries. The expansion of the concept of diaspora through the perspective of the characters also shows the difference in Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's view. Diaspora is not only reflected in the relationship between the individual and his native land but also the different spaces experienced by the refugees. In these works, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng starts from the state of being a member of the diaspora to address the great themes of literature: love, death, an infinity of universe and limit of human life.

6. Customary literature as the representation of nostalgia

As described above, the diaspora literature itself is a manifestation of nostalgia, a way of "giving shape and meaning to longing."⁵¹¹ Through the analysis of memory and the emergence of the identity of the immigrants, I have illustrated how the writers deal with their nostalgia. They create their homes-in-imagination through writings, or in other words, their texts are their restorative nostalgia, the kind of virtual reality. In essence, restorative nostalgia is based on "the sense of loss of community and cohesion"⁵¹² to revive national symbols and myths. Instead of reconstructing monuments from the past, the invented tradition born from restorative nostalgia offers "a comforting collective script for individual longing."⁵¹³ To illustrate how modern societies express their nostalgia about the lost heritages in the past, Boym gave the example of the Sistine Chapel as an attempt to "restore a sense of the sacred believed to be missing from the modern world."⁵¹⁴ Based on Boym's understanding of restorative nostalgia as an act of "rebuild[ing] the lost home and patch[ing] up the memory gaps"⁵¹⁵ I will illustrate Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's short stories as the product of not only restorative but also reflective nostalgia. Through the analysis of the group of works focusing on rustic contexts, I argue that these works are the literary restoration of southern Vietnamese.

⁵¹¹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

Customary literature (*văn chương phong tục*) is a style of writing that its definition and characteristics can be understood most fundamentally, not exactly the same, through the concepts of rustic literature or local color or literary regionalism. While literary regionalism mainly refers to the American literature that appeared in the late 1860s, it is similar to customary literature written by the Vietnamese in the sense that it is about a particular region, especially “the peculiarities of dialect, manner, folklore, and landscape that distinguish the area.”⁵¹⁶ In general, this style of writing provides a nostalgic memory of times gone by.

With the formation of the literature written in the national language (*quốc ngữ*) in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the presence of the subject of customs and traditions began to be recognized in Vietnamese literature around the 1930s onwards. The existence of writings about customs has been recognized by the critic Kiều Thanh Quế (pseudonym Mộc Khuê) in the article *Ba mươi năm văn học Việt Nam* (Thirty years of Vietnamese literature), in which the authors named cleverly describe the customs of each region in Vietnam:

The fictions of customs about the uplands in the North Vietnam by Lan Khai (*Tiếng gọi của rừng thẳm, Suối đàn, Truyện lạ đường rừng*), about the mountainous places in the Central Vietnam by Lưu Trọng Lư (*Khói lam chiều, Chiếc cáng xanh*), by Trần Tiêu (*Con trâu, Chồng con*) and especially *Lều chõng cự đại* by Ngô Tất Tố.⁵¹⁷

The researcher Vũ Ngọc Phan also commended the fiction *Con trâu* (Buffalo) by Trần Tiêu as a typical work describing “the life and customs of the people living in a countryside in North Vietnam.”⁵¹⁸ Around the same time in the South, the writer Phi Vân is also famous for a series of works about the countryside such as *Đồng quê* (1942), *Dân quê* (1949), *Tình quê* (1949), *Cô gái quê* (1950), focusing on lives of people living in Mekong Delta regions. He is considered a pioneer writer, “opening a new phase of

⁵¹⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/art/local-color>. See further about literary regionalism in John A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 1984.

⁵¹⁷ “Phong tục tiểu thuyết về miền thượng du Bắc Kỳ của Lan Khai (*Tiếng gọi của rừng thẳm, Suối đàn, Truyện lạ đường rừng*), về miền sơn cước Trung Kỳ của Lưu Trọng Lư (*Khói lam chiều, Chiếc cáng xanh*), của Trần Tiêu (*Con trâu, Chồng con*) và nhất là quyển *Lều chõng cự đại* của Ngô Tất Tố.” Mộc Khuê, *Ba mươi năm văn học*, 51.

⁵¹⁸ “sự sống và tính tình phong tục của người dân quê miền Bắc” Vũ Ngọc Phan, *Nhà văn hiện đại*, 784.

Southern-style,”⁵¹⁹ paving the way for authors like Bình Nguyên Lộc or Sơn Nam, who are also leading writers that specialized in customary literature later on.

The customary literature, especially that about the customs of South Vietnam, became one of the main styles of writing of Vietnamese literature from 1954-1975⁵²⁰. As explained by Võ Phiến, this is partly because of the migration phenomenon of the Northern writers who came to the South after 1954.⁵²¹ According to him, the migration of North and Central people into the South (some of them are artists, such as Phạm Việt Tuyền, Nguyễn Văn Xuân, Vũ Bằng, Nhật Tiến, Lê Tất Điều, Thanh Tâm Tuyền, Nguyễn Đình Toàn, Võ Phiến) contributed to the increase in the number of authors and the works reflecting customary themes and topics in the South Vietnam.

In addition to the Southern writers who focused on Southern lifestyle, society and customs such as Hồ Hữu Tường, Sơn Nam, Bình Nguyên Lộc, Lê Xuyên, Vũ Bình and Nguyễn Thị Thụy Vũ (prose); Nguyễn Văn Hào, Vương Hồng Sển and Đông Hồ (monographs), Southern customs also became the subject in the works of migrant writers who were from the North and Central Vietnam, such as Phạm Việt Tuyền, Nguyễn Văn Xuân and Vũ Bằng. The culture of the South is not only described through the topics but also the dialects, or according to Võ Phiến’s term “Southern register” (*giọng Nam*), which is expressed through the works of the writers Thanh Tâm Tuyền, Võ Phiến or Viên Linh. These characteristics have made the writings on the subject of customs become a unique trend in Vietnamese literature.

While writing about customs is one of the writing trends in the South, there are hardly any studies which show the popularity of this trend in the literature of North Vietnam from 1954 onwards. Instead, the most important topic within Northern literature was the anti-American resistance by the Vietnamese centering on cross-cutting themes such as the affirmation and praise of “revolutionary heroism of all classes of people in combat and production, to protect and build socialism in the North, to fight for the liberation of the South, to achieve the unification of the country.”⁵²² The Vietnamese

⁵¹⁹ Đoàn Lê Giang, *Văn học Nam bộ 1932-1945 Một cái nhìn toàn cảnh*, http://www.hcmup.edu.vn/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6753%3Avn-hc-nam-b-1932-1945-mt-cai-nhin-toan-cn&site=30. Accessed on 18 June 2019.

⁵²⁰ Nguyễn Vy Khanh, *Về văn học miền Nam tự do 1954-1975 Phần 1 Một thời văn chương*, <https://sites.google.com/site/tuyentapnguyenvykhanh/tuyen-tap/van-hoc-mien-nam-tu-do-1954-75-phan-1-mot-thoi-van-chuong>. Accessed on 21 June 2019.

⁵²¹ Võ Phiến, *Văn học miền Nam 1954-1975 (Tổng quan)*.

⁵²² Phong Lê, *Văn học Việt Nam hiện đại: Lịch sử và lý luận*, 425.

literature from 1954-1975, therefore, is called the literature to fight American to save the country (*Văn học chống Mỹ cứu nước*) by Phong Lê.

In general, customary literature expresses the deep concern and love of writers for their homeland and its regional cultures. However, in the context of modern Vietnamese literature, the compositions written about customs are not much compared to the works reflecting the fluctuations of Vietnamese history in the 20th century, both in war and post-war periods. By the 21st century, the situation is similar to the Vietnamese literature in Vietnam and overseas. Some notable authors who write about the countryside topics in Vietnam are Nguyễn Ngọc Tư (Cà Mau province, Vietnam), Hồ Trường An (in France), Phong Hưng Lưu Nhơn Nghĩa (in Germany and Australia), Huy Giang (in Germany) and Ngô Nguyên Dũng (in Germany). In the case of Ngô Nguyên Dũng, the compositions on customary topics will be listed below, accounting for a small portion of his compositions published in his collections of short stories. The novel *Núi đoạn sông lìa* (Broken Mountain, Separated River), which focuses entirely on the context of the Mekong Delta region, can be seen as a turning point in Ngô Nguyên Dũng's writing career. This novel will be analyzed not only as a typical customary novel, that is, focusing entirely on the daily lives of the people in the Mekong Delta. Instead, I will examine the conflicts between the ruling and ruled classes that are reflected in this novel to analyze the complex nature of social and cultural life in the countryside in the South Vietnamese.

Ngô Nguyên Dũng has written several short stories that can be described as customary literature, consisting of *Ao cá sấu* (Crocodile Pond), *Tháp Chạp, chợ Rằm* (December, The Market in New Moon), *Hình bóng cũ* (The Old Image), *Hương đêm vườn ổi chín* (Night Smell in the Guava Garden), *Câu chuyện thầy Hương Quán*⁵²³ (The Story of Hương Quán), *Hòn công lửa* (The Island of Fire Crab), *Nhân chứng* (The Witness), *Đệ tam khoái tửu điểm* (The Pub of The Most Three Pleasures), *Mưa ngũ cung* (Pentatonic Rain), and the fiction *Núi đoạn sông lìa* (Broken Mountain Separated River). Compared with the other works of customary literature written by other Southern writers in Vietnam, Ngô Nguyên Dũng's writings have some remarkable features. Although the context of South Vietnam is thoroughly recreated in the works, the ideology is expressed differently. Beside the works depicting the customs of the people in the Mekong River region such as *Hình bóng cũ* (The Old Image), *Nhân chứng* (The Witness), *Mưa ngũ cung*

⁵²³ *Hương quán* is the head of police, controlling of traffic system in South Vietnam.

(Pentatonic Rain), *Đệ tam khoái tửu điểm* (The Pub of The Most Three Pleasures), *Ao cá sấu* (Crocodile Pond), or *Tháp Chạp, chợ Rằm* (December, The Market in New Moon), Ngô Nguyên Dũng integrates the sentiments of the refugees in *Câu chuyện thầy Hương Quán* (The Story of Hương Quán), mentioning the historical events in South Vietnam (such as the conflict between Việt Minh and Hoà Hảo in *Ao cá sấu* (Crocodile Pond), thereby revealing the political tendency of the author (*Mưa ngũ cung* (Pentatonic Rain) in the collection of *Hòn còng lửa* (The Island of Fire Crab), *Hương đêm vườn ổi chín* (Night Smell in the Guava Garden) and *Núi đoạn sông lia* (Broken Mountain Separated River). Especially, although living in Mekong Delta region, Ngô Nguyên Dũng's protagonists are mostly educated and use the language used by the urban classes of South Vietnam, such as the protagonist Hương Quán or those who belong to the middle-class. The differences in how Ngô Nguyên Dũng builds his characters and expresses the author's artistic viewpoints reveal the specific features of customary literature written by Vietnamese writers living overseas.

Like writers living in Vietnam, the migration writers yearn to exploit the national treasure of folk culture. This desire manifests the diaspora's love for the homeland and their longing to return home. The composition of customary literature is one of the ways for them to transform the local customs and culture into prose, a form of reviving lost memories. Unlike the local writers, migration writers possess a perspective in which both the characteristics of the home and abroad become more visible and meaningful. Their privileged perspective, which is the result of their immigration and integration into the culture of their host land, is expressed through how they re-consider Vietnamese cultural values in the context of globalization and reveal both subjective and objective views about these legacies. The act of reconstructing the Southerner rustic contexts while giving them new meanings demonstrates the nature of restorative nostalgic in transhistorical restoring the cultural heritage of the past transhistorically instead of the pure act of total reconstruction.

In this section, I will analyze Ngô Nguyên Dũng's customary literature in his short stories and fiction to clarify the expression of nostalgia in the work. Nostalgia here is revealed through the subject matters and the register in the works. In addition to the short stories that have published online and in multiple journals, the novel *Núi đoạn sông lia* (Broken Mountain, Separated River) marks the author's effort to deal with a long-term

work which is set in the countryside of South Vietnam. In this novel, Ngô Nguyên Dũng exploits several historical events in the country such as the activities of Việt Minh in rural South Vietnam and the influence of Buddhism on the spiritual life of the Southerners, thereby describing the status of separation and evacuation of the Southern people during the resistance years against the French. I will prove that the composition of customary writings is a way for the author to create the lost home in his way.

6.1. The customs and beliefs of the Southerners in Mekong Delta through Ngô Nguyên Dũng's short stories

Ngô Nguyên Dũng's creating the lost homeland is shown through his emphasis on the lifestyle of the people living in Mekong Delta in the short stories *Tháng Chạp, chợ Rằm* (December, The Market in New Moon) and *Đệ tam khoái tửu điểm* (The Pub of The Most Three Pleasures). For example, the short story *Tháp Chạp, chợ Rằm* (December, The Market in New Moon) depicts the cultural practice of the locals, which is shown in their visit to the market on the full moon day. The market, which is observed through the eyes of the two young girls Thập and Nha, is crowded with many cultural significances. The market is a place where people sell their hand-made products. It is also a place where cultural performances take place, such as the worship of a boat or the performance of martial arts. Through the two sisters' visit to the market on the fifteenth day, Ngô Nguyên Dũng rekindles the cultural memories of the people in Mekong Delta.

It is not just the cultural customs but also the characteristics of the Southerners are described in Ngô Nguyên Dũng's works. The people living in Mekong Delta are normally characterized by their honesty and rustic nature. Therefore, their belief in supernatural powers is seen as familiar behavior, which is mentioned in the two short stories *Nhân chứng* (The witness) and *Câu chuyện thầy Hương Quán* (Hương Quán's story). By reflecting on the spiritual life of the locals, Ngô Nguyên Dũng emphasizes the philosophy of the idealistic of the locals.

In the short story *Nhân chứng* (The Witness), through the phenomenon of a meteor, known colloquially as a shooting star, Ngô Nguyên Dũng raises an interesting psychological characteristic of the Southerners living in Mekong Delta, which is their belief of supernatural phenomena. The character Huy Sơn, a journalist, is assigned to go to Tiền Giang province to find out about the phenomenon of the shooting star, which

exists in the form of a huge stone in the field. The meteor is an inherently natural phenomenon in the universe whereby meteorites pierce the atmosphere and collide with other materials, glowing and falling into the ground. However, during the investigation, the journalist encounters different reactions from people about this phenomenon. The first witness is Mrs. Út's family. Mrs. Út's family is the representative of the common people, considering the meteorite phenomenon as "the fall of God."⁵²⁴ In their view, everything has a soul, including the stone:

You should not think of the house, banana trees or the stone lying on the road as inanimate objects. I believe they have souls too, not to mention the rock being thrown into the field. Whenever there is a soul, there must be karma of the past and future. Whenever there is karma of the past and future, there is the law of cause and effect, good and bad.⁵²⁵

The second witness is a monk at Tịnh Độ Temple. When witnessing the meteor, the monk feels like it is the end of the world and reminisces about his life for a few seconds. Being an orphan and having been raised by the abbot in the temple, the monk learned how to worship Buddha during his childhood. The temptations for lust in his adulthood were always suppressed by prayers. He vowed to worship Buddha for the rest of his life and became an abbot in the temple. The investigation of the meteor is just a premise for the journalist to realize the nihilism of the real-life as well as the minuteness and finiteness of human life. An illustration of the finiteness of human life is expressed through the monk's story, when he displays an invisible resistance and devotes his entire life to Buddhism. The stone is the embodiment of the universe and a reminder of the state of being a refugee in the universe. The story ends with the stone slowly sinking into the mud, implying the nothingness of real life.

The short story *Câu chuyện thầy Hương Quán* (Hương Quán's story) puts an emphasis on the local's belief in the soul of things. Only one turtle that got lost offshore and landed on the mainland was enough for the people in Mỏ Cày, a small village on the bank of Hàm Luông River, to stir up: "Some people think it is a good omen. Some said

⁵²⁴ "bà giăng bà xẹt" Ngô Nguyên Dũng 2018, <https://damau.org/archives/1960>.

⁵²⁵ "Nè, thầy đừng tưởng cái cột nhà, cây chuối, viên sạn nằm giữa lộ là những vật vô tri vô giác. Tui tin là tui nó còn có linh hồn thì nói chi tới cái tảng đá bà xỏ một đồng ngoài ruộng. Mà hễ có linh hồn, thì phải có chương nghiệp khứ lai. Đã có chương nghiệp khứ lai thì ắt có nhân có quả, có thiện có ác, có tốt có xấu." Ngô Nguyên Dũng 2018, <https://damau.org/archives/1960>.

bad luck is coming.”⁵²⁶ Even the hexagons painted on the tortoiseshell were interpreted by the locals as the ancient Chinese characters, which are associated with the legend of the sacred Tortoise in the Hoàn Kiếm lake. Derived from the folk beliefs of the Southerners, Ngô Nguyên Dũng expresses the refugees’ minds. Here, the drift of the turtle is understood to be a metaphor for the migration of the Vietnamese. The turtle finding its way to the sea is a sign of migration of the South Vietnamese people:

Maybe this is the sacred turtle which has been swept up by the sword in the ancient past ... has dug the land from the Hoàn Kiếm Lake to the Pacific Ocean to South Vietnam in 1954, when the country was divided. The short time spent living in the South is compared to the days the turtle drifted to the beach of Hàm Luông to avoid the bad weather, or more profound comparison, it was a period from 1954 to 1975 that the people of South Vietnam enjoyed freedom. The fierce war is truly the zigzag lines that the tortoise made on the sand, the omen of the hopeless, no escape. Then the turtle quietly making its way back to the sea is a harbinger of the act of crossing the sea to find freedom of the Vietnamese people over the years?⁵²⁷

6.2 Condemnation of the inequality of the landlord-tenant relationship

In the short stories *Hình bóng cũ* (The Old Image) and *Hương đêm vườn ổi chín* (Smell in the Guava Garden at Night), Ngô Nguyên Dũng focuses on the injustice of the landlord-tenant relationship in South Vietnam. By building the context of the southwestern region during the resistance war against the French, the author expresses his deep sympathy for the miserable peasants and denounces the crimes of the landlord class. The story of the farmer’s daughter Huệ is a typical example of the humble and underprivileged status of

⁵²⁶ “Người thì cho đó là điềm lành. Kẻ thì nói mạt vận cận kề.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Dòng chữ tâm tình*, 70.

⁵²⁷ “Biết đâu chừng chính cái ông thần rùa ngậm kiếm dựng vua thuở xa xưa nào đã... đào đất từ hồ Hoàn Kiếm ra Thái Bình Dương tìm đường vô Nam năm 1954, khi đất nước mình chia đôi. Những năm ngắn ngủi sống trong Nam ví như mấy ngày ông rùa tấp vào bãi cửa sông Hàm Luông để tránh thời tiết xấu, hoặc ví von sâu xa hơn, đó chẳng qua là quãng đời từ năm 1954 tới năm 1975 mà dân miền Nam còn được hưởng không khí tự do. Cuộc chiến tranh tương tàn, khốc liệt đúng là những đường chân vẽ ngoằn ngoèo, ngờ nghệch, ngang dọc chằng chịt của ông rùa trên cát, một điềm linh ứng vô vọng, không lối thoát. Rồi hôm ông rùa lặng lẽ tìm trở ra biển có phải là điềm báo trước viễn ảnh cuộc vượt biên tìm tự do của dân Việt những năm qua?” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Dòng chữ tâm tình*, 74-5.

the farmers. Born as a daughter of a farmer, when Huệ was in puberty, she had to go to the landlord's house to become a maid. The heartache of the poor daughter is described in the details of the girl preparing gifts for her parents on the occasion of Tết. In the absence of money, the girl could only send her parents "a few yards of cloth, black and white satin. Half a dozen dried persimmon. One of the cheapest types of sausage. Four candles to worship grandparents and Buddha."⁵²⁸

Meanwhile, Huệ's parents as tenants have to tribute gifts, which are usually delicious and rare specialties, to the landlord's family:

She [Huệ] looked at the barrel of white rice, brown rice, the pair of ducks, and chickens ... that were brought by domestic staff and laid on the porch of the house with tears.⁵²⁹

Paradoxically, Huệ falls in love with Thiềm, the son of the landlord Thiết. The tragic love affair leads to the dismissal of both from the landlord's house. Hence they have to live poorly for the rest of their lives. In this story, Ngô Nguyên Dũng paints a gloomy picture of the life of the farmers in South Vietnam, prompting the reader to feel bitter about this painful period in Vietnamese history.

Similarly, *Hương đêm vườn ổi chín* (Smell in the Guava Garden at Night) is a denunciation of injustice in the landlord-tenant relationship in which the tenants are subject to much oppression and exploitation by the landlord. The story revolves around a murder case which contains a number of extraordinary happenings in An Thới village. The attorney Răng receives a letter of denunciation from the landlord Lê Đắc Phước about the death of his daughter, Miss Cẩm Hồng. The accused was the tenant Phát, who recently married Cẩm Hồng. During the wedding, Cẩm Hồng was mysteriously murdered. The tenant Phát was suspected of being the culprit and was arrested by the landlord Phước. Thanks to the process of observation and interrogation of local people, the attorney Răng found the perpetrator. It turned out that Miss Cẩm Hồng had a secret relationship with the boatman Sầm, which led to her pregnancy. In order to hide her affair, she tried to marry the tenant Phát. The boatman killed her in his jealousy, while the landlord Phước tried to

⁵²⁸ "vải thước vải ú, vải xa-teng đen trắng. Nửa chục hồng khô. Một ký lạc xưởng loại rê tiền. Bốn cây đèn cầy để cúng ông bà, đốt bàn thờ Phật." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Dòng chữ tâm tình*, 123.

⁵²⁹ "Nàng ngó thùng gạo trắng, gạo lứt, cặp vịt, đôi gà ... được gia nhân đem vô bày biện trên hiên nhà mà ứa nước mắt." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Dòng chữ tâm tình*, 124.

blame the crime to the poor peasant Phát. Without an investigation, the tenant would have been sentenced to death. The death of Miss Cẩm Hồng is understood to be the price paid for her promiscuousness with the boatman and the lie that she told the tenant Phát. The murderous behavior of the boatman Sầm is also explained by the anger of the afflicted man. Therefore, the culprit is worth being pitied rather than being condemned. The narrator concludes at the end of the story:

Finally, the culprit in this murder is more pitiful than the blamed. From Sầm, Phát to Miss Ba Hồng, all are victims of the landlord class, peasantry and the noble, tolerant attitude of the French colonialists.⁵³⁰

6.3 Describing historical changes during the resistance war against the French

Not only does Ngô Nguyên Dững depict the cultural practices of the people in Mekong Delta and condemn the inequality in the landlord-farmer relations but he also describes the historical changes in the South during the war against the French. In the process of building a lost homeland through literature, Ngô Nguyên Dững expresses his concern not only about cultural issues but also historical and social events. Historical fluctuations during the resistance against the French are briefly mentioned in the short story *Hòn còng lửa* (The Island of Fire Crab). In the fiction *Núi đoạn sông lia* (Broken Mountain Separated Mountain), the historical events of the nation are described in detail. Set in the Mekong River Delta during the resistance against the French, this novel centers around the prosperity and decay of a middle-class family in South Vietnam. The customs, habits, and lifestyles of Cẩm, the protagonist, and her family are explained in relation to the fluctuation of the times: the miserable circumstances of the locals in the colonial period, the religious differences and the opposing political trends among the races. Each member of Cẩm's family represents a different destiny for the people living in the South. Therefore, each option of the character symbolizes the choice of the Southern class in the midst of the chaos of the nation. Through his first novel, Ngô Nguyên Dững has

revived the mysterious legend in the period of land clearance of the mangroves forest, the wild region of South pole with the brave and naive

⁵³⁰ “Ngẫm cho ra lẽ, thủ phạm trong vụ án mạng này đáng thương hơn đáng trách. Từ Sầm cho tới Phát, lẫn cô Ba Hồng, tất cả đều là nạn nhân của giai cấp địa chủ, tá điền và thái độ trịch thượng, dung túng của thực dân Pháp.” Ngô Nguyên Dững, *Hương đêm vườn ổi chín*, 93.

locals. The way which was paved by the generations of Bình Nguyên Lộc, Sơn Nam, Lê Xuyên is now continued and deloped by Ngô Nguyên Dũng and other overseas writers.⁵³¹

In order to clarify how Ngô Nguyên Dũng created a lost homeland by re-establishing a homeland in the colonial period, I will now analyze the novel based on three factors: the structure of the work, the technique of building characters and the artistic discourse reflected in the work.

The structure of the work: points of view and literary spaces

In terms of the work structure, Ngô Nguyên Dũng employs a common style of writing that was mostly used by other writers focusing on customary literature such as Hồ Trường An, Sơn Nam or Bình Nguyên Lộc. By analyzing how Ngô Nguyên Dũng used these techniques in creating the narrative, point of view of the narrator, the construction of time and space in the work, I argue that Ngô Nguyên Dũng consciously follows the above-mentioned authors' way of composition. This is to preserve cultural vestiges through writing and to establish a collective memory for those readers who left the South.

Núi đoạn sông lìa (Broken Mountain Separated River) is told through the use of a third-person narrative, i.e the viewpoint of Cầm, the youngest daughter in a Southern middle-class family. It is not an accident that Cầm is chosen as the narrator in the novel. Cầm's sensitivity to the fluctuations around her life transforms her into an observer, who connects readers with the psychological developments of other members in Cầm's family. The author cleverly describes Cầm's sensitivity through her vague recognition of the loss of her family member as though she was just a little girl:

Cầm wakes up when the sunlight shines. Only Cầm is lying there. The house is suddenly quiet [...] Cầm does not leave the bed hurriedly. In the summer vacation, a day of Cầm is endless. But this morning, she has a sense of doubt and is almost afraid, when she has to leave the bedroom to find out what happened to her mother last night.⁵³²

⁵³¹ “làm sống lại một thứ huyền sử thời kì khai hoang của vùng rừng đước, đất mới cực Nam hoang sơ với những con người chon chắt, quả cảm. Những gì thế hệ Bình Nguyên Lộc, Sơn Nam, Lê Xuyên mở đường, nay Ngô Nguyên Dũng cùng các nhà văn hải ngoại khác tiếp nối và phát triển.” Nguyễn Mộng Giác, *Nghĩ về truyện Ngô Nguyên Dũng*, 189.

⁵³² “Cầm tỉnh giấc khi ánh ban mai loang loáng. Cũng chỉ mình Cầm nằm đó. Gian nhà đột nhiên lặng lẽ [...] Cầm không rời giường vội. Đang mùa bãi trường, một ngày của Cầm lê thê

The sensitivity of Cầm is referred to as “the eye of the second person”, which helps her not only anticipate the future but also the past:

Through the experienced eye of the second person, Cầm recognizes many new details, distinguishing between the extremely wide and the extremely narrow. This makes Cầm both happy and afraid. The keen eye of the second person in Cầm contains many mysteries, like the contents of thick books in her father’s locked cabinet. And, for the first time in her life, Cầm sees herself suspiciously as not only having a glorious future ahead but also a dull past behind her.⁵³³

Also, using the viewpoint of the youngest girl in the family is the way for the author to create an illusory atmosphere in the story. Cầm accepts incidents with the child’s immature knowledge. Therefore, the narrative scenarios are shed through Cầm’s point of view both real and unreal, both right and wrong. Hence the novel is lively and suggestive. For example, when describing the villagers’ fleeing from a flood at Phụng Temple, the author uses the vision of the little girl to describe the chaos of the escape:

It was not just her family but many people fleeing to Phụng Mountain. People, like the mischief of mice from the caves to drawback. The calling, shouting, cursing and crying mixed with cattle sound echo in narrow land, which is only a flat ground near the entrance to the temple. The grass is crushed and muddy, slippery like oil.⁵³⁴

In a panic, Cầm fainted and dreamt of the love affair between her sister Châu and the teacher Hoàng. This affair, which was viewed in Cầm’s delirium, makes readers doubt

không dứt. Nhưng sáng nay Cầm có cảm giác nghi ngại, gần như sợ hãi, khi phải rời buồng ngủ bước ra để nhận biết chuyện gì đã xảy tới cho má khuya qua.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông lia*, 2. (We use the Word file of this novel which is sent directly to us by Ngô Nguyên Dũng.)

⁵³³ “Bằng nhãn quan của kẻ thứ hai, sành sỏi, Cầm nhận ra nhiều chi tiết mới mẻ, phân biệt rạch ròi giữa cái vô cùng rộng với cái vô cùng chật. Điều này khiến Cầm vừa thích thú vừa lo sợ. Hai con mắt tinh tường của kẻ thứ hai trong Cầm chứa đựng nhiều bí ẩn, như nội dung những pho sách dày cộm của ba khoá kín trong tủ. Và, lần đầu tiên trong đời, Cầm ngỡ ngàng thấy ra mình không những còn một tương lai thậm thụt trước mắt, mà có cả những quá khứ mờ mịt sau lưng.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông lia*, 13.

⁵³⁴ “Không phải chỉ riêng gia đình ba má tản cư lên núi Phụng, mà sa số. Người, như lũ chuột nước lụt, từ hang hốc đâu kéo về, lở nhỏ. Tiếng gọi nhau, tiếng quát tháo, tiếng chửi rủa, tiếng than khóc lẫn tiếng gia súc vang vẳng chỗ đất hẹp, nơi bằng phẳng duy nhất gần lối lên chùa. Đất cỏ nát bấy chân người, lầy lội bùn sinh, trơn như thoa mỡ.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông lia*, 19.

the authenticity of the affair. In fact, the suspicion about the authenticity of this affair is the author's way to reflect the nature of love between Châu and Hoàng, which is full of illusions and misconceptions.

However, using the view of the little girl, Cẩm, to narrate the story reveals many limitations. She could only observe and comment on the behavior of those people around her. Therefore, the focalization is limited. This is where the omniscient narrator appears. As the outsider looking into the story, the omniscient narrator describes the psychological processes of the remaining characters in the novel. Hence, the narration is unlimited. The use of the omniscient narrator with a thorough viewpoint is a suitable solution for the author to describe the psychology of many characters in the novel, which goes beyond the observation and perception of the third-person narrator Cẩm. Throughout the novel, the characters' psychology changes, such as the character Châu's confusion and shyness when dating the teacher Hoàng, the character Chúc's confusion and ignorance when meeting Ms. Bạch Liên, the resentment of the boatman Năm Tụ when being exploited by the Bông family, are clearly revealed through the third person's omniscient point of view.

When using the omniscient narrator to delve into the psychological processes of the characters system, Ngô Nguyên Dũng creates a cultural space in the South to reflect on the intellectual consciousness of residents in the South. The Southern space built into the work creates the illusion of a lost world to help readers to feel the characters' thoughts. It can be said that space in the work is an artistic method for expressing Ngô Nguyên Dũng's worldview. The cultural space is portrayed both specifically and generally. The author does not refer to the name of the village, only describing a common Western region. The time is also referred to generally. The author does not specify a specific period. The readers only imagine the plot which is built during the period of the Six Provinces of Southern Vietnam under the French colonization. The ambiguity in the sketching of space and time reflects the feature of the vagueness of a lost home in memory. The memory of the exile is disjointed. Also, the authenticity of space and time is overshadowed by the evocation of collective space and time.

In terms of daily living space, Ngô Nguyên Dũng starts to describe the lifestyle of Cẩm's family as a typical example. For example, the writer focuses on the family house, the children's school or even the provincial market where the two sisters go shopping. The novel begins with a peaceful scene in Cẩm's family, a middle-class family

in the Mekong Delta region. Cầm's family is described as the modern family where the daughters are sent to the village school. The economic conditions are relatively stable. Cầm's father is a trader doing business away from home. Her mother and grandmother take care of household chores. The family has a maid Ba Khởi and a gardener as well as a boatman Năm Tự. The fiction leads the reader to the poetic natural setting through the description of Cầm's house:

The house is located near an opaque river in rainy and sunny seasons. The garden is covered with shady trees, where Cầm often stays during dry days. There are some purple star apple plants, two trees of king orange, one plum tree and one peach tree, two old guava trees next to the well which is only used during the six sunny months, a star fruit tree and a row of banana trees reflecting their leaves on the riverside. In front of the house grows a few flowerpots full of tagetes, cockscombs and a lot of bonsai in blue crockery, enameled pots which are decorated with images of mountains, water or clouds, being taken care of and displayed on both sides of the brick-lined walkway by the grandfather. The wooden arching door is not usually locked but there is a small bell hanging there. The bronze bell is bought somewhere in the north by dad. The bell sound is clear, cheerful and hospitable. On the left side of the door, a bush of hibiscus blooms with red flowers on the ivy fence.⁵³⁵

The typical lifestyle of the rural family in the South is illustrated through the way that the living space is arranged corresponding to the gender of characters. Particularly, female characters are associated with domestic spaces while male characters are linked with outdoor spaces. For example, Cầm or Châu is often found in spaces such as in their house, school or provincial markets. The same as the mother or the grandmothers, their

⁵³⁵ “Ngôi nhà nằm bên dòng sông đục trong hai mùa mưa nắng. Vườn cây êm ả phủ bóng mát, chỗ Cầm thường quanh quất những khi tiết trời khô ráo. Có vài gốc vú sữa tím, hai cây cam sành, một cây mận chua và một cây mận hồng đào, hai cây ôi lão cạnh giếng nước chỉ sử dụng sáu tháng nắng, một cây khế và hàng chuối sứ soi lá ven sông. Trước nhà trồng dăm khóm vạn thọ, mấy bụi mồng gà và thật nhiều cây kiểng lùn trong chén sành men lam, chậu sứ trắng men phủ vân, sơn thủy được bàn tay ông nội chăm bón, bày biện hai bên lối đi lát gạch nung. Cửa gỗ vòng cung thường không khoá, máng tôn teng quả chuông con. Chuông bằng đồng đúc ba mùa được trong lần phiêu bạt đầu độ tận phương bắc. Tiếng chuông trong trẻo, vui tươi, hiều khách. Bên trái cánh cửa, bụi dâm bụt ản ngại ngừng bông đỏ trong hàng đậu trường xuân.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông lìa*, 1.

lives are built in the space of their house, their ways to the market or the temple. With the maid, her space is the kitchen or a garden in front of the yard. In contrast, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng puts male characters in open and dynamic spaces, referring to the men's obligation to engage in social activities. For instance, the space of the father is linked with the streets that he goes through when doing his business. Chúc, the eldest son in the family, is described in association with the long rivers and distributary channels. The arrangement of water spaces in the case of Chúc also signals his future status, as he goes on to live away from home. In general, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng puts the characters into different spaces depending on the characters' actions and personalities.

In addition to living space in the family, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng pays special attention to the natural context of the Mekong Delta. The rural South Vietnam described through Mr. Bông's hunting trips and the boatman Năm Tụ is a wild swamp, full of phragmites and reeds, canals filled with silt running along the riverside villages, bird sanctuaries with numerous species of birds. The re-creation of the wilderness of Mekong Delta, when the provinces were still deserted marshlands, is a way for the author to reproduce a lost homeland because the modern Mekong Delta provinces have been urbanized.

Moreover, the rebuilding of the wild Mekong Delta regions reveals the author's recognition of a true native land. The beauty of the Southern homeland-in-memory is created by the wild natural scenery and rich ecosystem amid the vast immensity of heaven and earth, where human beings are just small and weak creatures. The description of human destiny to face with social chaos also reveals the author's self-awareness of the role of man in the wild and endless nature, which expresses a new perspective of the author as a diasporic writer. By reconstructing a lost homeland, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng not only rebuilds the natural landscape of South Vietnam but also redefines the role of southern people in the society as a whole. He has proved that human beings are very vulnerable to social contexts, which he, as a migrant, has experienced and understood thoroughly.

The beautiful but poor Southern countryside landscape is set in contrast to the colonial architecture of the French to depict the plight of the underclass. Ngô Nguyễn Dũng describes the Western-style villas which are admired by the villagers as paradise on earth:

From the immense hometown, for the first time in her life, Cầm sets foot in the crowded market. There is a fresh and strange feeling. The magnificent red-tiled villas, the ivory wall, the cemented fence, above the jagged broken bottle, the bent iron door with the sharp point, the gravel path, a neat and fresh garden as if it has just woken up from a dream.⁵³⁶

The palaces of the “great Western mandarins” represent the excesses of material life, which, paradoxically, are admired and coveted by the poor peasants. In the conversation between the two farmers, they even express the desire to live in the palace of the West, even though they can only be the helpers:

Can you imagine that being helpers for the Western makes one so happy?
You wear western-style clothes and have plenty of butter and milk to eat.
Not to mention meat or egg. Two Berger dogs also eat beefsteaks.⁵³⁷

In the process of creating a lost homeland, Ngô Nguyên Dững is particularly interested in the religious activities of the Southerners as a way of re-establishing collective memory. For example, through the visits of the Buddhist temple taken by the two sisters Cầm and Châu, the writer depicts an important spiritual activity for the Southerners. On the occasion of the full moon or at the beginning of the year, the locals usually visit the pagodas to pray for peace for their families and relatives. The pagoda serves as a religious institution, which is sacred due to their belief in the supernatural power of heaven and earth. Compassion, one of the features in Buddhism doctrines, is also applied and transformed by the locals to alter religious institutions into both spiritual and material support centers. In the novel, Phụng Temple is the place where people offer incense to Buddha at every full moon. It is also a shelter for the locals when they need to avoid floods.

The rich spiritual life of the people in the South is not only manifested through their belief in the Buddha but in all the supernatural beings in general, especially when

⁵³⁶ “Từ thổ ngại quê nhà khoáng đãng, ruộng nước mênh mông, lần đầu trong đời Cầm đặt chân tới phố chợ sung túc. Cầm giác mới mẻ, lạ lẫm rộn gai da thịt. Những biệt thự ngói đỏ nguy nga, tường vôi vàng ngà, hàng rào xi-măng, bên trên cấm miêng chai lờn chớm, cửa sắt uốn hoa văn chĩa mũi nhọn, thấp thoáng lối đi trải sỏi, vườn cây kiểng gọn gàng, tươi mát như vừa tỉnh giấc sau một giấc mộng huê dạng.” Ngô Nguyên Dững, *Núi đoạn sông là*, 3.

⁵³⁷ “Bà con tưởng tượng nổi hông, ở đợ cho Tây sướng giàng trời. Được bận đồ tây đảng hoàng nghe! Bơ sữa tràn đĩa, ăn phát nhọn. Thịt trứng, khỏi nói. Hai con chó bẹc-giê còn được ăn thịt bò bíp-tết nữa đó.” Ngô Nguyên Dững, *Núi đoạn sông là*, 3.

the locals experience disasters or uncertainty in their lives. Ngô Nguyên Dũng starts the novel with the persistent rain in the village. To explain the unusual phenomenon of nature, Cầm's mother visits a blind fortune teller. The act of visiting a fortune teller in times of emotional uncertainty is deeply embedded in Asian culture, which offers an early warning that helps them to take preventive measures. Through their predictions, the fortune tellers help to create a sense of security for people and reduce their uncertainty about the future. In general, fortune tellers serve both as the messengers of supernatural beings and sources of psychological counseling for those who are in emotional turmoil.⁵³⁸ In the novel, Master Ba, the blind fortune teller, is described as a man with a strange shape but possesses a mysterious power that makes others fearful:

After the mother burned incense and put these into the censer, murmuring prayers spiritual gods, Master Ba asks her to put her hands up. Her back is immediately cold when the man uses his finger which is only left two-third to reach the mother's palm. Her eyes are closed. In the moment of contact, the mother feels clearly the heater of the man's finger transmitted. And his finger traces each line of destiny which causes irritation, as if pricking with a pinhead. The mother's mind is confused, forgetting the past, there is only bold reality suspended in the context of the bad weather.⁵³⁹

The efficaciousness of Master Ba's predictions about the flood in the village signifies the conviction of the religious belief in the lives of the Southerners. This fact also contributes to highlighting one of the characteristics of the cultural space of the people in Mekong Delta, which is the belief in supernatural beings.

In short, in terms of structure, the novel *Núi đoạn sông lia* (Broken Mountain, Separated River) is constructed in both familiar and new ways. The combination of the third person-narrator and the omniscient narrator is commonly used by Ngô Nguyên

⁵³⁸ Chuang, *Zhan Bu / Xianming: Chinese cultural praxis and worldview*, 93.

⁵³⁹ “Sau khi má đốt nhang cắm vô bình, miệng lâm râm khấn vái thần linh về chứng giám, thầy Ba kêu má ngửa tay lên bàn. Sóng lưng má lạnh điện một dòng, khi người đàn ông lần ngón tay cụt một phần ba, mây mờ lên từng ly vuông lòng tay. Má nhắm rịt hai mắt. Trong giây lát thịt da tiếp xúc, má cảm nhận rành rành hơi lửa nóng từ ngón tay người đàn ông truyền sang. Và đường lòng tay rị mọ theo mỗi lần sinh mệnh gây cảm giác ran rát như đầu kim chích. Tâm trí má rối rắm, quên tuốt quá khứ, chỉ còn trâng tráo mảnh thực tại lơ lửng trong bối cảnh lở loét của thời tiết.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông lia*, 16.

Dũng. This makes it easy for the reader to observe the psychological progress of the characters in the novel. The literary space shows the new characteristic in Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's work when the author describes both the daily living space and cultural space of the Southerners. While the living space delves into the specific activities of the characters, the cultural space plays an important role in reproducing the cultural and historical backgrounds, an important factor for establishing the collective memory of the Vietnamese refugees. In addition, the literary time is not specifically mentioned, which is arguably a manifestation of the scattering nature of exiled memory.

The technique of building characters

The characters in the novel are depicted both broadly and deeply. In width, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng builds a diversified system of characters to portray the different destinies of the generation. These diverse characters go some way to re-constructing the social scene of the South during the French colonial period. Each character represents a class of people. Thus the character's behaviors are understood as the choices that members of each class had available to them. In depth, each character is described consistently with regards to their names, appearances, and personalities. The way of naming and describing the character's appearance signifies their fates and personalities. In general, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng delves into the psychological development of the main characters and their behaviors, such as in the cases of the characters Cẩm, Chúc, teacher Hoàng, Uncle Năm Tự, Mr. and Mrs. Bông. In contrast, the system of supporting characters, such as Ms. Bạch Liên and Mr. Chín, is portrayed through their actions rather than their psychological developments. In general, the author shows his effort in building characters to reproduce the representation of Southern people in the chaos of the nation.

Núi đoạn sông lìa (Broken Mountain Separated River) also has a diverse character system, representing the various classes in Southern society. The representatives of the middle class in the southern countryside are Cẩm's family, including Cẩm, her sister Châu, her parents and grandparents. The father is described as an educated trader who works far away from home. The mother and grandmother do not have to do much farm work because they have a maid Ba Khởi and a boatman Năm Tự. Originating from a middle-class family, Cẩm and her sister Châu are sent to school in the village. In their free time, they go shopping in a provincial market. The two brothers Chúc and Chung are

also sent to school and do not work hard. In the meantime, the maid Ba Khởi and the boatman Năm Tụ represent the poor peasantry, suffering much oppression in society because of their low social status. The maid Ba Khởi does the domestic work for the family. All year round she works in the family's kitchen. Năm Tụ is also a native, living his life in several places as the boatman. Both of them have no properties and families of their own. Their lives depend on Cầm's family.

The system of protagonists is set with the supporting characters, through which the overall context of South society is described thoroughly and comprehensively. For example, the teacher Hoàng is mentioned through his relationship with the character Châu, Cầm's sister. He represents the Northern exile settling in the South. Therefore, his appearance, manner, and attitude are much different from the Southerners. Similarly, the character Master Ba is seen by Cầm's mother as a spiritual symbol, whom she consulted when the village had a disaster. The character Mừng, a Master Ba's maid, who is ugly and has a peculiar personality, represents the unfortunate people in the society. The diversity of social classes is also reflected in the way that Ngô Nguyên Dũng builds characters based on their political tendencies. For example, Ngô Nguyên Dũng identifies the group of supporters for Việt Minh such as Mr. Chín, Chúc and Mrs. Năm Bạch Liên. In contrast, the group representing the French colonialists consists of the landlord Hoạch, and Mr. and Mrs. Bông who are French.

Ngô Nguyên Dũng not only deploys this character system broadly but also delves into the detail of each character within it. In particular, the author is conscious of building characters based on the consistency between their names, character descriptions, personalities, and destinies. For example, Ngô Nguyên Dũng gives the middle-class characters beautiful names such as Cầm, Châu, Chúc, Chung, Hoàng. Meanwhile, the poor people are given inelegant names or names which are based on their places in the families such as Ba (Three) Khởi, Năm (Five) Tụ, Ms. Bảy (Seven).⁵⁴⁰ Mysterious characters are referred by peculiar names, such as Mừng, or anonymous.

Besides, Ngô Nguyên Dũng is particularly interested in matching their appearances to their personalities. For example, the characters Châu or Chúc have beautiful figures, which signifies their turbulent emotional lives. Châu represents the

⁵⁴⁰ Naming people by their orders in the family is a familiar way of naming in the rural of Vietnam.

model of a young girl who is emotional, dreamy and naive. Through the eyes of Cầm, her sister is very beautiful and sentimental. Whenever Châu sings a song, she “bends her lip to the tune”, “her eyes are closed,” and her curly, twisted eyelash naturally blinks like the wings of a night butterfly.”⁵⁴¹ The graceful gestures of Châu, a genuine singer, reveal a plentiful spiritual life that signals her lively and passionate emotional life. Similarly, Chúc, the eldest son in the family, is also given an eye-catching appearance: “Chúc has a pair of much-loved eyes, thick eyebrows, a straight nose like his grandmother’s family, a charming smile and white teeth brushed with ash salt.”⁵⁴²

The teacher Hoàng, a Northern migrant, dresses in a western style with a “white, blue shirt, blue trousers or dark trousers, wearing a belt, always wearing leather sandals”.⁵⁴³ Conversely, the unfortunate characters are often portrayed as being ugly. One example of this is the bizarre appearance of the character Master Ba or his maid, Mừng. Master Ba has “eyes without eyeballs, exposing two pieces of flesh, red and fresh like blood”⁵⁴⁴, “his skin is rough and dry, his left hand is a cut phalanx.”⁵⁴⁵ Mừng has “a clumsy appearance, a puffy face, and eats like an animal.”⁵⁴⁶ The representatives of the French colonialists are described as luxurious and wealthy in appearance but alienated through the view of the natives. For example, the character Mrs. Bông wears “Mỹ A silk trousers, a light brown Vietnamese silk ensemble, her hair is wrapped high, red like sunburn, revealing the white nape of her neck.”⁵⁴⁷ The character Mr. Bổng has “clear, emotionless eyes”⁵⁴⁸, which denotes a cold attitude when dealing with indigenous people like the boatman Năm Tụ.

In general, Ngô Nguyên Dũng builds a system of diverse characters who represent the various classes in Southern society during the resistance war against France. The appearances and personalities of characters are portrayed specifically, through which

⁵⁴¹ “uốn miệng theo giai điệu”, “đôi mắt khép hờ”, “Đôi hàng mi cong rậm tự nhiên nhấp nháy như bộ máy một loài bướm đêm.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông lia*, 4.

⁵⁴² “Chúc có cặp mắt một mí đa tình, đôi lông mày rậm, sống mũi thẳng giống bên ngoài, cái miệng cười có duyên và hàm răng chà bằng tro muối, trắng tinh.” Ibid., 24.

⁵⁴³ “áo cụt tay lúc trắng lúc xanh da trời, quần tây màu đậm, thắt dây nịt, chân luôn luôn mang dép da.” Ibid., 8.

⁵⁴⁴ “cặp mắt không tròng, lòi ra hai khối thịt đỏ hồng, tươi rói như rướm máu.” Ibid., 16.

⁵⁴⁵ “da dẻ thầy sần sùi, khô quăm, bàn tay trái mất lông cụt ngắn.” Ibid., 15.

⁵⁴⁶ “Con Mừng tướng tá cục mịch, mặt mày bặm trợn, ăn uống như súc vật.” Ibid., 15.

⁵⁴⁷ “quần mỹ a, áo bà ba nâu lợt, đầu tóc quần cao, hung đỏ như cháy nắng, để lộ đáy ót trắng nhờn.” Ibid., 61.

⁵⁴⁸ “tia mắt trong veo, vô cảm” Ibid., 65.

their psychological behaviors are revealed more deeply. However, these characters rely on stereotypical tropes, such as landlords look beautiful, poor tenants look ugly, or Westerners look strange, which reveals the author's stereotype in his depictions. While the characters' appearances are built in a one-sided way, political discourses reflected in the fiction show the hybridity in the characters' relations towards their counterparts.

Political discourses in the fiction

The variety of characters system not only represents the diversity of the various classes in society. In contribution to the complexity of the Southern social life during the French colonial period, each character represents a different political tendency too. The political discourse expresses both the characters' and author's views and attitudes towards the political and social issues of the South. There are two political discourses expressed throughout the novel *Núi đoạn sông lìa* (Broken Mountain Separated River). The first discourse revolves around the colonial relations between the ruled indigenous peasantry, as represented by the boatman Năm Tụ and Mrs. Bảy, and the ruling class of white landlords like Mr. and Mrs. Bông. In particular, this discourse reveals the hybridity of the colonial class in the process of exploring indigenous cultures. The second discourse focuses on the relationship between Việt Minh⁵⁴⁹ and the French. In particular, the second political discourse places Việt Minh not only to the French but also with the indigenous peoples, mainly with the people in South Vietnam where the novel's setting takes place. In the second discourse, the author expresses his political views about the diaspora.

Hybridity in colonial discourse between Western and indigenous servants

The hybridity is shown through the building of the relationship between Mrs. and Mr. Bông and their boatman Năm Tụ. To the supporters for Việt Minh such as Mr. Chín or Chúc, Mrs. and Mr. Bông as well as the landlord Hoạch are representatives of the ruling class, those who were condemned and oppressed by the tenants: "Chasing the Western back to their country!"⁵⁵⁰ In comparison, the servant Mrs. Bảy, who worked for Mrs. and

⁵⁴⁹ Việt Minh, in full Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội, was formed in China in May 1941 by Hồ Chí Minh. This organization led the struggle for Vietnamese independence from French rule. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Viet-Minh>.

⁵⁵⁰ "Đuổi Tây mũi lõ về nước." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông lìa*, 74.

Mr. Bông, views Mrs. Bông as a merciful woman. Mrs. Bông not only pays the maid well but also teaches her how to solve mental problems:

They taught me to pray every evening, believe in the highest God, who knows everything and pays and punishes fair. I followed, feeling less worried than before.⁵⁵¹

Mrs. Bông is even loved by some indigenous people, who also received the preaching of Mrs. Bông to help them release their concerns. As for these two characters Mr. and Mrs. Bông, both recognize themselves as the enlightening people who bring civilization to the locals. In the conversation with the boatman Năm Tụ, Mr. Bông acknowledges his role in the enlightenment:

The land here, the golden forest silver sea, but the people are backward, atheist, our Westerners want to help you to develop, having faith in the supreme, we do not have a bad intention. Why do you not understand but rebel?⁵⁵²

Neither displaying extreme hatred or worshiping the Westerner, the character Năm Tụ serves as an unsacred person to reveal the nature of the characters Mr. and Mrs. Bông. Before working for Cẩm's family, Năm Tụ was a boatman for Mr. and Mrs. Bông. So he had an opportunity to approach the family of Mrs. Bông on various occasions. He carries Mr. Bông to hunt ducks, driving Mrs. Bông to the market or preparing meals for Mrs. and Mr. Bông when the maid is sick. The closeness with the Bông's family helps Năm Tụ receive the trust of the couple, which also pushes him into absurd situations and prompts him to question the nature of the colonial class. One of the bitter situations he finds himself in is when Năm Tụ has to massage Mr. Bông during a duck hunting trip. This scene was specifically depicted, evoking the bitterness for the destiny of the boatman:

He shudders, pressing his thumbs down to the bottom with light yellow hair. Mr. Bông lifts his body a few times, and hiccups. Năm forces ten

⁵⁵¹ “Họ dạy tui lần chuỗi đọc kinh mỗi tối, tin ở phép tối cao sanh ra hết thấy mọi vật, thấy hết biết hết, thường phạt công bằng. Tui làm theo, thấy bớt lo hơn trước.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông lia*, 67.

⁵⁵² “Đất đai nơi này, rừng vàng biển bạc, vậy mà con người còn lạc hậu, vô thần, người Tây chúng tôi muốn giúp cho phát triển, có được niềm tin ở đáng tối cao, chứ không có ý xấu. Đã không chịu hiểu thì thôi, còn nổi lên chống đối là sao?” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông lia*, 71.

fingers onto the sweaty back. Suddenly, Mr. Bông turns his back, sighing, mouth flapping: Bông, Bông ... Good, good! ⁵⁵³

In another example, Năm Tụ continues to be seen as an object of lust for Mrs. Bông. However, instead of the recurring colonized status of a servant as the subject to the colonizer's coercion, the sexual intercourse between Năm Tụ and Mrs. Bông is a double-subversion:

To him [Năm Tụ], it [the sex] is just the reflection of desires and the smugness of the male. Furthermore, his body is vomiting indignation for his weakness on the skin of the ruler, as if the sex is a way to punish the oppressed guy in his own country, using genitals as a weapon of resistance. And also to recognize the instinct of the white mistress, which is, in fact, mediocre and frail of the creature in the face of the urge of the body. ⁵⁵⁴

The sexual exploitation, which is even seen as a colonial legacy⁵⁵⁵ and occurs between the male colonizer and a female colonized, is reserved. Here, "Mrs. Bông is not an Annamite woman raped in a raging Western battle"⁵⁵⁶ but a white colonial proprietor who actively proposes to have sex with the native boatman. In contrast, Năm Tụ "is not a wild soldier in the French Foreign Legion, shooting and killing the indigenous people without flinch"⁵⁵⁷ but only a native man. However, the sexual act, which is often seen as colonizing abuse, plays a role as a form of rebellion for the oppressed people towards their oppressors. Through the sexual behavior, there is a transformation in the role and

⁵⁵³ "Chú rùng mình, ấn hai đầu ngón cái xuống rãnh mông giao lông vàng hoe. Ông Bông núng người vài cái, nắc giọng đùn đục. Chú Năm vẫn mạnh mẽ mười ngón tay lực điền lên thót lung nhóp nhúa mồ hôi. Bất ngờ, ông Bông trở lưng bật ngựa, thở phì phì, miệng lấp đáp: Bông, bông ... Giỏi, giỏi lắm!" Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông lìa*, 72.

⁵⁵⁴ "Với chú, chỉ là phản xạ của dục vọng đòi hỏi và bản tánh tự mãn của giống đực. Hơn vậy nữa, thân xác chú đang ối mửa thốc tháo những cảm phần nhục tiểu lên thịt da kẻ thống trị, như thể chuyện hành lạc là cách thức trừng phạt của gã thuộc địa bị áp bức trên chính quê hương mình, sử dụng bộ phận sinh dục làm vũ khí chống trả. Và cũng để nhận thực bản năng của bà chủ da trắng, thì ra cũng tầm thường, yếu đuối của một sinh vật trước cơn bức bách của thể xác." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông lìa*, 78.

⁵⁵⁵ See further in Sarah Deer, *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America*.

⁵⁵⁶ "Bà Bông không phải là người phụ nữ An-nam-mít bị cưỡng hiếp trong một trận Tây ruồng.", Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông lìa*, 78.

⁵⁵⁷ "Chú không phải là tên lính lê-dương súng sục thú tính, bắn giết, hãm hại dân bản xứ không nương tay." Ibid.

status of a native yellow skin boatman and the white lady in which the former becomes independent and strong while the latter becomes vulnerable and weak.

The political discourses between Việt Minh, the French and indigenous peoples

The conflict between the French and Việt Minh is one of the main discourses expressed throughout the novel in which the latter became a counterweight to the former, which is perceived as the cause of the impoverishment and enslavement of Vietnamese indigenous people Vietnam. Ngô Nguyên Dũng repeatedly exposes the contradictions and conflicts between the French and indigenous locals in the novel. Some examples of this include the violent situation between the peasants and Mr. Bông to avoid paying taxes or the act of Mr. Chín or Chúc to rob the landlord Hoạch's property as a way to revenge. The culmination of anti-French action is reflected when the Việt Minh breaks into Mr. Bông's villa, robbing his property, burning the house and arresting Mr. and Mrs. Bông. Returning to Mr. Bông's villa after the visit to his family, Năm Tụ sees that the property of Mr. and Mrs. Bông was completely destroyed:

The house with a tile roof and a solid wall is now ruined. All are burned. He could not see his palm hut. The yard in the front and fruit trees in the back of the house were completely destroyed. The black bronze statue was drowned in the shallow water lily pond, its head was cut off lying on the grass as the unexpected happenings. The ground was dense with scars like bruises of hateful lice. Here and there are scattered pieces of clothing, shoes, and things, perhaps the robbers do not know what to do.⁵⁵⁸

However, the description of Việt Minh's intrusion into Mr. Bông's villa makes the Việt Minh's protest action, which is seemingly part of their fight for a cause, suddenly becomes an act of vengeance. This violent act is seen by the viewpoint of the maid Ms. Bảy:

⁵⁵⁸ “Ngôi nhà mái ngói, tường vôi vũng chắc; giờ chỉ còn là một di tích gạch vụn ngổn ngang. Thảm thảm đều cháy nám. Căn chòi lá của chú cũng không thấy đâu. Vườn cây cảnh phía trước và cây ăn trái sau nhà bị đốn phá gần như trơ vụn. Pho tượng đồng đen chúi mình trong ao sũng cạn, đầu đứt lìa trên cỏ như nổi đành đoạn không ngờ. Mặt đất ẩm chằng chịt dấu dầy xéo như những vết trầy trụa, bầm máu những lần roi thù hận. Đó đây vương vãi mảnh vụn áo quần, giày dép và những vật dụng, có lẽ bọn cướp cạn không biết dùng để làm gì.” Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông lìa*, 79.

Mrs. Bảy raises her face, only realizing her shadow had suddenly grown more heads. She is about to open her mouth to shout, then an arm blocks her throat, she just makes a noise with her hoarse, broken voice. A muscular hand covers her mouth, swiftly inserting a rag in it, and gagging her with the cloth knotted on her nape. The porcelain bowl drops into the water tub. The old woman's eyes roll, glimpsing a lot of figures, before a strip of black cloth sealed covering her eyes. Her arms are torn back, tied up. Her body is soft like a pinch of flour, dragged and thrown out of the house.⁵⁵⁹

The depiction of Việt Minh's violent act against both Ms. and Mrs. Bông, who were representatives of the French colonialists, and those who worked for the colonists, called the "henchmen of the Westerners",⁵⁶⁰ is an example of how the narrator questions the legitimacy of Việt Minh's violence. In particular, the narrator expresses suspicion about the nature of Việt Minh through the description of Việt Minh's representatives such as Ms. Năm Bạch Liên, Hai or Chúc, thereby sophisticatedly expressing the narrator's poignant reflection on the destiny of the country. These contents will be analyzed in the next section.

In the political discourse on the relationship between Việt Minh and the indigenous people, Ngô Nguyên Dũng once again questions the legitimacy of Việt Minh. By describing the process of transforming the political tendency of the character Chúc, the eldest brother of Cầm, from an ignorant bystander to a supporter of Việt Minh, Ngô Nguyên Dũng offers a counterviewpoint on how Việt Minh established its organization in South Vietnam. Although this example contains a one-sided view of an anti-Communist writer, it contributes to the general outlook of the complex political situation of the South during the colonial period, through which the lively history of South Vietnam has been reproduced.

⁵⁵⁹ "Bà Bảy ngừng mặt, chỉ kịp nhận ra bóng mình bất thần mọc thêm nhiều cái đầu ngúc ngắt. Bà há miệng toan la làng, tức thì một cánh tay chặn ngang cổ họng, bà chỉ kịp hức lên một tiếng đục ngầu, đứt đoạn. Một xoè tay u nắn bịt ngang miệng bà, lệ làng nhét vô nhúm giẻ, bịt ngang mảnh vải thắt gút sau gáy. Cái chén sành rớt xoạch xuống thau nước, tung toé. Hai tròn mắt già nua trợn trừng, nhón nhác một thoáng nhiều đáng người lơ nhô sát rạt, rồi tối sầm dải khăn đen bịt kín. Hai cánh tay bà bị quật ngược ra sau, trối lại. Thân thể bà mềm nhũn như nhúm bột bánh, bị lôi đi xềnh xệch, bỏ nằm đầu đó bên vách nhà." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông lia*, 87.

⁵⁶⁰ "tay sai cho chó Tây" Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông lia*, 88.

Chúc's joining the Việt Minh is described as a spontaneous act, driven by a blind love instead of a revolutionary idea. Chúc knows Việt Minh through an ironic situation. During his first sexual encounter with a prostitute named Năm Bạch Liên, he is introduced to this political organization and the revolutionary ideals of youth:

After the intercourse, Ms. Năm Bạch Liên drags her hand to the mat, pulling out the sheet of yellow paper folded, putting it on Chúc's chest, and says nothing. Chúc is surprised. Ms. Năm's eyes are glittering, staring at Chúc, her lips are pressed urgently. Chúc opens it. Letters are printed blurrily. On the top are the symbols of a sickle, a bundle of rice, and a constellation of three stars. Below is the words 'Fatherland, Independence, Freedom'.⁵⁶¹

The first contact between Chúc, the representative of the South Vietnamese locals and the revolutionary organization named Việt Minh, ironically, takes place amidst the embarrassment and confusion of the adolescent boy who has his first experience of sexual pleasure. And the revolutionary ideal, which is propagated through the spokesperson of an experienced prostitute, makes the first-ever intercourse between Chúc and Ms. Năm Bạch Liên full of paradoxes.

Chúc's joining the Việt Minh comes primarily from the boy's confusion with the prostitute instead of his revolutionary awareness. However, his participation in this organization is a necessary condition for readers to observe the Việt Minh's internal affairs, thereby recognizing the political nature of this organization. For example, the activities of the resistance troops are described as scandalous. When the resistance troops do not attack the French garrison, they knock on the door of the locals' houses to ask for taxes or food or hunt down Hoà Hảo believers. Chúc even recollects the farewell party organized by the Việt Minh in South Vietnam, which is essentially a form of installing their armies through marrying Southern women:

Talking with them [the women] he knows they are lovers or involve with most of the resistance comrades. Some just got pregnant. Some take their

⁵⁶¹ "Sau khi hành sự, cô Năm Bạch Liên luồn tay xuống chiếu, moi ra tờ giấy vàng sẫm gấp tư, đặt lên ngực Chúc, không nói. Chúc sững mặt ngạc nhiên. Hai mắt cô Năm long lanh, chăm bẳm ngó Chúc, môi chúm chím thúc giục. Chúc mở ra. Chữ dấu in lem nhem. Phía trên có hình lưỡi liềm, bó lúa và chòm sao ba chiếc. Bên dưới là hàng chữ "Tổ quốc, Độc lập, Tự do". Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông là*, 25.

babies, some children are held in the women's arms, some children toddle.⁵⁶²

Even, Chúc is assigned to a Southern Vietnamese girl named Lụa and later has a baby with her. Lụa's request for a "gathering child" with Chúc reveals the childish perception of the young girl about her political role. This naive perception is acknowledged by her at the end of the story:

Many times, I wonder whether I have children with you [Chúc] is right or wrong? Does the action contribute to the revolutionary ideal? Or just the frivolous outburst in a moment of weakness, easy to believe lip service?

⁵⁶³

Also, the description of the participants in the Việt Minh shows the narrator's superficial and extreme view. The participants in Việt Minh are those who live at the bottom of society. For example, Ms. Năm Bạch Liên is a prostitute. She encounters proletarian theories, class struggle and resistance while doing her job. Chúc is a young man but is blinded by love. Uncle Sâm, an illiterate person who is alienated by women, follows the revolution for his safety. Teacher Mão follows the revolution to fight against the French and unexpectedly gets involved in a robbery, rape, and murder.

The narrator's one-sided portrayal of the nature of the Việt Minh organization is even indirectly reflected through the character Hoàng. As a native of the North, Hoàng is first described as an educated man. His return to the North to directly participate in the anti-French resistance instead of getting married to Châu is explained as the way to sacrifice personal emotion to serve for the common cause of the nation:

The victorious news in Điện Biên is often told by an anonymous interlocutor who asks Mr. Chín to bring letters, making him [Hoàng] confident about the upcoming decisive moment.⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁶² "Trò chuyện một đôi thì biết, họ là nhân tình nhân ái hay dan díu sao đó với hầu hết các đồng chí kháng chiến. Có người bụng vừa móm móm. Có người dắt theo con nhỏ, đứa còn ẵm trên tay, đứa đã chập chững biết đi. » Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông lia*, 172.

⁵⁶³ "Nhiều lúc em tự hỏi, không biết chuyện em nhất định có con với anh, đúng hay sai? Là hành động góp phần vì lý tưởng cách mạng? Hay chỉ là những nông nổi bột phát trong khoảnh khắc yếu lòng, dễ tin dễ nghe theo những chiêu bài đầu môi chót lưỡi? » Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông lia*, 201.

⁵⁶⁴ "Những tin chiến thắng từ núi rừng Điện Biên được người giao liên ẩn danh thường xuyên nhờ ông Chín đưa thơ đem tới, khiến thầy phấn chấn vững tin vào thời điểm quyết định gần kề." Ngô Nguyên Dũng, *Núi đoạn sông lia*, 109.

However, Hoàng's unexpected act of seducing Châu to have sex with him in the hotel makes the building of this character become less convincing. The depiction of the psychological transformation from a polite and knowledgeable teacher into a bad guy at the end of the story shows the author's anti-communist tendency in building this character.

In a nutshell, the novel *Núi đoạn sông lia* (Broken Mountain Separated River) characterizes both restorative and reflective nostalgia. While the novel's structure and the building of characters in the novel follow traditional descriptive ways, which are often found in the writings of the writers in the former South Vietnam, the political discourse in the work reveals the political view of the exiled writer. Through the vivid description of the customs and habits of the Vietnamese people in South Vietnam, Ngô Nguyên Dũng reconstructs the cultural context of Vietnam through literature, which is essentially the cultural restoration of the lost homeland by the restorative nostalgics. However, the way of integrating political views on the relationship between the Việt Minh, the French and the indigenous people shows how the literary writings have never been the pure reconstruction of cultural values, according to restorative nostalgics. In the case of Ngô Nguyên Dũng's fiction, it is not difficult to see that the political discourse expressed in the work is influenced by the author's situation as the diaspora. The anti-communist political trend is a common feature of South Vietnamese writers, especially among the boat-people writers living in Germany. Although not a boat person, Ngô Nguyên Dũng shares the memories of South Vietnam in the pre-Communism period with them, reminisces about the lost homeland and disagrees with the political institutions in the present. For reflective nostalgics, homeland in the present is called into question, their memories are created through the nostalgics' fragmented memories mixing with the nostalgic's perspectives and experiences.

Mini conclusion

In short, in my analysis of Ngô Nguyên Dũng's works, nostalgia is explained to be the core theme, which contributes significantly to the formation of migrant memories and the emergence of identity. The writings on nostalgia are also perceived as restorative products that re-establish the memories of the lost homeland. The memory embodied in Ngô Nguyên Dũng's work reveals the characteristics of memory as fragmentary and ambiguous in time and space, intermingled with the subjective of the memory-makers.

Besides, the expression of identity formation of the immigrants is analyzed as an on-going process in which the immigrants are constantly mobilized to adapt and reposition themselves.

The themes in Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's stories are diverse, ranging from reflecting on the life of refugees in host lands, depicting their haunting memories in the homeland, and re-enacting the context of South Vietnam in his customary literature. This diversity reflects the author's extensive concept of diaspora literature. In his debut works, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng shares many common features with Vietnamese diaspora authors. Diaspora here is understood to be the mental state of the Vietnamese in Germany rather than their "meeting" the requirement of becoming naturalized in their host country. In fact, some of the Vietnamese boat people after immigration became naturalized and got German citizenship, as did Ngô Nguyễn Dũng.⁵⁶⁵ Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's empathy with the community of Vietnamese boat people is shown in the author's reflections on the crossing-sea experiences of the Vietnamese boat people, even though he did not directly experience these frightening events himself. The experiences of crossing the sea and living in refugee camps are one of the most popular themes in the writing of the Vietnamese boat people not only in Germany but around the world. Nevertheless, even when sharing these subjects with other boat people, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's approach to the problem reveals differences due to his background and integration experiences. In particular, he focuses more on the psychological trauma of refugee shelters, the consequences of the obsession with the memory of the characters.

The works in Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's later period of writing show a shift in his viewpoint. His characters are not only boat people but also immigrants in general, who have migrated from one country to another for several reasons rather than politics. They faced not only the memories of the lost homeland but also the frightening experiences in the process of integrating into the host lands, the concerns of re-locating the identity or their hybridity. I use the metaphors of rooting and uprooting to refer to the process of

⁵⁶⁵ However, although he has been living in Germany since 1969 and has German citizenship now, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng considers himself the diaspora writer. In his own definition, according to the emails between Ngô Nguyễn Dũng and us, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng defines the Vietnamese words diaspora (*lưu vong*) in which *lưu* means to stay and *vong* means loss. Hence *lưu vong* means "to stay due to the loss" (*ở lại vì mất*). His definition emphasizes on the act of staying in Germany because of the loss of the old country and the disagreement with the new regime after 1975.

relocating and redefining the identity of the characters, which are universal problems not only for the exiled but also for immigrants in general. The transformation of Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's creative tendencies are not only reflected in the shift in subject matters but also in the language of composition. In his early works, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng composed entirely in Vietnamese, published mainly in the United States and Canada. The collection of short story *Hòn còng lửa* (The Island of Fire Crab) marks the entrance of Ngô Nguyễn Dũng into the German market when he translated this work from Vietnamese into German and published both in the United States and Germany. In early 2019, Ngô Nguyễn Dũng published the novel "Tausend Jahre im Augenblick"; which is written entirely in German. The writing and publication in German show the innovative way of writing by Ngô Nguyễn Dũng, especially the author's attempt to reach the mainstream through literature written in German.

CHAPTER 5: JOURNEYS AS THE DRIVER TO SEARCH FOR MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN ĐOÀN MINH PHƯỢNG'S NOVELS

1. Introduction to Đoàn Minh Phượng

Emigrating to Germany in 1977 and returning to Vietnam in the nineties, Đoàn Minh Phượng is known both for her talent in making films and composing stories in Vietnam. Her fictions, like her documentary films and movies, receive positive reviews from critics and researchers.⁵⁶⁶ The aspects of topic contents and methods of composition in Đoàn Minh Phượng's works are studied. For example, researchers Thái Phan Vàng Anh⁵⁶⁷, Lê Tú Anh⁵⁶⁸ and Nguyễn Đức Toàn⁵⁶⁹ have focused on the narratology in Đoàn Minh Phượng's novels. In particular, the factors relating to the narrative structure of the novel such as the use of stream of consciousness, of the first-person narrator or inner monologue are analyzed by these researchers.

The method of building a character system in Đoàn Minh Phượng's novels is also noted in studies by researchers Bùi Việt Thắng⁵⁷⁰ and Lê Tú Anh⁵⁷¹. In these analyses, characters in Đoàn Minh Phượng's novels are seen as ongoing or traumatic characters. Besides, the master thesis by Thái Thị Thu Thắm⁵⁷² can be considered as a comprehensive study of Đoàn Minh Phượng's works. This thesis focuses on analyzing almost all aspects of Đoàn Minh Phượng's literary work, from the structure of the work, the character system to the artistic discourse in the work. It contributes significantly to analyzing Đoàn

⁵⁶⁶ Đoàn Minh Phượng is best known for her film "Bride of Silence" which was played at several film festivals overseas. This film won many prestigious awards such as Tiger Awards at the Rotterdam International Film Festival (Netherlands) in 2005, Best Debut film at the Kerala International Film Festival (India) in 2005, Best ASEAN Film Awards at the International Film Festival Bangkok in 2006 and Best Filming Award at the 7th Las Palmas International Film Festival (Spain) in 2006.

⁵⁶⁷ Thái Phan Vàng Anh 2010, "Trần thuật từ điểm nhìn bên trong ở tiểu thuyết Việt Nam đương đại", 5-9.

⁵⁶⁸ Lê Tú Anh 2013, "Những cách tân nghệ thuật trong tiểu thuyết của Đoàn Minh Phượng", 57-63.

⁵⁶⁹ Nguyễn Đức Toàn 2014, "Kỹ thuật dòng ý thức trong tiểu thuyết "Và khi tro bụi", 12-20.

⁵⁷⁰ Bùi Việt Thắng, "Sự thức tỉnh của tâm linh từ góc nhìn văn hóa qua một số tiểu thuyết xuất bản gần đây", <http://vanhocquenhua.vn>, accessed on 23 July 2019.

⁵⁷¹ Lê Tú Anh, "Tư tưởng hợp Đoàn Minh Phượng, nghĩ về văn học chấn thương ở Việt Nam và quan điểm nghiên cứu", http://khoavanhoc-ngonngu.edu.vn/home/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4617%3At-trng-hp-oan-minh-phng-ng-h-v-vn-hc-chn-thng-vit-nam-va-qun-im-nghien-cu&Itemid=135&lang=vi, accessed on 15 July 2019.

⁵⁷² Thái Thị Thu Thắm 2014, *Nghệ thuật tự sự của Đoàn Minh Phượng*.

Minh Phụng's composition as innovative works in terms of the narrative genre. Also, the thesis demonstrates the interference and influence of foreign culture expressed in Đoàn Minh Phụng's composition.

Meanwhile, the issues of memory and identity of diasporic characters are discussed in articles by journalists Trần Tiến Cao Đăng⁵⁷³, Thuý Nga⁵⁷⁴ and Lưu Hà.⁵⁷⁵ In their articles, they question about the feelings of expatriates as expressed in Đoàn Minh Phụng's compositions or the problems faced by overseas writers. In general, within the volume of interviews, it is understandable that the journalists express their interests in the author's writing process rather than her literary works.

The haunting family tragedies told in two novels *Và khi tro bụi* (And when this Dust) and *Mưa ở kiếp sau* (Rain in the Life Afterdeath) are the starting points for my analyses of memory and identity of the diaspora. In both novels, the main characters are all Asian women, who have profound introspection characterized by their resilience and coping with cultural conflicts. As Đoàn Minh Phụng herself acknowledged, after many years living in Germany, she "was mature enough to remember her Vietnamese origin and to know that she was not a foreigner."⁵⁷⁶ However, the cultural ambivalence of the main characters will be analyzed as a consequence of the migration process, as confirmed by the state of being uprooted from their homeland. Therefore, the cultural conflicts faced by female characters will be interpreted as consequent representations of the diasporas in their resistance to "the other" cultures and their struggle to locate their own cultural identities. In this sense, both novels can be read and illuminated by the theories and concepts of diaspora studies. These stories of diasporic Asian women also display the universal characteristics shared by almost all immigrant characters from any minority community, who have been struggling to find their own culture in relation to the mainstream cultures of their new homelands.

⁵⁷³ Trần Tiến Cao Đăng, "Đoàn Minh Phụng: Làm thế nào để biết được tại sao có giải thưởng đây", <http://vietnamnet.vn>, accessed on 23 July 2018.

⁵⁷⁴ Thuý Nga, "Đoàn Minh Phụng và tác phẩm mới nhất: Tôi bắt đầu từ sự trở về", <https://tuoitre.vn/doan-minh-phuong-va-tac-pham-moi-nhat-toi-bat-dau-tu-su-tro-ve-135252.htm>, accessed on 23 July 2018.

⁵⁷⁵ Lưu Hà, "Nhà văn Đoàn Minh Phụng: "Tôi viết khá lạnh", <https://vnexpress.net/giai-tri/nha-van-doan-minh-phuong-toi-viet-kha-lanh-1895245.html>, accessed on 10 April 2018

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.

Đoàn Minh Phượng portrays a wide range of emotions through the stories of unexpected circumstances. For example, in the novel *Và khi tro bụi* (And when this Dust), the reader is led into a fascinating detective story. A young girl who had intended to commit suicide on the train with sleeping pills accidentally found a diary of a night-time receptionist in a hotel. Since then, she postponed her plan to die to search for the truth in the receptionist's family tragedy. The mother of the receptionist was killed, the crime scene was an ice lake on the mountain. His brother was not known to be alive or dead. The narrator leads the readers to discover not only the truth behind the tragedy of the receptionist's family but also the truth behind the spiritual tragedies of the discoverer herself. Đoàn Minh Phượng describes the journey of searching for the happiness of those who lost their souls, such as the night-time receptionist, his father or his mother; especially focusing on the journey to recreate the cultural identity of those who lost their memories, like the storyteller herself. The protagonist's outward-journey to find the truth in the family of the receptionist is actually her inward-journey to explain the complex and subtle contradictions in her life. Her ignorance of married life, her desire to die when life has no meaning, her fragmentary memories about her hometown, her horrifying obsessions with the death of the mother, sister and adoptive father, all these tragedies of the narrator are expressed in a deep and sophisticated way as an expression of the state of the trauma by a migrant who was a victim of the (unknown) war.

Similarly, the journey from North to South and back to Central Vietnam of the heroine is also explored by Đoàn Minh Phượng in the novel *Mưa ở kiếp sau* (Rain in the Life Afterdeath). Following the journey to find a father by the narrator Mai, the reader is caught up in the trafficking activity of young impoverished girls and money-rich players in a disguised form of prostitution. Not to mention the appearance of the ghost leading all Mai's activities. Mai's search not only reveals the truth about the wealthy but corrupt father but also exposes a society filled with harsh prejudices and its influence on the formation of identity. Mai's obsession and action play out under the influence of past events which show the influence of the past on this character. The fact that the characters live and act according to their concerns leads to their sense of alienation, which makes them become diasporic within the borders.

If the migration of the author Đoàn Minh Phượng is understood within the framework of diaspora, that of her characters is understood both as a form of actual

migration due to their crossing borders (from their un-known homeland to Germany) as a social form, and as a type of consciousness. The protagonist An Mi in *Và khi tro bụi* (And when this Dust) is built up as a moving character to examine both. Basically, her life is a combination of trips: first, the journey from her hometown to Germany to search for peace; then the journey on the trains through European countries to commit suicide; later, the journey to find the truth in the story of the night-time receptionist. While the above-mentioned character makes a trip through external borders, the character Mai in *Mưa ở kiếp sau* (Rain in the Life Afterdeath) takes a journey through internal borders. She was born in Huế but lived with her mother in Hà Nội, then she made the trip to Sài Gòn and returned to her hometown to find out the truth about her father and sister. In general, the immigration actions of these characters are both active and passive. The migration route from Vietnam to Germany in the case of An Mi or from Huế to Hà Nội in the case of Mai was initially involuntary but later became conscious as the characters try to restore memories and locate their identity.

As a type of consciousness, during the process of living in places of settlement, these characters share a lonely, lost and unconscious expression that comes from a state of lost memory. Their diasporic experiences are marked by their dual and paradoxical nature. Diasporic characters have often experienced both the feeling of being discriminated against and excluded from the majority while being identified with cultural heritage, possibly minority, not “here” but “somewhere”.⁵⁷⁷ Diasporic individuals’ awareness of decentred attachments, of being simultaneous “home away from home” or “here and there” is also referred to by Paul Gilroy.⁵⁷⁸ Similarly, Clifford mentioned the duality of diaspora as when they dwell here but assume a solidarity and connection there. ...[It is] the connection (elsewhere) that makes a difference (here)”.⁵⁷⁹

During the journey to restore memories and locate identity, Đoàn Minh Phượng’s characters are frequently described in a state of ignorance and of cultural ambivalence. The common legacy they possess is the fragmentary memory of the homeland, which is paradoxically the source of the character’s act of migration. The protagonists fall into

⁵⁷⁷ Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen 1999, *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*, xviii.

⁵⁷⁸ See further in Paul Gilroy’s works, such as *There ain’t no Black in the Union Jack* (1987), *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (1993).

⁵⁷⁹ James Clifford 1994, “Diasporas”, 322.

disorientation, of belonging to another world, another place. I argue that the characters' state of ignorance and ambivalence is a manifestation of the loss of memory, and the characters' journey of migration is the act of restoring memory and identity.

2. The loss of memory or fractured memory as the remains

The loss of memories, the psychological state of the immigrant character that I discussed in my previous analysis of Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's works, continues to be a popular expression of the characters in Đoàn Minh Phượng's novels. The characters bring with them the fragments of memories. Throughout their journeys within or outside their settlement territories, the characters often fall into a state of the ambiguity of their identity and become alienated to reality. It can be said that the ignorance about the surroundings is the first and most prominent characteristic of immigrant characters. However, the ignorance of the main characters is not marked with absolute blanks. On the contrary, it is marked by the ambiguity of vague and intertwined memories. Diasporic characters constantly struggle between the values of where they live and those of their homeland somewhere, which, in the illusory hope of the diaspora, contains collective memory and cultural identity. Here, fractured memories serve as trails of collective memories, which creates a new map of desire and attachment⁵⁸⁰ and which helps the diaspora reveal themselves.

In the state of ignorance

The state of ignorance is marked as the first feature expressed through Đoàn Minh Phượng's characters. The state of ignorance is understood as the state of loss of awareness caused by physical or mental injuries. The novel *Và khi tro bụi* (And when this Dust) starts with the death of the heroine's husband. Notably, the wife is portrayed as ignorant, especially towards her husband's death. She does not know the cause of her husband's death and does not know what he did on the road where the accident occurred.

My husband died because the car fell down the cliff in a mountainous pass section, in a fog, about 5 o'clock in the afternoon of November. Where he went on that road on that day, at that time, no one knew. He had no job to

⁵⁸⁰ Appadurai's term used in her article Appadurai 1991, "Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology".

do or the acquaintance in the area which led to that road. I did not understand his death at all.⁵⁸¹

She even doubted her husband's death caused by his straying into a mist of fog on the mountain, surrounded by that mist of fog "and he did not want to get out of it."⁵⁸² The protagonist's ignorance is emphasized through her little knowledge of the funeral rite for her husband. The body of the husband was cremated and the ashes were kept in an urn, but she does not know how long the remains of her husband could be stored there.

I do not know how long they will keep the ashes. I do not know how many years are needed to keep the ashes that carry a person's name, to say that the person was once on the earth, under this sky.⁵⁸³

All she knows is the bold and fierce fact that her husband is dead. And when he died, all of her ties with this world are over. In short, ignorance is a dominant psychological state of the heroine at the beginning of the story.

Similarly, the character Mai in *Mưa ở kiếp sau* (Rain in the Life Afterdeath) is marked by her ignorance. The novel begins with sketches about the poor lives of Mai and her mother. Mai is the illegitimate child of a Huế woman who emigrated to the North to earn a living. Their migration is a way of escaping the grim fate, the result of rejection and alienation of the mother's family. The pregnancy of the mother is a disgrace to an old royal lineage in Huế, "who for many years still waited for the King to come back"⁵⁸⁴, and who "lived with the quiet and harsh pride of those who think they are noble but failed."⁵⁸⁵ The mother has no choice but to leave. To the North, she does not bring anything with her but silence. The father rejects the illegitimate child. The mother's family does not

⁵⁸¹ "Chồng tôi mất vì xe rơi xuống núi, ở một đoạn đèo, trong một đám sương mù, khoảng 5 giờ một buổi chiều tháng 11. Anh ấy đi đâu qua đoạn đường ấy vào ngày ấy, giờ ấy, không một ai biết. Anh không có công việc gì cần làm hoặc người quen ở vùng con đường ấy dẫn tới. Tôi không hoàn toàn hiểu cái chết của anh." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 7.

⁵⁸² "và không muốn ra khỏi đám sương mù ấy nữa." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 46.

⁵⁸³ "Tôi không biết họ sẽ cất giữ những bình tro trong bao lâu. Tôi cũng không biết bao nhiêu năm là thời gian cần thiết để lưu giữ những mớ tro có mang tên họ của một người, để nói rằng người đó đã một thời có mặt trên mặt đất, dưới bầu trời này." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 8.

⁵⁸⁴ "những người suốt nhiều năm vẫn chờ vua trở lại" Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 63.

⁵⁸⁵ "sống bằng niềm hãnh diện lạnh lẽ và khắc nghiệt của những kẻ nghĩ mình cao quý nhưng thất thế", Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 63.

recognize the granddaughter. Therefore, Mai is completely ignorant of both her paternal and maternal roots:

I know nothing about the mother's side. What my grandparents do, how many uncles and aunts I have. I know nothing about my father. I do not know anything about the period between the day when my mother was a pupil in Đồng Khánh standing in an old house in Hue looking out at the rain, and the day my mother is a single mom without a household, selling vegetables in a market in Ba Đình district, Hà Nội.⁵⁸⁶

All she knows about her father and her mother's family are the images of an imaginary father, an imaginary old house in Huế, an imaginary grandfather, who "knew Chinese and French, "read books", a village "green like pearls and pink like lotus, dreamy in a beloved rainy season."⁵⁸⁷

The ignorance of the main characters is explained as a result of migration. Mai is a daughter abandoned by her father when she was born, a grandchild who is not recognized by her maternal family. She and her mother are forced to go to the North to escape the estrangement and scorn of her grandfather. Similarly, An Mi falls into exile at the age of five after fleeing Vietnam because of the war. When her village is bombed, she is injured and taken to Germany for treatment, and then starts her life there. The identity of the protagonist is like a "seed of weed that is led by the wind to root on the cliff,"⁵⁸⁸ a metaphorical image referring to the state of being scattered by the diasporic child. But even Germany is not the ideal environment for the seed of weed to grow. When An Mi returns to Frankfurt, she does not feel that Germany was her homeland.

The diasporic characters in Đoàn Minh Phượng's novels show how memories and imagined homelands govern the characters' behaviours and emotions. The way the character practices the rituals of worshipping based on the patterns of the original but minor culture instead of the place of settlement reveals both the insidious resistance of

⁵⁸⁶ "Tôi không biết gì về bên ngoại. Ông bà tôi làm gì, tôi có bao nhiêu cậu, dì. Tôi không biết gì về cha tôi. Tôi không biết gì về khoảng thời gian giữa ngày mẹ tôi là cô học trò Đồng Khánh đứng trong một gian nhà xưa ở Huế nhìn ra mưa, và ngày mẹ tôi là thiếu phụ một con không họ khẩu, bán rau trong một cái chợ ở quận Ba Đình, Hà Nội." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 8.

⁵⁸⁷ "biết chữ Nho và chữ Pháp," hay đọc sách', một làng quê "xanh như ngọc và hồng như sen, mơ màng trong những mùa mưa nhiều thương nhớ." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 13.

⁵⁸⁸ "một hạt cỏ gió đưa đến bám rễ trên vách đá" Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 131.

the immigrant character to the culture of the majority and the character's need to be connected with the imagined community. The practice of these religious ceremonies is also a manifestation of the characters' awareness of multi-locality.⁵⁸⁹ For example, for the death of her husband, An Mi came up with a strange idea about how to mourn the husband, which in the eyes of the foreigners could be considered ignorant:

I want to bring the urn to a hill in the midlands, pour his ashes into the grass and bring the empty urn back to put in the window, where I will stand for seven days looking down the road in front of the house.⁵⁹⁰

She even dimly acknowledges the culture of mourning her husband in her old homeland:

I remember hearing that when a husband in my country dies, a wife mourns for three years. During those three years, they do not wear makeup, wear clothes with the fringe unsewn and do not welcome guests.⁵⁹¹

She perceives that the color of the funeral where she was born is white instead of black. So, on the day of her husband's funeral, she resolutely makes a cultural ritual in her old country:

On the day of his funeral, I wore a long white shirt. When I walked into the chapel, everyone looked at me and quickly turned away, as if deliberately avoiding a big mistake. I thought: don't make me do anything else, I only have this time in my life to wear the white robe for him.⁵⁹²

In *Mưa ở kiếp sau* (Rain in the Life Afterdeath), instead of an insidious reaction, how Mai's mother practices funeral rituals for her grandmother shows the need to connect with the lineage's cultural heritage. Chapter two of the novel centers the suffering of Mai's mother with regards to the grandmother's death, accompanied by the grandfather's

⁵⁸⁹ Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen 1999, *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*, xviii.

⁵⁹⁰ Tôi muốn mang chiếc bình lên một ngọn đồi ở miền trung du, đổ mớ tro của anh xuống đám cỏ và mang chiếc bình không về đặt ở thành cửa sổ, nơi tôi đã đứng suốt bảy ngày nhìn xuống con đường trước nhà." Đoàn Minh Phụng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 7-8.

⁵⁹¹ "Tôi nhớ có lần nghe kể là phụ nữ xứ tôi chồng chết thì để tang ba năm. Trong ba năm đó họ không trang điểm, mặc quần áo sờn gấu và không tiếp khách." Đoàn Minh Phụng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 23.

⁵⁹² "Ngày tang lễ anh tôi mặc một chiếc áo trắng, dài. Lúc tôi bước vào nhà nguyện, mọi người nhìn tôi rồi vội quay đi, như tế nhị tránh nhìn một điều sai sót lớn lao. Tôi nghĩ: đừng bắt tôi làm khác, tôi chỉ có một lần này trong đời để mặc chiếc áo trắng dành cho anh." Đoàn Minh Phụng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 8.

denial about the existence of his granddaughter. This situation reveals the loneliness of the mother and daughter when they are uprooted from their hometown. In this situation, instead of returning home to mourn the grandmother, the mother chooses to worship the grandmother by herself with her daughter. The mourning in a shabby house in Hà Nội shows the mother's effort to restore traditional rituals and to reconstruct lost memories. However, this act only reveals the state of being uprooted and the discrete identities of the diaspora. The mother enlarges the picture of her grandmother to make a worship picture, "put the frame on the top of the cupboard, put the incense bowl in front of the frame,"⁵⁹³ she "wraps a mourning headband over her head, holding the incense and kneeling before the incense cupboard."⁵⁹⁴ Instead of offering a tray of food, the mother and daughter "just add a bowl and a pair of chopsticks"⁵⁹⁵ where they have a meal. The strange connection between the living and the dead by sharing a tray of rice shows the borderless attachment of living or dead people, living in the North or Central or coming from a wealthy or destitute family. The sense of this attachment (whether real or imaginary) connects the diasporas who have the same origin, which in this case is Huế. This sense is a prominent feature of diasporic awareness, the source of the mother's spiritual strength, the cause of happiness, though small, crept in the deep sadness caused by the loss of the daughter. Mercy for their loved ones, paradoxically, is what they both share. To the mother, it is a mourning for her dead grandmother; to the daughter, it is the mercy of the suffering of the mother. Suffering and mourning for their loved ones are similarities between the mother and the daughter. Hence sharing a sadness can still bring joy:

It is a sad day, but I feel within sadness a little bit like happiness. Although it's very quiet, I will not forget this rare little fire. It is the day my mother cries for love, she makes me cry too. In a moment of a quiet and peaceful day of mourning, we become one: my grandmother, my mother and me. We melt into each other because the sadness eradicates the borders

⁵⁹³ "đặt cái khung hình trên nóc tủ, đặt bát hương ở trước khung hình" Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 14.

⁵⁹⁴ "quấn khăn ngang đầu, cầm nhang quỳ trước tủ hương" Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 15.

⁵⁹⁵ "chỉ để thêm một cái bát và một đôi đũa" Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 15.

between one person and the other, this and that place, this time and another time.⁵⁹⁶

The ignorance of the main characters is explained as the result of the process of uprooting from childhood. An Mi was brought to Germany for treatment. Mai followed her mother to the North. In other words, the diasporic process to them is partly passive instead of voluntary. However, the way they deal with their memories about their homeland is surprisingly conscious. The main characters deny and avoid the fragments of remnant memories in their childhood. This way of dealing with memory is argued as the act of denying the self-proclaimed identity (as an Asian girl in An Mi's case or Huế girl in Mai's case) and denying the association with the collective memory. The fact that the character behaves with the fragmentary memory is the act of denying the identity as an Asian girl in An Mi's case or Huế's girl in Mai's case and cutting off the association with the collective memory. This partly shows the fluid nature of identity. There is no fixed identity that you automatically belong to. Instead, diasporic identity is a synthesis of personality traits that are created and changed under the influence of personal and temporal implications.

Avoid and reject memories

The avoidance and even rejection of memories is An Mi's initial reaction in *Và khi tro bụi* (And when this Dust). After the funeral ceremony for her husband, the first thing An Mi does is to cut off all contacts with her dead husband. The beautiful memories of the couple, which exists through old photos of her husband, are packed and classified by An Mi to "separate them" from her life:

I classify photos by place, by time, put them in paper bags. I write on the outside of the bag which trips the photos were taken on, then tie strings on the paper bags. I don't know what to do with them, but at least, after days

⁵⁹⁶ "Hôm đó là một ngày buồn, nhưng tôi thấy trong nỗi buồn có một chút gì giống như hạnh phúc. Dù nó rất khẽ khàng, nhưng tôi sẽ không quên ngọn lửa nhỏ hiem hoi đó. Đó là một ngày mẹ tôi khóc vì tình yêu, mẹ làm tôi khóc theo. Trong đôi khoảnh khắc của một ngày tang lặng lẽ và êm đềm, chúng tôi đã là một người: bà tôi, mẹ tôi và tôi. Chúng tôi tan vào nhau vì nỗi buồn làm nhoà hết những đường biên giới giữa người này và người kia, nơi này và nơi kia, thời này và thời kia." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 15-16.

and nights of arranging them, I feel like I've found a place for photos, and once there is a place to stay, they'll stop obsessing me.⁵⁹⁷

The old things that the husband left behind were stored in a chest because it was impossible to “burn a big fire and burn all the things.”⁵⁹⁸ She put all the memories of her husband in their place to make them stop haunting her life. The way the girl treats the memory of her deceased husband shows her refusal to establish contact with her new country. Her husband was the one she was closest to when she lived in Germany. When her husband dies, all of her ties with Germany end: “I have no acquaintances, nothing to do, nowhere to go.”⁵⁹⁹ Here the memory is treated as a tangible object, which can be packed, stored or discarded. Burning or throwing away old things is like “burning memories”. And because the memory is lost, the girl falls into an unimaginable loss: “I have nothing, my soul is just a bunch of ashes.”⁶⁰⁰

The protagonist even thinks about dying herself after her husband dies. She even thinks it would be best to die when she is not aware of it. But she does not die in ignorance. On the contrary, she is forced to die consciously. The first part of the novel reveals a strange journey to the death of the heroine. She prepares herself for a long trip on trains across Europe. But that is not planned to be a holiday. In a small cabin on the train in some strange city, she decides to leave this world with the help of sleeping pills:

It only takes me a day to drop off my belongings. I give away all my clothes and books, cups and kitchen stuff. I hand the house key to a real estate company, asking them to sell the house and furniture in it. And I go to look for death on the road.⁶⁰¹

⁵⁹⁷ “Tôi phân loại những tấm ảnh theo nơi chốn, theo thời gian, bỏ chúng vào các túi giấy. Tôi viết lên bên ngoài túi những bức ảnh đã được chụp trong chuyến đi nào, rồi lấy dây buộc những túi giấy ấy lại. Tôi không biết làm gì với chúng, nhưng ít ra, sau những ngày những đêm ngồi sắp xếp, tôi cảm thấy tôi đã tìm được chỗ nằm có tên tuổi cho những bức ảnh, và một khi có nơi ở rồi, chúng sẽ thôi không ám ảnh tôi nữa.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 9-10.

⁵⁹⁸ “đốt một đồng lửa lớn mà đốt hết những đồ vật” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 10.

⁵⁹⁹ “Tôi không còn người quen, không còn việc gì trên đời để làm, nơi chốn nào để đến.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 14.

⁶⁰⁰ “Tôi không còn gì, hồn tôi chỉ là một đám tro.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 12.

⁶⁰¹ “Tôi chỉ mất một ngày để bỏ những đồ đạc của tôi. Tôi đem cho tất cả quần áo và sách vở, ly chén và đồ dùng trong nhà bếp. Tôi giao chìa khoá nhà cho một công ty địa ốc, nhờ họ bán nhà cùng những bàn ghế trong đó. Và tôi đi tìm cái chết trên đường.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 12.

By living on a train, which means she is not attached to a specific place, so the heroine shows how she refuses to make new memories:

I will live on journeys on the train. There, I will meet many people, but I will not meet anyone who knows who I am. I want them to be forever strangers and every time I talk to anyone there is no second time. If I have an address to live, a bakery to buy cakes every morning, a street that I know every window of houses, I would also have acquaintances, memories, a place that belongs to me.⁶⁰²

The protagonist is afraid of creating a new relationship, a new identity because it means creating new memories. And with memory, come people who she is attached to, which she does not need when she wishes to end her life.

The way in which the protagonist Mai denies her origin in *Mưa ở kiếp sau* (Rain in the Life Afterdeath) reveals the surprising similarity in the way the two diasporic characters, Mai and An Mi, deal with their memories from their homeland. Chapter three describes the visit to Mai's mother and daughter by Aunt Lan, the mother's sister. The strange language that the three women use when talking to each other subtly reveals their attitudes to their memories and homeland. After years of separation, Mai's mother and Aunt Lan have a tearful reunion. Together they review their childhood memories, cooking the dishes from the homeland and reliving the beautiful days before their families experienced traumatic events. This conversation is observed by the daughter Mai:

And they are talking about the dry, the rainy and the wind seasons in the Central region. They are wandering through places I don't know. The two sisters pass by treeline of neem along the road to the wharf. The two sisters sit under the boat roof looking out at the white rain on the river. The two sisters walk up and down the sand dunes outside Tam Giang lagoon. The

⁶⁰² “Tôi sẽ sống trên những chuyến xe lửa. Ở đó, tôi sẽ gặp nhiều người, nhưng tôi sẽ không gặp bất cứ một người nào biết tôi là ai. Tôi muốn họ mãi mãi là người lạ và mỗi khi tôi nói chuyện với ai đều không có lần thứ hai. Nếu tôi có một địa chỉ để ở, một tiệm bánh mì để mua bánh mỗi sáng, một con đường mà tôi biết từng khung cửa sổ của những căn nhà, thì rồi tôi cũng sẽ có người quen, có kỷ niệm, có một nơi chốn thuộc về mình.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 13.

two sisters sit in the old school. The two sisters dress in white *Áo dài* to walk over the bridge.⁶⁰³

Earnestly returning to hometown, even through stories is revealed through the language used by the two women: “From behind, I heard my mother and Aunt Lan talking to each other in the Huế accent. Strange voices, I find my mother strange, as if she is another person.”⁶⁰⁴

Huế is the mother’s hometown. In order to weave memories of the homeland, nothing can evoke more emotions than using the accent of that region to describe it. The mother’s way of using such language emphasizes the role of the motherland in diasporic awareness, especially the diaspora who has memories like a mother. This is completely different from the daughter. She was born in Huế, but left that place before she became aware of it. She always knew she had a hometown, a maternal family, but before meeting Aunt Lan, a representative of the mother’s family, she had never met any member of this family. So, she could not speak with the Huế accent. When witnessing her mother speaking in this accent, she sees her mother like “another person.” And because the narrator has no memory of her homeland, she denies the connection to a hometown which is only being heard:

The love that connects me with that homeland has gone, which has been flown by the river to the sea. I have never really been a Hanoian, but I am not a Huế person either. I don’t have a homeland, and I don’t need it.⁶⁰⁵

Meanwhile, the way the mother switches to the Huế accent when talking to Aunt Lan and to a Hanoi accent when talking to her daughters reveals the adaptive effort of the mother in maintaining fragile memories of her homeland. However, the mother’s code-switching also reveals her sense of the multi-locality, her straddling between places, Hà Nội here and Huế there, and the feeling of belong nowhere at that moment.

⁶⁰³ “Và họ đang nói chuyện về mùa nắng, mùa mưa và mùa gió ở miền Trung. Họ đang lang thang qua những nơi chốn tôi không biết. Hai chị em đi ngang qua hàng sấu đầu dọc con đường ra bến đò. Hai chị em ngồi dưới mái thuyền nhìn ra trời mưa trắng sông. Hai chị em bước nháp nhô trên những đồi cát ngoài phá Tam Giang. Hai chị em ngồi trong ngôi trường xưa. Hai chị em mặc áo dài trắng đi qua cầu.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 24.

⁶⁰⁴ “Từ phía sau lưng, tôi nghe mẹ và dì Lan nói chuyện với nhau bằng giọng Huế. Tiếng nói lạ, tôi thấy mẹ tôi cũng lạ, như mẹ là một người khác.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 23.

⁶⁰⁵ “Thứ tình nối tôi với cái quê hương đó đã mất rồi, cuốn theo sông trôi ra biển còn đâu. Tôi chưa bao giờ thực sự là người Hà Nội, nhưng tôi cũng không phải là người Huế. Tôi không có quê hương, và tôi chẳng cần.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 23.

The character Mai not only loses the memory of her maternal family but also any memory she has about the paternal family is few. According to her aunt, Mai's father "is an educated person who has a high social position."⁶⁰⁶ However, he is not a good father because he abandons his wife and the daughter. Aunt Lan gives Mai the address of the man considered to be her father, leading Mai on a journey from North to South with the aim of finding Mai's father. However, everything she knows about her father is given to her by Aunt Lan instead of her mother. Therefore, memories of the paternal family are illuminated through the prism of a third person, filled with prejudice and limited by the narrator's perception. The little information that Mai has about her father becomes so unreal and unreliable. Therefore, on the train down South, the closer to the city where her father lives, the more ambiguously the daughter thinks about her father:

Strangely, the closer the train is to my father's city, the more out-focused my thoughts are about my father. My love for my father, though abstract, had followed me for years, and now becomes a breath. Now in the last hours of the night before the meeting, that breath suddenly resembles a smoke, a cloud which is melting away on a distant sky.⁶⁰⁷

Even when Mai came to her father's house, she could not meet him. The memory that Mai had about her father is only a concept: "He is an idea, a fragile dream but never broken."⁶⁰⁸ The fact that the father and the daughter have not met each other for a long time is understood as destiny, an end to the dream about the father who has never been met by the daughter, a testimony to the daughter's orphan status.

Although Mai does not fall into the situation of losing relatives like An Mi, the two share similarities. Both have no connection with their homeland and origin. All the ties between Mai and the lineages in the paternal and maternal families are fragile and fuzzy. Similarly, An Mi's memories of her childhood about her homeland are almost concealed amongst the dense layers of ignorance. So much so that readers almost do not

⁶⁰⁶ "là người học nhiều, có chức vị cao" Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 30.

⁶⁰⁷ "Lạ lùng thay, tàu càng đến gần thành phố cha tôi ở thì những ý niệm của tôi về cha càng mất nét. Tình yêu của tôi với cha, dù trừu tượng, đã theo tôi trong tất cả năm tháng tôi còn nhớ được, đã trở thành một thứ hơi thở. Bây giờ trong những giờ cuối của đêm trước ngày gặp gỡ, hơi thở đó chợt giống như một thứ khói, một đám mây đang tan đi trên một tầng trời xa lắc." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 5.

⁶⁰⁸ "Ông là một ý niệm, một ước mơ thấp thoáng, mong manh nhưng không bao giờ đổ vỡ." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 49.

know about An Mi's relative status. More precisely, An Mi lacks memories, which leads to the state of having an undefined identity. During the conversation with the taxi driver on the way to a train station, An Mi does not know how to answer when asked about her hometown: "On the way, the driver asked me where I was from. I said I did not know. But you are not German, are you. Yes, I am not German."⁶⁰⁹ Not Germany, but she never confirmed which country she is from. All that revolved around her identity contained only a few short lines:

I came here when I was seven years old. Children were orphaned by war. I was injured, and they took me to the German hospital for medical treatment. My family died, no one came to pick me up, they brought me here.⁶¹⁰

There is another example of An Mi's avoidance and denial of memory as she establishes a fake identification on her suicide journey by train. After packing and selling the old memorabilia between her and her husband, An Mi buys expensive items to bring along on the move, the aim is to turn herself into a stranger:

Expensive things compensate for the lack of comfort when living on the train. The expensive things carry false values, making the owners also feel unreal and far away from the ordinary world.⁶¹¹

She also avoids staying too long in a particular place. The aim is to avoid all intimate attachments to the world. After walking around the European cities that the train passed through, An Mi always returns to the platform. In that way, she trains herself to become acquainted with the movement. By moving, An Mi gets used to leaving the lower realm and reaching the dead: "I have become accustomed to the roar of trains in my sleeping, as well as the sailors are accustomed to their boats."⁶¹²

⁶⁰⁹ "Trên đường đi, tài xế hỏi tôi quê cô ở đâu. Tôi nói tôi không biết. Nhưng cô không phải là người Đức mà. Vâng, tôi không phải là người Đức." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 30.

⁶¹⁰ "Cháu qua đây lúc bảy tuổi. Trẻ mồ côi vì chiến tranh. Cháu bị thương, người ta đem lên tàu bệnh viện Đức để chữa bệnh. Gia đình cháu chết hết, không ai đến nhận cháu về, người ta đưa cháu qua đây luôn." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 65.

⁶¹¹ "Những thứ đắt tiền để bù đắp cho sự thiếu tiện nghi khi sống trên tàu. Những thứ đắt tiền mang trên người nó những giá trị giả dối, làm cho người dùng nó cũng thấy mình không thật và cách xa thế giới bình thường." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 14.

⁶¹² "Dần rồi tôi quen tiếng rầm rập của xe lửa trong giấc ngủ, cũng như những thủy thủ quen chiếc thuyền của họ." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 15.

The unsuccessful sex scene between the protagonist and a stranger on the train, a person whose height resembles her deceased husband, confirms her break with life. The appearance of the stranger almost makes An Mi cry, which she did not do when her husband died. The stranger reminds her of the emotional feelings of a living person. This scene depicts the struggle and encroachment between death and life:

In the vicinity of human skin, I overheard the murky breath of death. It surges and gets thicker and thicker, mixed in the breath, mixed in the movements of the body preparing for sex. The scent is with me. The scent is in me. The scent of the negative realm.⁶¹³

And the act of leaving before she could make love to the strange man marks the victory of death.

Anyway, in a moment, I thought I was back in life, doing the most passionate thing of the living world. But right at the moment that the return was about to happen, I found myself more dead than ever.”⁶¹⁴ [...] The unsuccessful lovemaking with a man makes me see the distance between me and the life. There is no path, no one who takes me back to the world of the living.⁶¹⁵

The train becomes a metaphor for the migration process in both novels by Đoàn Minh Phượng. The representation of An Mi wandering indefinitely on the trains through nights and days evokes an association with the wandering journey of the diasporas. Whether or not it is a voluntary movement, the journey is the necessary action for the diaspora to search for and locate their identity. In the novel *Và khi tro bụi* (And when this Dust), the journey on the train reflects the mood of the diaspora. An Mi’s trans-European journey is interpreted as the act of being away from life. Therefore, the way the natural scenery glided through the door frame simulates the gliding of human life. The character

⁶¹³ “Trong sự kề cận của da người, tôi nghe loáng thoáng làn hơi âm u của cái chết. Nó dâng càng lúc càng đầy, lẫn vào trong hơi thở, lẫn vào những chuyển động của thân thể đang sửa soạn cho ân ái. Mùi hương ở bên tôi. Mùi hương ở trong tôi. Mùi hương của cõi âm.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 24-25.

⁶¹⁴ “Dù thế nào, trong một đôi giây phút, tôi tưởng tôi đã quay lại với sự sống, làm cái việc nông nản nhất của thế giới những người sống. Nhưng ngay trong khoảnh khắc sự quay về đó sắp xảy ra, tôi thấy tôi ở gần cái chết hơn bao giờ hết.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 25.

⁶¹⁵ “Cuộc ái ân không thành với một người đàn ông làm cho tôi thấy rõ khoảng cách giữa mình với cuộc đời. Không có một con đường nào, một người nào đưa tôi trở về với thế giới của những người đang sống.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 25.

does not suffer any attachment to the world around her, as she is gradually slipping further from life and closer to the death she desires:

Then the train comes and leaves the city, passing through the successive fields, sometimes flat, sometimes going up and down hills. There are paths that cross those fields, disappearing far away. Then the train goes through a forest, a neighborhood with scattered houses, gleaming with lights and roadways going up and down. The homeland of mankind is now moving farther away from the glass door frame, always passing by, faint and unvoiced.⁶¹⁶

The world seen through the train window is dark, filled with uncertain colors, full of skepticism, not reflecting the nature of phenomena but the perception and recognition of the observer towards the world. For example, the protagonist sees a peaceful setting through the window of a house. The happiness spreading gently through the house makes her heart resent it because it was human emotion about the life, all things she wanted to deny:

I look outside, seeing a house across the street. There is a low wooden door opening into the yard. There are some winter bushes in the yard, their leaves have a gloomy green color. Indoor lights have warm yellow. In the window frame, I see several flower pots, some animals made by cloths, and a few books. From that house spreads a gentleness, when that comfort touches me it makes my heart frozen in a few beats. I do not know if the people living in that house are happy. But their happiness is not important, only the image of happiness is important. The world is not the world but only our perception of it.⁶¹⁷

⁶¹⁶ “Rời tàu đến và rời thành phố, đi qua những cánh đồng nối tiếp nhau, có khi bằng phẳng, có lúc lên núi xuống đồi. Có những lối đi băng qua những cánh đồng đó, mất hút về phía xa. Rồi xe đi qua một cánh rừng, một khu phố lưa thưa nhà cửa, loáng thoáng ánh đèn, đường xe đi lên đi xuống. Quê hương của loài người bây giờ lại lùi xa bên ngoài khung cửa kính, lúc nào cũng chỉ lướt qua, nhạt nhòa và không tiếng động.” Đoàn Minh Phương 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 20.

⁶¹⁷ “Tôi nhìn ra ngoài, thấy một căn nhà bên kia đường. Có một cái cửa thấp bằng gỗ mở vào sân. Trong sân có mấy bụi cây mùa đông, lá mang một màu xanh âm đạm. Đèn trong nhà đã mở màu vàng ấm. Ở thành cửa sổ tôi thấy vài chậu hoa, mấy con thú bằng vải, đôi ba cuốn sách. Từ căn nhà ấy một nỗi dịu dàng khẽ khàng loang ra, khi sự dễ chịu ấy chạm đến tôi nó làm tim tôi buốt đi trong vài nhịp. Tôi không biết những người sống trong căn nhà đó có hạnh phúc không. Nhưng hạnh phúc của họ không hề quan trọng, chỉ có hình ảnh của sự hạnh phúc là quan trọng.

It is no coincidence that the female character's journey by train is repeated in the novel *Mưa ở kiếp sau* (Rain in the Life Afterdeath). The protagonist's boarding the train to the South to find a father is understood as a necessary act to clarify her past. In other words, moving is a way to search for truth. The part of this truth is cleverly revealed on Mai's trip to the South. She had a faint feeling of the loss of her father's love. As the train approached the station, she felt her love for her father fading:

My love for my father, abstract though it is, followed me all the years I remember and became a breath. Now in the last hours of the night before the meeting, that breath suddenly looks like a smoke, a cloud is melting away on a distant sky.⁶¹⁸

Later, their failure of meeting each other confirmed the loss. Through a journey down South, every memory that Mai had about her father becomes nothing.

The way Đoàn Minh Phượng builds diasporic characters, who are in a state of refusing to establish relations with the surrounding environment, and at the same time denying the establishment of memories, marks a sudden expression of the diasporic characters. Contrary to Appadurai's argument⁶¹⁹ about the diaspora's leaving a collective memory, the characters initially shirk any act to leave memories and locate identities. They are marked in the state of lost memory and refusal to establish new memories. This expression appears not only to the main characters but also to the minor characters. All of them are somewhat or completely ignorant. They all lose faith in the world around them. They all carry in themselves fragmented memories of their homeland and origin. And they all carry mental disorders.

3. To be or not to be? The conflict between death and existence

If An Mi's trans-European journey ended with death, and Mai's downward journey ends with her bitter defeat when she is not allowed to meet her father, the diasporic characters would only have fragmentary memories, loss, and suffering as their legacies. But the

Thế giới không phải là thế giới mà chỉ là cảm nhận của chúng ta về nó mà thôi." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 19-20.

⁶¹⁸ "Tình yêu của tôi với cha, dù trừu tượng, đã theo tôi trong tất cả năm tháng tôi còn nhớ được, đã trở thành một thứ hơi thở. Bây giờ trong những giờ cuối của đêm trước ngày gặp gỡ, hơi thở đó chợt giống như một thứ khói, một đám mây đang tan đi trên một tầng trời xa lắc." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 46.

⁶¹⁹ Appadurai 1989, "On moving targets", i-iv.

journey does not only lead to the confirmation of lost memory, an imagined homeland or an imagined father. Moving always opens new worlds, new lives and new realities. The journey to discover new realities not only leads to the confirmation of worlds outside the explorers but also helps the characters to understand themselves. The journey of the main characters in Đoàn Minh Phượng novels is argued to be a trip to find and discover both the mysteries of social life surrounding the characters and the characters themselves. With An Mi, the journey leads her to the exploration of the tragedy of the night-time receptionist, Michael. With Mai, the train to the South leads her to find out the truth behind the mysterious death of her twin sister, Chi. The journeys on the trains of the two characters, at first thought as a deadlock, suddenly lead them to other worlds outside the storyteller's life.

In the first stage of the journey, both An Mi and Mai were defeated. Before dying, An Mi had planned to find a notebook to write her life on it. But when An Mi found the notebook, she had nothing to write:

Or my life written down on paper is only half a page. When it was like a ghost outside the door, I thought it was there. But when I really looked at it, it did not have a face.⁶²⁰

Even the information about the girl was so sketchy that it was not enough for her to draw a curve on a piece of white paper if she was an artist.

But my world is not intact for me to draw an intact stroke. People paint serenity, their black color was a deep space, and I draw the defeat, my black is a shadow covered with hundreds of thousands of fragments. They paint their lives, the lives they understood, and I paint my life, the life I did not know.⁶²¹

An Mi's obscure identification is undoubtedly the first reason for her to write down a few short lines about her life. But more importantly, writing her biography means that An

⁶²⁰ “Hay là đời tôi viết xuống giấy chỉ được nửa trang giấy. Khi nó còn như bóng ma mờ lung bên ngoài cửa, thì tôi tưởng nó có đó. Nhưng khi thật sự nhìn mặt, thì nó không có gương mặt nào.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 42.

⁶²¹ “Nhưng thế giới của tôi không nguyên vẹn để tôi có thể vẽ nên một nét nguyên vẹn. Họ vẽ sự thanh bình, màu đen của họ là khoảng không sâu thẳm, còn tôi vẽ cuộc chiến bại, màu đen của tôi là một thứ bóng tối phủ lên trăm nghìn mảnh vỡ. Họ vẽ cuộc đời của họ, cuộc đời mà họ hiểu, còn tôi vẽ cuộc đời của tôi, cuộc đời mà tôi không biết.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 40-41.

Mi's mission in the world is over. And that will be the time for her to end her life. There is no reason to delay her death.

But An Mi has many questions about life. She is not ready to die. The desire to write her life on paper is likened by her as a way to create meaning for life which has no meaning. But does the meaning make the truth? Is the novel more real than the stories behind it? The question revolves around the secret of life preventing An Mi's writing, forcing her to question the meaning of life and death that she is about to experience. At the moment Mai is about to take anti-emetic pills to commit suicide, she indeed gives up on the need for writing.

I no longer need to write on the remaining two pages about my life. I do not need remembrance, memories or sadness. I will throw the notebook that the night-time receptionist gave me out of the window of the hotel.⁶²²

However, the act of removing memories contradicts the need, though vague, of learning the origin of her life. The struggle to find the meaning of her life is even greater than the obsession with beautiful memories with her husband, which means that her journey to the death is not fulfilled. She extends the deadline for three months. During that time, she will find a meaning for her death.

But before finding meaning for her death, An Mi has to decipher the secret in the family tragedy of the night-time receptionist at the hotel. On the back of the notebook that the receptionist gave her, there is the story of the receptionist's life. Has he written these stories before? Why did he give them to a stranger? What are the mysteries in his family tragedy? All these questions change An Mi's journey.

There is a shift in the narrator from An Mi to Michael, a night-time receptionist at the hotel in chapter six of the novel *Và khi tro bụi* (And when this Dust). Michael begins recounting his family tragedy at a time when he was young. One day, his mother, Anita, suddenly disappears without a reason. Seeing his father killing the dog called Shalma by throwing it into the ice lake, Michael thought of his father killing his mother in the same way. The terrifying association leads him to come to Sophie, the boy's teacher, and he tells her everything. In the teacher's house, he is advised, comforted and

⁶²² “Tôi không còn cần viết hết hai trang còn lại về đời tôi. Tôi không cần có trí nhớ, kỷ niệm hay nỗi buồn. Tôi sẽ ném ra ngoài cửa sổ cuốn sổ người trực đêm khách sạn đã cho tôi.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 50.

cared for by Sophie. Michael also talks about the sudden disappearance of his brother, Marcus. Michael thinks his brother probably left in fright after witnessing the father murdering his mother. No one knows if he is alive or dead. Since then Michael has spent three years searching for him, until one day he finds his brother in Lünberg. Unfortunately, Marcus does not recognize his brother. For years, Marcus was secretly nurtured by a forest keeper. Hence Michael has to meet his brother in secret because if caught, the guy who looked after Marcus must send him to the Youth Department for fear of keeping him illegally. Meanwhile, Marcus can not return home because he fears his father might kill him. So, Michael plans to save money to help his brother escape. More than eight months later, Michael returns to Lünberg to pick up Marcus but his younger brother has completely disappeared. From that time, he set up a plan to find his lost brother, kill his father to avenge his mother and commit suicide.

The narrative voice switches to An Mi as the finder of Michael's story. She suddenly learns of a family tragedy that contains many mysterious circumstances, which turn her into a bearer of responsibility. She unexpectedly faces a new journey in search of the truth: how could Michael's father kill his wife? Is Michael's mother alive or dead? Where is Marcus? The sudden appearance of the receptionist's story makes An Mi realize how tragic life is:

A strange young man having the eyes of a lost animal and a strange story jostled in my privacy, jostling in my loneliness. With a few short texts, simple sentences and almost no adjectives, he talked about the burden he carried. Compared to him, I do not know what it means to have a burden. Compared to him, what marks my life is not sadness but a void.⁶²³

The struggle between taking on the burden or evading it is reflected through the confusion of the protagonist. She buys a bottle of red wine to help her “dream and sleep, oversleep to postpone everything”⁶²⁴, delaying taking responsibility for a sudden story and delaying the search for death as well: “I want alcohol to make me dreamy and

⁶²³ “Một người đàn ông trẻ không quen với cặp mắt của loài thú đi lạc và với một câu chuyện lạ lùng đã chen lẫn vào khoảng riêng tư, chen lẫn vào nỗi cô đơn của tôi. Với những đoạn viết ngắn, những câu đơn giản và hầu như không có tính từ, anh nói về gánh nặng anh mang. So với anh, tôi nào biết thế nào là gánh nặng. So với anh, điều đánh dấu cuộc đời tôi không phải là nỗi buồn, mà là một khoảng trống không.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 63-64.

⁶²⁴ “mơ màng và ngủ quên, ngủ quên để hoãn lại mọi thứ.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 64.

oversleep, oversleeping to postpone everything, including those bromides neatly placed in the leather bag.”⁶²⁵

At first, she decides to reject the responsibility of taking over Michael’s story:

I refuse to be the only one to shoulder his story, shouldering any truth or paranoia in this notebook. He wanted to disappear from the earth and not be alone carrying his secrets and loneliness. No. I refuse. [...] I want to return the notebook to him immediately, not say a word, then return to the station, return to the train, continue or end my own journey.⁶²⁶

Refusing to take responsibility is an understandable reaction by the protagonist. Being an orphan and immersed in extreme loneliness due to her husband’s death, An Mi realizes the tragedy she had to endure was too much to bear, so she did not want to face any other tragedy in life. However, after instant rejection she experiences sadness.

When I stand alone at a station in Hamburg with my luggage, I feel confused and uneasy. I feel sad. That means I am closer to life than death.

⁶²⁷

The receptionist’s story affects An Mi’s psychology and makes her wake up in the middle of the night. The mysterious details of the sudden disappearance of the mother and her little son, the justification of Sophie and the father, the hopeless journey to find the brother of the receptionist, all brought confusion and infinite sadness.

The victory of the desire to search for memory, even the memory of another person, is expressed in the hesitant state of the protagonist when she tries to throw away the diary. The notebook, understood to be the embodiment of the receptionist’s memory, clearly weighs as it contains mysteries. It makes the girl hesitate to throw it away. The

⁶²⁵ “tôi muốn rượu làm cho tôi mơ màng và ngủ quên, ngủ quên để hoãn lại mọi thứ, kể cả những viên thuốc an thần đang nằm ngấn nắp trong chiếc túi da.” Đoàn Minh Phụng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 64.

⁶²⁶ “Tôi từ chối làm cái người duy nhất gánh vác câu chuyện của anh, gánh vác bất cứ sự thật hay điều hoang tưởng nào trong quyển sổ này. Anh muốn biến mất khỏi mặt đất này mà không phải một mình mang đi những bí mật và nỗi cô đơn của mình. Không. Tôi từ chối. [...] Tôi muốn trả cho anh quyển sổ thật nhanh, không nói một câu nào, rồi trở về ga, trở về xe lửa, tiếp tục hay là chấm dứt cuộc hành trình của riêng tôi.” Đoàn Minh Phụng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 68-69.

⁶²⁷ “Lúc một mình đứng ở thêm ga Hamburg với mớ hành lý, tôi thấy lòng rối bời và nao nao. Tôi cảm thấy buồn. Điều đó có nghĩa là tôi gần sự sống hơn cái chết.” Đoàn Minh Phụng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 69.

girl's hesitation before throwing it away signals her wish to search for and store the memory:

I want to throw it into the river, but the people on the street will look at me strangely, telling me with their eyes that the river running across the city is not a place that anyone can throw anything. I could not leave the notebook on the bench of a tram or a table at a cafe, because someone would pick it up and read it. And throwing it in the city garbage basket is like throwing a paper plate with mustard and tomato sauce all over it after eating sausage on it, just I couldn't.⁶²⁸

The moment she decides not to throw away the notebook, An Mi takes responsibility for resolving the mystery in Michael's story and finds a new purpose in her life. At the very least, she decides to live now.

The psychological transformation of the heroine is shown in the way she deals with Michael's story. She changes from an emotionless person experiencing sadness, loneliness, and desperation to knowing a little hope, from living without purpose and traveling on a train to nowhere specific to suddenly defining a specific destination. Lünberg is the place she decides to go to when asked by a train ticket seller. Lünberg is the village where the tragedy took place in Michael's family. Lünberg is An Mi's next station in the search for the truth. The ironical thing is that Lünberg, a fictional place, is an unreal village that marks An Mi's journey to search for purpose. When deciding to learn about Michael's story, An Mi takes off her fake identity. She throws away the expensive objects and returns to her usual way of dressing.

When I leave the hotel, I leave all the expensive clothes and high shoes in the closet and the bath oil in the crystal bottles. On the way to the train station, I stop by to buy jeans, a cloth shirt, a windbreaker jacket, and walking shoes.⁶²⁹

⁶²⁸ “Tôi muốn ném nó xuống lòng sông, nhưng những người đi đường sẽ nhìn tôi kỳ lạ, nói cho tôi hiểu bằng ánh mắt rằng giòng sông chảy ngang thành phố không phải là nơi ai muốn ném gì vào thì ném. Tôi không thể để quyển sổ lại trên băng ghế xe điện hoặc một chiếc bàn trong quán cà phê, vì sẽ có người nhặt nó lên đọc. Còn ném nó vào giỏ rác thành phố, như người ta ném một cái đĩa giấy với mù tạt và sốt cà chua sau khi đã vừa đi vừa ăn xong cây xúc xích trên đó, thì tôi không đành.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 72-73.

⁶²⁹ “Lúc rời khách sạn, tôi để lại trong tủ tất cả những bộ quần áo đắt tiền, những đôi giày cao, dầu tắm đựng trong những chai pha lê. Trên đường ra ga tôi ghé mua quần jean, áo sơ mi vải, áo đi gió, đi mưa, giày đi bộ.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 74.

She continues her journey on the train to learn about living instead of death:

My life is still on trains. But temporarily, it is not the train that takes me to a pool of fog. They take me, very simply, from one province to the other. I go to take a photo and go to find a house in the middle of the hill with a private path leading down to a corner of a hidden lake in the mountain, as described by the night-time receptionist at the hotel.⁶³⁰

Once again, the image of the train appears as a necessary means in An Mi's wandering journey to search for Michael's village. The train, as characterized by its movement, evokes many references to the migration journey of the diasporas. But in its two occurrences, the train has two different meanings. At first, when An Mi is depicted in the emotionless state and refuses to set up memories, the train leads her to death. However, Michael's story lights up her doubts, sadness and gives her joy and hope. At that time, the train leads her to new lands to discover new life. I argue that the train has been used by the author Đoàn Minh Phượng as a metaphor for the act of crossing-borders which diasporic communities are familiar with. By moving from one place to another, not carrying any memories or refusing to restore the memory, the diasporas seem to die. The migration journey must include moving and yearning to discover the truth ahead, as in the case of An Mi's wanting to learn about Michael's tragedy. That is a sign which shows An Mi's longing for living. It is also a sign of the existence of the diaspora. Memories, hopes, beliefs, all of these characteristics are the source of life and the vitality of the immigrants. They create imaginary connections between the community and their homeland.

In *Mưa ở kiếp sau* (Rain in the Life Afterdeath), the protagonist's journey down to the South to find her father ends the moment she reaches her father's house, seeing him through the car window and realizing she is indeed an orphan: "I see him and nothing happens. There is no magical blood. I am not anyone's daughter."⁶³¹ But Mai does not return to Hà Nội to continue to live with her mother, and become a second ghost just like

⁶³⁰ "Đời tôi vẫn còn là những chuyến tàu. Nhưng tạm thời, đó không phải là những chuyến tàu đưa tôi dần dần đi đến một vùng sương mù. Chúng đưa tôi, rất giản dị, từ tỉnh này đến tỉnh kia. Tôi đi chụp ảnh, đi tìm căn nhà ở lưng chừng đồi với một lối đi riêng dẫn xuống một góc hồ khuất trong núi của người trực đêm khách sạn." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 75.

⁶³¹ "Tôi đã nhìn thấy ông và không có chuyện gì xảy ra. Không có tình máu mủ màu nhiệm. Tôi không là đứa con gái nhỏ của ai cả." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 53.

her mother. Ghosts are those who live without memories, or buried memories, living like a silent shadow for a lifetime like Mai's mother. Instead, Mai chooses to stay in Sài Gòn, quitting school, going to work and sending money to the North for her mother. She chooses to live instead of becoming a shadow, thus deciding against living silently and enduring poverty and humiliation with her mother. Even when she works as a waitress in a restaurant, which is contrary to her mother's wishes and the ambition of being a medical student as she used to be, that was still her choice. But Mai does not dare to confess to her mother about her current job. Nor does she have the courage to tell the truth to Aunt Lan that she did not meet her father. With her mother, she chooses to remain silent and only sends money. With Aunt Lan, she invents a beautiful story that she met her father, that she is now living in her father's splendid mansion, that she is accepted, loved and cared for by him.

But life is inherently cruel. A waitress cannot be a long-term choice because of the hard-working environment, low wages, especially with the risk of harassment for young women. Mai is forced to face up to her decision. Will Mai continue to work as a waitress with little money? Can Mai continue to lie about the reunification with her father? The next chapters prove that living in the South is not an easy choice. That choice takes Mai from a student who only knew how to live under the cherished arms of her mother to become an adult, self-proclaimed girl who dares to face reality even when she is knocked down.

The ghost, a special character, marks its appearance for the first time in chapter six. The ghost, Chi, is Mai's twin sister. Chi appears for the first time between the sleepless nights when Mai falls ill. The ghost is re-confirmed in the letter that Aunt Lan sends to Mai. Mai's mother gave birth to twins: Mai and Chi. Due to the weak health of both mother and children, and the poverty the family lived in, Aunt Lan decided to take Chi to her father. She gave the baby directly to him before she left. However, Mai's mother investigated that the child was abandoned by a roadside and died suddenly. This incident causes Mai's mother's suffering and despair, which partly made her silent for the next twenty years.

Aunt Lan's letter even reveals the strange maturity of Chi's soul. Although Chi died, her soul is lingering in the lower realm, presenting itself to Mai and wandering into Mai's view:

She does not have her own body, she merges into you. She wandered between the strands of falling hair, flickered through walking feet, and left a cold breath on the ends of your eyebrows⁶³²

Through the letter, Aunt Lan wants Mai to ask her father about the death of Chi so that Chi's soul can be released:

Why Chi died, at what time, and especially where they buried her small body. You pick a place and time to ask your father. I know this is difficult because your father probably does not want to remember. But you still have to ask.⁶³³

Aunt Lan's letter signals a new turning point in Mai's southern journey. Instead of going back to Hanoi, Mai chooses to stay in Saigon to learn about Chi's death. The moment Mai knows the story of Aunt Lan, she accepts Chi's presence, taking up a conversation with the ghost and thus taking on the responsibility of learning about Chi's death, Mai's life takes another direction. The journey down to the South to meet her father which ended suddenly now becomes an urgent need. Mai must meet her father to learn about Chi's death. Mai meets her father not because of herself but because of her sister Chi. Paradoxically, a ghost turned out to be the source of life and vitality, the driving force to maintain the dying Mai.

In short, both An Mi and Mai reveal the process of resisting death in favor of life. For An Mi, before stumbling upon Michael's story, she likened herself to a zombie, a person without a soul. However, An Mi's suicide journey on trains reveals a tormenting process between death with no memory, or continuing to live to find out the past, the homeland and origin. In particular, the accidental reading of Michael's story, especially the whole mystery surrounding the family's tragedy, suddenly stimulates An Mi's desire to live. The predetermined plan to die is delayed as An Mi begins a new journey to decipher the mystery of Michael's family. With Mai, she goes from living a silent life like a shadow to taking on a commitment to keep living despite how harsh her life is. Before the journey, she did not have any memories of her roots. After the journey, she

⁶³² “Nó không có một thân thể riêng, nó lẫn vào trong con. Nó lơ thơ giữa những sợi tóc buông xuống, thấp thoáng bên đôi bàn chân bước đi, nó để vương một làn hơi lạnh lạnh ở phía đuôi hàng chân mày trên gương mặt con...” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 72.

⁶³³ “Vì sao Chi chết, lúc mấy giờ, và nhất là người ta chôn táng thân nhô xú của nó ở đâu. Con hãy lựa nơi, lựa lúc mà hỏi cha con. Dì biết việc này khó, vì cha con chắc không muốn nhớ lại. Nhưng con vẫn phải hỏi.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 74.

has the opportunity to clarify her mother's silence, her father's disappearance and her sister's death. The journey to decipher the mysteries of the life of the two main characters will be analyzed in more detail in the next chapter.

4. In search of identity:

4.1 When their stories

In *Và khi tro bụi* (And when this Dust)

Starting from chapter eight onwards, the novel describes a new journey of the heroine. An Mi chooses to work as a freelance photographer, especially focusing on the backdrop of mountains, villages with mountains, forests, and an ice lake. She aims to search for Michael's house. She continues to wander from place to place, however, this time the wandering has a specific purpose. The journey is no longer an unintentional wandering to death. Thinking of herself as a Japanese painter, she finds herself on her way to find her own Mount Fuji. "Someday, from some angle, at some moment, I will see my own Fuji."⁶³⁴ The metaphor of Mt. Fuji here does not only refer to Marcus, Michael's lost brother. Mount Fuji also signifies the truth in the mysterious story. Having a job to do, means having a purpose to live, An Mi finds her life more meaningful: "The job makes me sometimes feel more peaceful and think of me less."⁶³⁵ An Mi continues her job as a way of sustaining life. The story of Marcus either becomes immersed in her daily work or emerges as an enduring need, but An Mi does not forget. Her journey lasts for two years.

At the end of the winter in the second year, An Mi stumbles upon Marcus in an orphanage. She knows that the boy is Marcus, based on the similarity of the 10-year-old boy's eyes and the eyes of the receptionist. The boy also used to raise a dog named Shalma, the name of Michael's dead dog. However, he does not remember anything about his parents or brother: "I have no parents how can I have a brother."⁶³⁶ The boy lacks any memory about his family.

⁶³⁴ "Một ngày nào đó, từ một góc nào đó, trong một khoảnh khắc nào đó, tôi sẽ nhìn thấy Phú Sĩ của riêng tôi." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 76.

⁶³⁵ "Công việc làm cho tôi đôi khi cảm thấy yên bình hơn, ít nghĩ tới mình hơn." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 76-77.

⁶³⁶ "Em không có cha mẹ làm sao mà có anh được." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 79.

There is the younger brother, which means there is a part of the truth. But half of the truth, as people say, is not true. Therefore, An Mi continues to find the receptionist's place, a house on a mountain slope. Until one day, she actually finds one. The house is in an abandoned state, and currently uninhabited: "In the yard is an ax lying on the ground, surrounded by half-broken logs, not yesterday but for three weeks. There is no name on the door."⁶³⁷

The ruin of the house makes An Mi half hesitant and she half wants to find out about those living in it. As long as she does not understand the whole story, she still can not easily accept its end. The reaction of the protagonist is completely different from what she experienced after her husband's death. Before, An Mi easily accepted that death was an arranged destiny although she did not know how he died. Now, she does not accept the end of the other's story, as it would be. Her strange reaction reveals a desire to unravel the mysteries surrounding the story while marking the rise of the need for living by the protagonist. Why does An Mi care about Michael's tragedy if she does not want to live, and is not dimly aware of this secret leading her to other secrets?

An Mi finds the teacher - Sophie's house. In Michael Kempf's diary, Sophie is the one who cared for and comforted Michael when he was in crisis. When Michael reached Sophie's home in a panic, Sophie warmed his legs, treated him with tea and sweet cake, soothed his soul with Schumann's music in a room filled with scents. Unexpectedly, An Mi also receives the same welcome when she first arrives at Sophie's house. The warmth and sincerity of the teacher make An Mi give the diary to Sophie, and ask her what happened. Surprisingly, according to Sophie's explanation, the story is narrated differently.

There was no husband killing his wife. Instead, Anita, the wife was just a drunk and skittish woman. As she was so bored with the cramped married life, she took Marcus away. Michael was so frustrated by the fact that his mother left him that he imagined the whole story and wrote it in his notebook. The story was invented as a tragedy because it is only in tragedies that people need villains and a hero. In the story created by Michael, the father is an evil person, and he is a hero.

⁶³⁷ "Trong sân có một cái rìu nằm dưới đất, chung quanh là mấy khúc củi đang chờ dờ, nhưng không phải mới hôm qua, mà đã đôi ba tuần. Ở cửa không có bảng tên." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 80.

It's just a boring story of a boring woman who left her husband. The son lives with the television. Since his childhood is so empty he draws the experiences created on television and assigns them to himself, to his mother and brother, to make his life colourful. At the end of the tragedy, the hero must find the inevitable death. He wants to try to find death to see if that makes life more meaningful.⁶³⁸

Marcus just follows his mother. And the child An Mi found in the orphanage is just a stranger.

The story told by Sophie brings to An Mi a strange loss. "Something in me has just fallen, broken, then the fragments fall again in an empty, dark, and voice-less area."⁶³⁹ That is the loss of facing the past which is impossible to explain, or which is no sense. It makes her search meaningless. A family tragedy suddenly turns into a mediocre story about the betrayal of a wife and the paranoia of a son living in loneliness. That is all. The truth in Michael's family story was so simple. While Sophie's attitude is so sincere it conjures up a strange panic in An Mi's mind: "A warm paradise makes the bird who is only accustomed to flying under the snowy sky feel smaller and more lost."⁶⁴⁰ It makes An Mi continue to figure out Michael's story. To confirm what Sophie says happened. In order not to regret the few years of youth which she spent searching for the truth. An Mi needs a meaningful story, to make her life meaningful.

An Mi goes to the neighbor's house of Michael. Here, surprisingly, she knows conflicting comments about Sophie and Michael's family. In the views of the neighbor's wife, Sophie is a bad person. "She lives with the father who is abandoned by his wife. Then when he becomes seriously ill, she welcomes his son to her house."⁶⁴¹ In contrast, the neighbor's husband claims that Sophie is a generous teacher. There are similarities in

⁶³⁸ "Chỉ là một câu chuyện nhảm chán của một người đàn bà nhảm chán chồng và bỏ đi. Đứa con trai ở lại tiếp tục sống với cái máy truyền hình. Tuổi thơ nó trống không nên nó lôi những kinh nghiệm cùng những thù ghét của người khác trên truyền hình xuống và gán vào cho chính nó, cho mẹ nó và em nó, cho đời có chút hương phấn. Cuối vờ bị kịch thì người hùng phải đi tìm cái chết tất yếu. Nó muốn thử đi tìm cái chết để xem như thế thì cuộc sống có ý nghĩa hơn không." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 90.

⁶³⁹ Một điều gì trong tôi vừa rơi xuống, vỡ ra, rồi những mảnh vỡ ấy lại rơi nữa trong một vùng trống, tối, và không có âm thanh." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 91-92.

⁶⁴⁰ "Một thiên đường ấm áp làm cho con chim chỉ quen bay dưới bầu trời tuyết thấy mình nhỏ nhoi và lạc lõng thêm." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 92.

⁶⁴¹ "Cô ấy ăn ở với cha của một đứa học trò, một người đàn ông bị vợ bỏ. Rồi khi ông ta bị bệnh nặng, cô ấy đón con trai ông ta về nhà mình." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 96.

the neighbors' words about the fate of the mother and son. The mother is an alcoholic, taking her little son away from home. But there are more facts that An Mi does not know. The father is currently ill and lies in the hospital. In addition, Michael lives with Sophie and has given up on finding his younger brother now. He has left his little brother out there somewhere. He has been plunged into a peaceful and happy life with Sophie in a house filled with fragrance all year. All the miserable chill of life fades thanks to hot glasses of wines with cloves and cinnamon: "He refuses the story he told himself in the notebook."⁶⁴²

Michael chooses to live with Sophie and denies his past. So, An Mi has no choice but to find Michael's father. In order to find out the truth, she claims to be Anita's (the wife) friend, forging a letter from her and passing the letter to her husband. The husband immediately realizes it is a fake letter. His wife died and he knows that better than anyone else because he murdered her. The truth is what An Mi read in Michael's diary. In a state of extreme loneliness, the husband tells An Mi the story of his family. Because he does not go to church, neither confessing nor knowing how to tell a truth, he does not want to bring his family story to his grave. Also, he asks An Mi to destroy any memorabilia of his deceased wife which he keeps in his home.

An Mi temporarily delays her own journey, the journey to find death, to carry out the journey of others. She searches for Michael's house and seeks to decipher the mysteries surrounding Michael's story. The truth is exposed, but An Mi is still not satisfied. A lot of conflicting information revolves around it but there is only one truth. The wife did not leave home, she was killed by her husband. Marcus did not leave his mother, he has been clearly missing. But not everyone knows about the incident. And even knowing, not everyone accepts it. They accept the truth they want to believe. There is still a blurred space behind this story, which motivates An Mi to continue her commitment. Behind the story of another, there is still something that seems to be hers.

In Mưa ở kiếp sau (Rain in the Life Afterdeath)

Similar to An Mi, Mai in *Mưa ở kiếp sau* (Rain in the Life Afterdeath) conducts a journey to seek the truth on behalf of others. But unlike An Mi, the truth Mai looks for is closely related to her. Mai must find out the truth about Chi's death. Why did she die? What was

⁶⁴² "Anh từ chối câu chuyện chính anh đã kể trong quyển sổ." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 115.

the truth behind the fateful day, when Chi's small body was handed to the father? Mai is forced to stay in Saigon not for her sake but Chi's.

Mai seeks to approach her father's family to learn about Chi's death. She goes to the father's house and pretends to be Quỳnh's classmate, the father's daughter. She asks Quỳnh's mother, the father's legal wife, about the death of the child in front of her house twenty years ago. The sudden and straightforward approach does not bring good results. The woman completely denies the horrible story that happened in front of her house. Mai is evicted from the house and is completely defeated. After that day, Mai has a strange reunion with Chi in her dreams: "I saw Chi holding my hand to lead to two large wooden gates to enter a place called Muôn Hoa (Flower Garden)."⁶⁴³ Muôn Hoa, where Chi leads Mai in her dreams, is also where Mai suddenly sees in a classified ad. The logo of Muôn Hoa makes Mai feel familiar as if she has seen it somewhere before. This makes Mai apply to this place. It is hard to imagine this is a coincidence, as the narrative intertwines many half-broken real elements into the story. Mai's search for Muôn Hoa is implicitly guided by the ghost of Chi. Not only is the place where Mai is about to work but it probably also relates to Chi's fate.

As soon as she arrives in Muôn Hoa, Mai immediately understands that this is not an advertising company. Rather, it is a brothel, "a society where high-class men come to play, where they drink a lot of alcohol and are helped to make their parties more exciting."⁶⁴⁴ Ms. Tâm is a manager. Here, Mai will sit and model nude:

You don't have to do anything, just sit still, so beautiful. [...] People will look at you, but there will never be enough light in the room for them to see your full body.⁶⁴⁵

When she starts working at Muôn Hoa, she gradually becomes less aware of herself, turning herself into "a naked, almost motionless body" with "the head tilted, the chest

⁶⁴³ "Tôi thấy Chi nắm tay tôi dắt đến trước hai cánh cổng bằng gỗ lớn để vào một nơi có tên là Muôn Hoa." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 90.

⁶⁴⁴ "Nó là một cái hội, nơi đàn ông thượng lưu đến chơi, nơi họ uống rất nhiều rượu và được các cô người mẫu giúp cho những cuộc rượu hào hứng hơn." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 94.

⁶⁴⁵ "Em không phải làm gì hết, chỉ cần ngồi thật yên, thật đẹp. [...] Người ta sẽ nhìn em, nhưng trong phòng sẽ không bao giờ đủ ánh sáng để thấy trọn cả người em". Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 97.

breathing softly.”⁶⁴⁶ At first she is an immovable body, and slowly, she accepts to be handcuffed. In return, Mai not only has money, like other girls working in Muôn Hoa, working under Ms. Tâm’s direction gives Mai a feeling of being cared for:

She [Ms. Tâm] thinks, she understands, and understands for them, understanding what they do is necessary. The girls can rely on her, believing everything they do not understand, and feeling relieved.⁶⁴⁷

But when Mai becomes a “birthday present” for a very wealthy man, Mai knows she is alone: “I was blindfolded, they tied my body with strips of silk like a ribbon to pack presents, laid or sat in the middle of the house.”⁶⁴⁸ When Mai accepts the game, she is forced to follow its rules.

After this shocking incident, Mai falls into a half-conscious state. She does not know how she escaped from Muôn Hoa after this terrible night. She does not know why the room is on fire, and how she finds her way home. She does not know why she experiences these horrifying events. She falls into a state of losing consciousness:

I recall my story, but the story is not straightforward. There are dark spaces in between, stories, experiences without voice and not getting into memory, but they are still there. Are stories in the dark space still mine? I do not know.⁶⁴⁹

Mai’s loss of her virginity in Muôn Hoa neither helps her to understand her origin nor deciphers Chi’s death. Hence Mai is not able to stop working at Muôn Hoa until things are clarified. If Mai stops, every bitter loss that Mai has suffered since entering Saigon is suddenly meaningless. Even if she suffers a lot, she has to continue her search.

Mai returns to Muôn Hoa, which is led by Chi:

I know Chi has brought me back to Muôn Hoa. But I have no idea why Chi does so, controlling my body while I am sleeping, forcing me to Muôn

⁶⁴⁶ “một thân thể trần trụi gần như bất động, đầu cúi nghiêng, ngực thở khê khàng.” Đoàn Minh Phụng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 110.

⁶⁴⁷ “Cô suy nghĩ, cô hiểu, và hiểu thay cho chúng, hiểu những việc chúng làm là cần thiết. Những đứa con gái có thể nương tựa vào cô, tin tất cả những gì chúng không hiểu, và thấy an tâm.” Đoàn Minh Phụng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 112.

⁶⁴⁸ “Tôi bị bịt mắt, họ cột người tôi bằng những dải lụa giống như thứ ruy băng dùng để gói quà, nằm hay ngồi ở giữa nhà.” Đoàn Minh Phụng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 114-115.

⁶⁴⁹ “Tôi nhớ lại câu chuyện của tôi, nhưng câu chuyện đó không liên lạc. Có những khoảng tôi chen vào giữa, những câu chuyện, những kinh nghiệm không có tiếng nói và không len được vào trí nhớ, nhưng chúng vẫn có đó. Những câu chuyện nằm trong vùng đất tôi có còn là của tôi hay không? Tôi không biết.” Đoàn Minh Phụng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 124.

Hoa, walking on the narrow corridor between the Earth and hell, the railing without handrails and always being staggered.⁶⁵⁰

Mai could not explain why Muôn Hoa relates to Chi but Mai is not strong enough to resist Chi's control. The meetings at nights with Chi in Mai's dreams almost dominate Mai's activities. Chi takes Mai back to the brothel. But Mai is the one making the agreement:

I will go to work in Muôn Hoa for four months. Seventeen weeks and no more extra days at all. This is the last time I will follow Chi's will. After that, Chi has to leave me alone and cannot make me do things I do not want to do.⁶⁵¹

4.2 ... are also yours

Mai's story

The reason for Mai's working at Muôn Hoa, despite her suffering and humiliation, is gradually revealed through two agreements, of which Mai is mostly passive. The first agreement is made by Ms. Tâm, just two days after Mai went back to work:

There is a guest, a gentleman, I said that because he is so rich, he notices you for a long time. I will arrange a date, a very special day.⁶⁵²

And the second agreement is set by Chi:

I will take you back to Muôn Hoa on the other day. You will accept Ms. Tâm's proposal. She will ask you to meet three guests who are asking to buy Mai's virginity. Mai will not choose the most handsome or the youngest. Mai asks Ms. Tâm: 'Who is the richest?' Ms. Tâm will let Mai know and Mai will say you want to go with that person. [...] Ask Ms. Tâm

⁶⁵⁰ "Tôi biết Chi đã đưa tôi trở lại Muôn Hoa. Nhưng tôi hoàn toàn không hiểu tại sao Chi lại làm vậy, điều khiến thân thể tôi trong lúc tôi đang ngủ, bắt tôi đến Muôn Hoa, đi trên dãy hành lang hẹp giữa mặt đất và địa ngục, dãy lan can không có tay vịn và luôn luôn chao đảo." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 142.

⁶⁵¹ "Tôi sẽ đi làm ở Muôn Hoa trong bốn tháng. Mười bảy tuần và không thêm một ngày duy nhất nào cả. Đây là lần cuối cùng tôi tuân theo ý Chi. Sau đó, Chi phải để tôi yên và đừng bắt tôi làm những việc mà tôi không muốn làm." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 143.

⁶⁵² "Có một khách, một vị khách, chị nói thế vì ông ấy giàu có lịch lãm lắm, ông để ý em từ lâu. Chị sẽ sắp xếp một ngày, phải là một ngày thật đặc biệt." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 145.

to request the guest for a little extra, a little bit, because your father is sick, you need just enough money to pay for the hospital.⁶⁵³

The agreement with Chi is warned to have full of sadness, but if Mai overcomes it, she will be a different person, stable and never be suffered. If only Mai could do it, Chi would stop clinging to Mai and would go away peacefully, never bothering Mai. Muôn Hoa must have some certain secrets about the origin of both sisters. Muôn Hoa is Mai's whole life since coming to Saigon. She cannot leave until she finds out the truth. The conversation with Chi confirms the necessity of returning to the brothel: "In Muôn Hoa Mai will grow up, Mai will understand the truth, and thanks to that fact we can release us."⁶⁵⁴

This part of the truth is gradually revealed in the book that Mai brings home when she visits her father's house. Inside the book is a business card, which has the name of Ms. Tâm and the address of Muôn Hoa. The identification of the guest Mai must serve is revealed. The one Mai will serve is her father. While Mai is in extreme panic, Chi appears to tell Mai why Mai has to do this terrible job. Mai must be a servant to her father, letting him know how painful the devastation is. He devastated the life of Mai's mother without knowing how long the mother had to live after being devastated. He devastated Chi's life without knowing how much the baby wanted to breathe after being smothered by a pillow. The father is the one who killed his daughter. He gave his driver 5 maces of gold, asking the driver to bring Chi to the driver's hometown. In fact, the father knew the driver would kill the baby: "The five maces of gold he paid to the driver was to ask this guy to do it for him, not for that guy to bring me [Chi] to his cousin to raise me."⁶⁵⁵

The father belongs to the world of those who make rules and have power. He tramples on the lives of others but remains on top of his world. Girls like Mai or other young girls who once served their father have nothing more than a body to lead him to hell. Those like Mai's father, who believes that taking a girl's virginity will bring them

⁶⁵³ "Ngày kia em sẽ đưa chị trở lại Muôn Hoa. Chị sẽ chấp nhận đề nghị của cô Tâm. Chị sẽ xin cho chị gặp ba người khách đang hỏi mua trinh Mai. Mai sẽ không chọn người đẹp nhất hay trẻ nhất. Mai hỏi cô Tâm: "Ai giàu nhất?" Cô Tâm sẽ cho Mai biết và Mai sẽ nói chị muốn đi với người đó. [...] hãy nhờ cô Tâm xin ông khách thêm một ít, một ít thôi, vì cha bị bệnh, chị cần vừa đủ tiền trả bệnh viện." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 159.

⁶⁵⁴ "Ở Muôn Hoa Mai sẽ trưởng thành, Mai sẽ hiểu được sự thật, và nhờ sự thật đó mà chúng ta được giải thoát." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 152.

⁶⁵⁵ "Năm chỉ vàng cha đưa là để trả công hấn làm việc đó thay ông, chứ không phải để hấn mang về quê đưa cho chị họ hấn nuôi em." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 175.

good luck at work, will understand that breaking his daughters' does not only mean destroying his career.

That sin for him is greater than murdering his child. It is the same as killing the ancestry. His world will shatter. Only in the breakup will he be back together entirely?⁶⁵⁶

Mai has to let Chi take over Mai's body once, letting Chi lead his father to the place of murder "not for revenge, but for the sin to come to an end"⁶⁵⁷ so that his sin is taken to the end. Only in this way, he can return to being a human being, and Chi will go away peacefully:

There are murderers who do not see blood so they do not know if they kill people. [...] I just want him to know when he kills his daughter, and blood comes out, I want to show him what it is like.⁶⁵⁸

The truth about Chi's death is illuminating. The cause of Mai being led to Muôn Hoa is also exposed. Muôn Hoa is the place where the father commits the sin. And Mai goes to Muôn Hoa to wash away her father's sins, by sacrificing her virginity to redeem her father. Mai intends to take revenge for Chi, according to the plan Chi had prepared, but takes one step further. After the father commits the last sin, Mai plans to kill her father and commit suicide. But Mai is not strong enough to do everything she wants. Instead, she escapes into the bathroom and uses pieces of glass to stab herself. Mai does not take revenge for Chi. Mai does not push her father to the last sin as intended. In the end, Mai is still a weak person, her action is only led by Chi.

Mưa ở kiếp sau (Rain in the Life Afterdeath) is not only a horror story with the gruesome appearance of the ghost, its domination and leadership to the psychology and action of the heroine. The novel tells the stories of the living people in the world. Crime, resignation, suffering, torment, all are emotional experiences of the living people. Even the ghost is suddenly revealed by Đoàn Minh Phượng at the end of the novel as a living

⁶⁵⁶ "Tội lỗi đó với ông lớn hơn tội giết con. Nó ngang với tội giết tổ tông. Thế giới của ông sẽ vỡ tan. Chỉ trong sự đổ vỡ, ông mới nguyên lành trở lại." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 179.

⁶⁵⁷ "không phải để trả thù, mà để cho tội lỗi đến nơi kỳ cùng" Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 178.

⁶⁵⁸ "Có những kẻ giết người nhưng không thấy máu nên không biết mình giết người. [...] Em chỉ muốn ông biết khi cha giết con gái, và máu chảy ra, thì nó như thế nào." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 178.

soul. After the fateful day when she is forced to meet her father in a humiliating and ironic situation, Mai decides to return to her hometown, Huế, to avoid Chi. The narrative describes Mai's and Aunt Lan's efforts to help Mai stop being obsessed with Chi. They go to the temple to chant for Buddha, then visit a shaman to eliminate the ghost. But Chi is still there. Chi still appears in Mai's dreams, looking at Mai sadly, disappointedly and painfully when Mai tries to banish Chi's soul. Mai realizes her strange sympathy for her ill-fated sister. Mai realizes that the more scared and disgruntled she is with Chi, the more Mai loves her.

Who is Chi? How come does the baby, who died prematurely and who Mai never met, relate to Mai's life? Why does Chi appear in Mai's life, haunting Mai but not someone else? Because Mai herself is the one who embraces and nurtures Chi's soul. Chi represents the part of Mai's inner desire. Mai loves her father the same as Chi loves him. Chi hates him because Mai hates him. Mai is both weak and cruel like Chi:

I suddenly understand. Chi does not know this life. Chi does not love her father either. Only me. I crave my life, living with it, understanding it. I begin to love my father from the early years of thinking. Chi could not hate her father like that if she has never loved him. That love, that glue comes from my heart, because Chi breathes with my chest. Then Chi recalls the pillow that her father had hired the driver to put on her face when she was a baby, so that the love was broken up, becoming a persistent hatred. If Aunt Lan did not bring her to her father's house but me, now I am a ghost instead of Chi. I know that, and I hate my father. But I do not have the strength or the courage to understand that. I ask Chi. I need to have Chi to live the feud I do not dare to bear, the sadness I do not dare to listen, the soul I not dare to embrace. I love Chi because I need Chi.⁶⁵⁹

⁶⁵⁹ “Tôi chợt hiểu. Chi không biết cuộc đời này. Chi cũng không yêu cha. Chỉ có tôi. Tôi khao khát cuộc đời của mình, sống nó, hiểu nó. Tôi đã bắt đầu yêu cha tôi từ những năm mới biết suy nghĩ. Chi không thể thù cha như vậy, nếu nó chưa từng yêu ông. Tình yêu đó, thứ keo sơn đó Chi lấy từ tim tôi, vì nó thở bằng lồng ngực của tôi. Rồi Chi nhớ lại chiếc gối cha đã thuê tên tài xế úp lên mặt nó khi nó là đứa bé con, nên tình yêu đó bị đôn ngã lại, trở thành nỗi hận thù xương tủy. Nếu dì Lan không mang nó đến nhà cha mà mang tôi, thì bây giờ tôi là hồn ma chứ không phải Chi. Tôi biết như vậy, và tôi hận thù cha tôi. Nhưng tôi không đủ sức lực hay can đảm để hiểu điều đó. Tôi nhờ đến Chi. Tôi cần có Chi để sống mối thù tôi không dám cưu

Mai and Chi are symbiotic. Mai needs Chi as well as Chi needs Mai. Mai and Chi are two but only one.

To conclude, the novel *Mưa ở kiếp sau* (Rain in the Life Afterdeath) is a journey to find the truth, which is pieced together from fragments of memory, or half-truths. The memories are a strong obsession, controlling the character's actions. Though living in the present, the characters trace the debris of the past on the way to the future. Mai's actions are led either by Aunt Lan's memories, by her mothers,' or by her immature subconsciousness. For example, Mai traces from the letter of Aunt Lan, her rare records, and connects those memories to build up the image of her father and homeland. The story of the deceased twin sister Chi is also gradually revealed through the stories of Aunt Lan, especially through the ghost which appears in Mai's dream. The dream is understood as the depth of the subconsciousness, suddenly awakened by the personal despair of unreasonable and grim reality. The representation of Chi in the dream is nothing more than a clone of Mai. The ghost of Chi reflects a stronger, more brutal and more fierce Mai, leading and making Mai do things she does not dare to do.

The identity of a living person like Mai depends on the soul of a dead person like Chi to be revealed. The journey to the South is Mai's journey to find the father and origin. The journey is derived from the desires, hatred, and resentment of an abandoned daughter who lived in poverty and longed for love. Chi is just another "me", an alter-ego, hidden inside Mai. Chi is Mai's broken, hurtful "me", which lacks knowledge of the world. Chi was born when Mai was uprooted and hidden by the absolute silence of the mother. Chi grows up thanks to Mai's immature, subjective and emotional experience through the journey to find the father and collide with real life. Chi is Mai's imperfect ego of the diaspora who has hidden from her identity and forced to recreate it towards the harsh reality of life.

An Mi's story

The mysteries of Michael's family have been discovered but An Mi's journey has not ended yet. In the final chapters of the novel, An Mi makes a strange journey by visiting all members of Michael's family. The narrator's intervention in others' stories begins

mang, nỗi buồn không dám lắng nghe, phần hồn tôi không dám ôm ấp. Tôi yêu Chi vì tôi cần Chi." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2007, *Mưa ở kiếp sau*, 223.

with an accident. But that last involvement is an intentional act of the narrator. An Mi's sorrowful memories of the lost past are suddenly aroused through her visits to Michael's father in the hospital, the younger brother in the orphanage and Michael at Sophie's, the teacher, house. An Mi's identity is gradually built up through not only one but many others' identities. An Mi's journey to discover the truth happens for a reason.

An Mi visits Michael's father in the hospital. The whole truth is clarified through his account. It was he who killed his wife and dragged the body to the ice lake. The elder son Michael witnessed the horrifying scene. The little son Marcus was too frightened and left home. The father's story reveals the strange role of Sophie in her relationship with the father and the son. Sophie's theory, which is "suffering is at heart and we should eliminate it,"⁶⁶⁰ is the spiritual medicine that helped the father and the son calm down. It even obscures the sins they committed. Sophie made the father believe that the family conflict was a "conflicted karma"⁶⁶¹ and that the death of the wife was a relief. Sophie also made him believe that he had the right to decide when his wife lived or died. According to Sophie's and the father's excuses, the wife was Jewish, her home town was in Russia, she had no relatives, and if she died on the road, it would be even more disastrous. In her philosophical thinking about human destiny, Sophie makes the husband think of his role as a savior instead of a murderer. Even when the father does not look for his 5-year-old son Marcus, even though he understood his son might die in minus 10-degree temperatures, this was explained by the father that the son's blessing had ended:

Sophie said that his blessing, which was taken care of by me for such years, ended. That was all his fate. I am not guilty, not to torment myself.⁶⁶²

An Mi goes to the orphanage, inquiring about Marcus's condition. The boy is diagnosed with severe psychological crises. In his first psychological crisis, Marcus, who was in a coma due to the cold, was found by a forest keeper named Maibuchen. It is believed that he had amnesia at that time. The forest keeper kept Marcus to raise him, separating him from the outside world. The second psychological crisis came four years

⁶⁶⁰ "đau khổ đều tại tâm và muốn diệt khổ thì từ trong." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 143.

⁶⁶¹ "mệnh nghiệp khắc nhau". Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 143-144.

⁶⁶² "Sophie nói ơn phúc của nó được tôi lo cho từng ấy năm là hết. Phần số nó được bấy nhiêu. Tôi không có tội, không phải tự dẫn vật mình." Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 145.

later, when Mr. Maibuchen, the forest keeper, died of a heart attack. Marcus was found in a state of depression due to hunger, being “alone in the house with a man who has been dead for twenty days.”⁶⁶³ Marked by the loss of memory, Marcus also reveals his way of treating his memory:

His memory until the age of 6 is no longer available. His memory from the age of 6 to 10 may not be completely lost, but he refuses to tell anyone who wants to know his experiences.⁶⁶⁴

An Mi also goes to Sophie’s house again to meet Michael. She purposely informs Michael about the situation of Marcus in the orphanage, but his indifference and coldness disappoint her. Michael, like Marcus, chooses to erase the tragic memory. Even when An Mi shows him the notes about Marcus’s condition, Michael shows no concern. Instead, he chooses to trust the distant letters, which was supposed to be written by his mother and brother from Canada to deny the past and live a peaceful life with Sophie.

Each of the facts revealed during An Mi’s visits to Michael’s family is more or less similar to An Mi’s story. For example, the active elimination of parts of memories, especially when those memories are traumatic experiences, such as Marcus’ or Michael’, is how An Mi performs when confronting her memories too. If in the first chapters, An Mi was featured by her complete ignorance, her memories are gradually revealed in the final chapters. An Mi’s childhood years when she was brought to Germany was a time filled with joy and panic. She was adopted by a German family who loved her as their own child until the day her adoptive father shot himself in the church without any explanation. The memory of that foster father was completely obscured:

I miss love, miss the loss, but strangely, I can not keep the memory of the father.”[...] I miss the river and the forest he led me through, in winter and summer, but I do not remember the time he took my hand.⁶⁶⁵

⁶⁶³ “một mình trong căn nhà với một người đàn ông đã chết được hai mươi ngày.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 135-136.

⁶⁶⁴ “Trí nhớ của em cho đến năm 6 tuổi không còn. Trí nhớ của em từ 6 đến 10 tuổi có lẽ không mất hẳn, nhưng em từ chối bất cứ ai muốn biết những kinh nghiệm của em.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 136.

⁶⁶⁵ “Tôi nhớ tình yêu, nhớ sự mát mẻ, nhưng lạ lùng thay, tôi không giữ được ký ức về người cha.” [...] “Tôi nhớ giòng sông và những cánh rừng ông dẫn tôi đi qua, mùa đông và mùa hạ, nhưng tôi không nhớ lúc ông nắm tay.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 99-100.

This memory did not suddenly disappear but was removed by those who know of the horrific experiences attached with all the memory. When the protagonist reaches puberty, her adoptive father fell in love with her and committed suicide because of this sin. Hence, her childhood is filled with panic due to a sin that she did not know about. At the age of 13, An Mi had to kneel on the stone ground at the church to repent the sin which she could not erase. Instead, she “only erased the memory of the days before her father’s gun exploded in the church”⁶⁶⁶ The horrifying experience of her puberty erases all of An Mi’s peaceful memories. It eliminates the truth about those memories as well. An Mi only has “a way to understand it. There are only abstract ideas left that people were mistaken as memories after many years.”⁶⁶⁷ The sad memories of childhood are also actively forgotten and erased by An Mi just like Michael and Marcus do. All three share white spaces that they cannot fill about a certain time in life. All three fall into temporary loss of memory.

The visit to Michael’s father leads An Mi to a point when she reaches adulthood, which continues to reveal other memories forgotten by her. Upon returning to Michael’s house to destroy the treasures of the deceased wife Anita, which was done at the request of the husband, An Mi stumbles upon Anita’s huqin. The huqin reminds An Mi of the time she was lost and lonely after her adoptive father died. In those days, An Mi came to music as a way to release her sadness. The huqin was both a means of livelihood and a companion. The days when she was accompanied by music were the time she was most conscious of her homeland:

I recall I am a stranger here. I recall I am a stranger anywhere. People who do not have their homeland are like a seed of weed that is pulled by the wind to root on the cliff, I know my identity is very fragile.⁶⁶⁸

An Mi goes to India to study religion. When returning to Germany, she is shocked to realize that even Germany is not her homeland. The sense of exile experienced by the

⁶⁶⁶ “chỉ xóa đi trí nhớ về những ngày tháng trước khi tiếng súng của cha cô nổ vang trong nhà thờ.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 105.

⁶⁶⁷ “Chỉ có lại cái cách hiểu về nó. Còn lại những ý nghĩ trừu tượng mà sau nhiều năm, người ta làm với ký ức.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 106.

⁶⁶⁸ “Tôi nhớ lại tôi là khách lạ ở đây. Tôi nhớ lại tôi là khách lạ ở bất cứ nơi đâu. Con người không có quê hương giống như một hạt cỏ gió đưa đến bám rễ trên vách đá, tôi biết thân phận của mình rất dễ vỡ.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 131.

heroine is expressed by “a daze that seeped into the flesh,”⁶⁶⁹ which may arise in the minds of immigrants both from outside and within the borderlands:

I know better than ever before when leaving the airport, I do not have a place to go, no doors for me to turn my key to enter my own place, no relatives’ phone numbers to call to tell them I am back.⁶⁷⁰

The musical instrument belonging to the dead wife forces An Mi to face her own memories, reminding her of how lonely she is.

The truth about the night-time receptionist is illuminating. The story is nothing more than a tragedy of deceit, lethargy, and cruelty among members of the family. Chapter 14 returns to the story of the protagonist, An Mi. She discovers the truth about other people’s lives. Now, she must discover the truth about her life. It is revealed in the detail how she plays Anita’s huqin. The instrument of the deceased wife reminds An Mi of how important music once meant to her. The life of the deceased wife also reminds An Mi of how similar their fates are. Everyone forgot Anita when her husband killed her. The elder son promised to take revenge but abandoned his deceased mother. But she passed away anyway. An Mi’s life is worth mentioning. She is alive but “she wandered through so many sad trains, did anyone remember her?”⁶⁷¹ The journey to find the truth about the receptionist’s family turns out to be nothing else more than an excuse for An Mi to have a job to do and a purpose to live in this world. An Mi grieving for Anita’s fate is actually an excuse for the protagonist to cry for her own fate:

The instrument is the one that has attached me to Anita. I played her huqin, supposed I was Anita, dreamed her dreams, felt sad for her sadness. I brought the resentment of the dead, missed the living, loved the flesh, the body which still felt warm and cold. But the huqin is not mine, I have to return it to Anita’s little son. Giving it back, do I have any story, any love,

⁶⁶⁹ “một nỗi bàng hoàng ngấm vào xương thịt” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 132.

⁶⁷⁰ “Tôi biết rõ hơn bao giờ hết là ra khỏi sân bay rồi, tôi không có một nơi nào để đi về, không có cánh cửa nào để tôi xoay chìa khóa bước vào một nơi chốn của mình, không có một số điện thoại của một người thân nào để gọi, con đã về.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 132.

⁶⁷¹ “cô lang thang qua bao nhiêu chuyến tàu u buồn, có ai nhớ cô không?” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 158.

any truth for me to touch? Are there any memorabilia for me to tell me that I also live in a true, though very sad, story?⁶⁷²

The receptionist's tragedy ends with a strange similarity that is made obvious between Anita and the narrator. Though living or dead, they both suffered the same fate of being forgotten by others. The mother's life, paradoxically, continues to be followed by a living person, An Mi:

Two years of borrowing, I lived by the story of others, raising my body with blood from the beating of their hearts, the dead and the living.⁶⁷³

But unlike the mother, An Mi is at least still alive, who has skin to warm, hands to play music, and a heart to be sad.

Chapter 16 marks the process of merging the soul and body between An Mi and Anita. The narrator, An Mi, reveals a spiritual connection with Anita. She feels she could meet Anita's ghost in her dream, and even if there is no ghost in this world, An Mi herself would create Anita's ghost with her memories. An Mi expresses deep concern about Marcus's feelings even though they are not relatives. The narrator leads the reader to a paradoxical situation, when the living person, An Mi, relies on the soul of a dead person, Anita, to teach her how to live, to love and to take responsibility:

Anita, you must return to tell me. When the mother meets her child again after the mourning separation, how the mother feels. Go back to show me the mother-son love, which I have never seen. Go back to me, locking yourself in my chest to remember the breath and emotions. Go back to love Marcus with my beating heart, crying with eyes and tears.⁶⁷⁴

⁶⁷² “Cây đàn là vật đã gắn bó tôi với Anita. Tôi đã chơi cây đàn của chị, tưởng mình là Anita, đã mơ những giấc mơ, buồn những nỗi buồn của chị. Tôi đã mang nỗi uất ức của người chết, đã thương nhớ sự sống, quý báu cái da thịt, cái thân thể còn biết ấm lạnh. Nhưng cây đàn không phải là của tôi, tôi phải trả lại nó cho đứa con trai nhỏ của Anita. Trả nó lại rồi, tôi có còn câu chuyện nào, tình yêu nào, sự thật nào để tôi chạm lấy được? Còn kỷ vật nào cho tôi biết rằng tôi cũng đã sống trong một câu chuyện thật, dù rất buồn, nhưng là một câu chuyện thật?” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 166.

⁶⁷³ “Hai năm vay mượn, tôi đã sống bằng câu chuyện của người khác, đã nuôi thân thể mình bằng máu từ nhịp đập trái tim của họ, người chết và người sống.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 165.

⁶⁷⁴ “Anita, chị phải về, phải nói cho tôi biết. Khi người mẹ gặp lại con mình sau cuộc chia lìa tang thương ấy, tình cảm của người mẹ như thế nào. Về để chỉ cho tôi thấy tình mẹ con, điều tôi chưa từng thấy. Về để nhập vào tôi, tự nhốt mình trong cái lồng ngực của tôi để nhớ lại hơi thở và cảm xúc. Về để yêu Marcus bằng trái tim còn đập của tôi, khóc bằng đôi mắt còn có tuyến nước mắt.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 179-180.

This episode shows An Mi's earnest attachment to life instead of her longing for death. By loving and living with Marcus, An Mi learns to love and live her life:

I live with him, and through him, with my life. My shoulder takes some of the burdens, my heart contains a little love, enough for me to return to the world of human beings as well.⁶⁷⁵

Even An Mi expresses her intention to live under the identity of the deceased because she has no identity for herself:

I come here from the land I do not know. I am orphaned, there is no past, love, dream, I do not have a name, portrait or soul. I am an empty house. [...] I was picking up Anita's story, as though it was mine. [...] I will take her name, dreaming her dreams, raising her little child, playing her huqin. I will live the life Anita left unfinished, continuing it with a little direction and peace.⁶⁷⁶

Again, the story reflects the conflict inside An Mi's mind. Her will to possess others' lives and souls (Anita) to continue living the whole life contradicts the consciousness of living her own life, no matter how sad and meaningless it was.

I am not you, cannot be you, I can't be anyone else forever. My body, my mind, even though it is absent, does not allow anyone's soul to reside.⁶⁷⁷

This episode marks the awakening of An Mi's identity. She struggles to escape from the dream which is both beautiful and scary. In particular, when realizing she could not live in someone else's story, the feelings of sadness, despair, and fear overwhelm her. She is forced to face her own story. Especially, the thought of seeking death makes her painful:

I am returning to the last train, returning to an empty space, with death. I suddenly know that the return is painful. My mind has stopped, still, can

⁶⁷⁵ “Tôi gắn bó với em, và qua em gắn bó với cuộc đời. Vai tôi nhận một ít trách nhiệm, tim tôi chứa một ít tình thương, đủ để chính tôi cũng trở lại thế giới của loài người.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 181.

⁶⁷⁶ “tôi đến đây từ một miền đất tôi không biết. Tôi mồ côi, không có quá khứ, tình yêu, ước mơ, tôi không có một cái tên, chân dung hay linh hồn. Tôi là một gian nhà trống. [...] Tôi đang nhặt lấy câu chuyện của Anita, tưởng nó là của mình. [...] Tôi sẽ lấy tên chị, mơ những giấc mơ của chị, nuôi đứa con nhỏ của chị, chơi cây đàn của chị. Tôi sẽ sống cuộc đời mà Anita đã bỏ dở, tiếp tục nó với đôi chút phương hướng và sự yên lành.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 182-183.

⁶⁷⁷ “Tôi không phải là chị, không thể là chị, muôn đời tôi không thể là ai khác tôi. Thân thể tôi, tâm trí tôi, dù nó vắng ngắt, nó cũng không cho hồn ai đến ngụ.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 184.

no longer accept that pain. It enters my liver, skin, and flesh. I feel bitter all over me.⁶⁷⁸

She is forced to accept the fact that Marcus, the child who made An Mi feel bothered and harassed, does not interfere with her: “Marcus and I are always standing outside the doors of that life. We are orphans who do not know each other.”⁶⁷⁹ The only similarity between them both is that like Marcus, An Mi also has a very sad story, lying somewhere between the areas of memory which she does not remember. Like Marcus, An Mi has a movie of her life, though some scenes have been erased.

In the final chapter of the novel, An Mi really faces the death of her life. At the moment she decides to take 20 sleeping pills on the train to finish her life, her childhood memories are suddenly aroused. This part of her childhood takes place even before her sad past with the adoptive parents’ family in Germany. It takes place in a rural area of an unknown Asian country. It is An Mi’s true hometown. It is the place containing An Mi’s childhood memories, where her soul and identity are exposed to fragmentedly. The final chapter reveals how the diasporic character deals with a spiritual crisis, which deeply affects the existence of memory and the formation of immigrant identity. Dispersal due to a traumatic event can lead to the loss of temporary memories, both consciously or unconsciously. The victims can even actively create new memories to deny a tragic truth. The process of creating new memories can lead to the formation of a new identity, an incomplete identity.

In An Mi’s case, the tragic memories of her hometown, especially the dreadful death of her mother due to bombing and the horrifying truth about An Mi’s leaving her sister to run alone, are the past that An Mi consciously denies:

In Germany, I do not tell the story that night to anyone, I do not want the story to be real. I forget my mother and the sister, forget my childhood, I had never heard the sound of cannons screeching in the air and fell where

⁶⁷⁸ “Tôi đang quay về với những chuyến xe lửa cuối cùng, về với khoảng không, với cái chết. Tôi chợt biết sự quay về đó gây đau đớn. Tâm trí tôi đã dừng lại, bất động, không còn có thể nhận lấy nỗi đau đó nữa. Nó đi vào gan ruột, da và thịt tôi. Tôi thấy buốt khắp người.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 189-190.

⁶⁷⁹ “Marcus và tôi là những kẻ luôn luôn đứng ở bên ngoài những cánh cửa của cuộc đời ấy. Chúng tôi là những đứa trẻ mồ côi không quen biết gì nhau.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 194.

we were born, grew up, and had touched cheeks to each others' backs to sleep every night.⁶⁸⁰

The lack of An Mi's memory during her maturity leads to her inability to define her identity when she grows up: she has no soul, she does not want to live, she does not know who she is or what the meaning of her life is. And that is why the whole story of her life is filled with journeys, going outside to better know herself. Hence the journeys can be seen as a recurring feature in diasporic literature.

Mini conclusion

In summary, both novels share similarities in how characters trace memories and locate their personal identities. The two protagonists begin by searching for the truth in stories belonging to others and end with those of their own. The others turn out to be reflections of themselves. It is no coincidence that the author allows her characters to experience moving in an indefinite space, i.e. on a train. The train is the beginning of the journey to discover a missing strange girl as in the case of An Mi or the lost father as in the case of Mai. But their search for missing people is actually just an excuse. More importantly, the trip symbolizes the journey of the helpless and lonely girls. As it symbolizes the protagonists' journeys of finding their identity and being confused by it. Indeed, the act of moving is the main narrative in the novel. Coming on board and commencing the trip is, in fact, how the author locates a position of the exiled because only exiles who have lost their origins can bear an aimless life on trains. But, as the protagonists found an answer at the end of the novels, the movement is the only way for an exile to find the past. Migration, understood as a departure, is the cause of separating an individual from his past, his hometown, even the truth behind the historical discourses. In contrast, immigration as a return is a way to save the loss of identity, a way to find a person's past and origin. Although An Mi does not return to her hometown, she eventually reveals the secrets about her origins and considers them as the cause of her trauma. These facts reveal the close bond between her and her homeland even though she does not live there. An

⁶⁸⁰ “Ở Đức, tôi không kể câu chuyện đêm đó cho ai nghe, tôi không muốn câu chuyện ấy có thật. Tôi quên mẹ và em, quên tuổi thơ, tôi chưa bao giờ nghe tiếng đạn đại bác rít trong không rồi rơi xuống nơi chúng tôi sinh ra, lớn lên, đã đêm đêm áp má vào lưng nhau mà ngủ.” Đoàn Minh Phượng 2016, *Và khi tro bụi*, 204.

Mi's revealing the secret of life is also implied as the journey for her to "return" to homeland, albeit in her awareness, thereby discovering the identity of the diasporic character.

The stories told in Đoàn Minh Phượng's novels suggest that memories and identities are created continuously. When An Mi and Mai first start their journeys, they are marked by a state of lacking memory. The fragile memories they own are just meaningless information, not enough to create specific identifications, let alone personal identities. Through their movements and experiences, mingling with their desires to learn about the truth, diasporic characters collect the memories of others, who share the same memories with them, and rebuild others' memories that correspond with their own. The journeys of the protagonists have just been described both as a real act and a metaphor referring to the quest of exploring inner worlds. Both An Mi and Mai actually wandered through roads. But a new berth, somewhere outside, is not the final destination. A new awareness of the origin, the reassembly of fragmentary memories into meaningful collective memories is the final destination that the diasporic characters attain on the journeys.

CONCLUSIONS

As was mentioned, immigrant literature can be considered as literature of minorities, which is written to help marginalized communities speak up and be heard. The narrative scarcity about those who have been marginalized in a mainstream culture might be turned into the narrative plenitude through the diaspora's articulations, reflections, and manifestations about a full spectrum of the world.⁶⁸¹ Diasporic literature is born to serve this plenitude, to give access for the subaltern to see their narratives and some reflections of who they are. My research about these narratives, especially focusing on those of the writers who live in Germany, aims to recognize the minorities' efforts to speak up and evaluate their contributions to the aesthetic aspects reflected through their writings. Like them, I also want to have more and more voices of the minorities to be articulated and to be heard because globalization will become the game of the majority communities if local identities, as well as multi-ethnic interactions, are not taken into account.

Applying the theory of diaspora studies, memory and cultural studies, I aim to study Vietnamese literature in Germany in relation to the cultural and social context where these works are composed. Two issues of memory and identity are highlighted in my research to clarify the breakages and continuation of Vietnamese culture in a multicultural context. Corresponding to the diversity of the social composition of Vietnamese writers in Germany is the varied and multi-perspective ways that writers recognize and manifest memory and identity in their works. For writers who are boat people, memories and nostalgia that are both fanciful and bitter about the homeland are often recreated in their compositions. In contrast, the former contract workers focus on their struggles to create their livelihoods in the host land. For other authors, it is neither homeland nor host lands but in-between spaces, where the diaspora continuously questions, self-defines and reconstructs identity in the age of migration, and these become prominent themes in their composition.

⁶⁸¹ The concepts of narrative scarcity and narrative plenitude are used by the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Viet Thanh Nguyen in his talk on Vietnamese diasporic literature in the US. See further in <https://vietnguyen.info/2018/viet-thanh-nguyen-and-vu-tran-narrative-plenitude-talks-at-google>.

Within the scope of my study of the Vietnamese diaspora literature in Germany, the first chapter of this dissertation is devoted to the issues of the formation and development of Vietnamese literature in Germany. The topics cannot be analyzed thoroughly if I do not examine the movement and interaction of diasporic subjects within their social and cultural environments. The change in geographical spaces means that migrants have the opportunity to access, absorb or reject new cultural values. This process of cultural interaction contributes to the process of creating local identities that are dynamic and specific thanks to globalization.

I began my research by introducing the formation of the Vietnamese community in Germany. I did this in order to emphasize the diversity and complexity of the Vietnamese community in Germany. The two most populous groups are boat people, who migrated to Germany between the 1970s and the former contract workers, who arrived in Germany in the mid-80s; not to mention the Vietnamese people coming to Germany for family reunification, to study overseas or seek asylum. The group of Vietnamese boat people can be considered an active community, understood in the sense that there are many boat-people-writers and their works are published almost immediately after migrating to Germany.

In addition, the support of the Viên Giác Socio-cultural Center, a religious, political and cultural organization presided by the Venerable Thích Như Điển, has greatly contributed to the printing and publishing of literary works of Vietnamese people in Germany. In order to study the main topics reflected in Vietnamese literature in Germany, I decided to look at the two main literary spaces in these compositions. Accordingly, most works are directed towards the homeland (Vietnam) or the host land (Germany). The way the authors reflect on their experiences living in places of settlement, nostalgia for their homelands, or even the ambivalence between the two worlds shows the diverse and complex manifestations of the migrant subjects in reproducing memories and forming identities.

The analysis of the representations of identities and memories cannot be ignored with their “becoming”, their forming and shaping within sociocultural contexts. In chapters two, three, four and five, the memories and identities of immigrant characters are argued to be progressive and interactive processes. Specifically, through the narratives of the departure and return of the Vietnamese workers in Germany, the second chapter

shows the social and cultural adjustment of the members who originated in the same community, i.e. that of the contract workers. Both the writers Thế Dũng and Nguyễn Văn Thọ are former contract workers. However, the way these two writers build the narratives of departure, as in Thế Dũng's novels, and of returning, as in Nguyễn Văn Thọ's, show complexity and contradiction in how the diasporic characters view their homelands as well as how they define their identities. In addition, the narratives about labor workers in Germany, such as those told in the short stories by Lê Xuân Quang, overthrow the illusions of the socialist paradise that the migrants mistook before their arrival and expose the harsh facts of their existence in Germany. In general, the narratives of former contract workers in Germany can be viewed as vivid literary documents about how the immigrant community adapts and responds to social fluctuations during this time.

The complex relationships between nature, city space and identity are brought to light in chapter 3, in which memory and identity are considered through the lens of urban ecology studies. The advantage of being an immigrant writer means that Lê Minh Hà, an immigrant coming to Germany for family reunion, describes Hà Nội as it was in a different time, a poetic Hà Nội in the past and a chaotic Hà Nội in its current socialist-oriented market economy. The spontaneous urban expansion is analyzed in relation to the identity of occupants in these urban spaces, where the acts of occupying the common space by the occupants are understood to be the articulation of their position towards their neighbors. In addition, the expansion of urban space signals the victory of the built-environment against its non-built environment. The heroines in Lê Minh Hà's novels are portrayed by their regrets and nostalgia for the old Hà Nội and their bewilderment to the rapid changes of the current cultural values in a new society. The protagonists' frequent reminiscence and recalling between past and present are themselves the carriers that convey the representations of memory.

In chapter 4, the formation of migrant memories and the emergence of identities as reflected in the short stories and the novel written by Ngô Nguyên Dũng are analyzed in relation to nostalgia. The process of restructuring memory to create an imaginary homeland expresses the very essence of nostalgia, i.e. the longing for home and the desire to return. The representations of the refugees' dark memories while migrating to foreign countries, their fragmentary memories of the Republic of Vietnam, the extreme loneliness, isolation, and disintegration in the places of residence are argued through

Boym's concepts of nostalgia. In addition, the manifestations of characters' ambivalence, hybridity and the search for identity emphasize the dynamic attachments among nostalgia, memory, and identity during the protagonists' relentless questioning of home. In general, nostalgia, as a constructed discourse, relates not only to spatio-temporal but also to socio-cultural dimensions, and memory, as a process of recalling and reproducing, is found intertwined into the diasporic negotiation of their migrating and belonging.

In the final chapter, the expressions of memories and identities are analyzed in relation to the journeys of the heroines. Two fascinating novels by the writer Đoàn Minh Phượng, who had lived in Germany since 1977 and returned to Vietnam now, have shown us how the diaspora can be understood both as a form of actual migrations and as a type of consciousness. Based on the understanding of the diaspora as a function of mind, I argue that the protagonists' journeys are both real acts to discover the mysteries in social lives and metaphors used to explore the subtle intricacies hidden in the protagonists' inner worlds. The journeys of the migrant characters are illuminated in their complex relations with memory and identity when as far as the characters go in their journey of finding the truth through fragmentary memories, the closer they get to understanding who they are. Diasporic experiences have also opened up in-between cultural spaces where people are constantly aware of multi-location and duality and keep having to define their identities. This analysis also emphasizes our understanding of diaspora as not only related to the roots, i.e homeland, but also the routes, i.e the journeys themselves, migrating, realizing and reconstructing selves.

In short, the multi-perspective analyses of Vietnamese literature in Germany show how diasporic characters register and respond to changes during their migration in competitive and contradictory ways. The variety of themes and aesthetic methods that the Vietnamese writers used in their compositions are enlightened and linked through a key and thorough study of how memories and identities are expressed in Vietnamese diaspora literature in Germany. These analyzes have contributed to elucidating two questions about the ontology of diaspora literature that I proposed in the introduction section. That is what we can understand about diaspora literature; and how the narratives of memories and identity in Vietnamese literature could tell us about individuals and groups within its community.

Regarding the first question, diaspora literature includes the works, which are

written mostly by immigrants or tell the stories of migrants. Whether the diasporic experiences attained by the authors are first-hand or not, the narratives of diaspora literature usually deal with the social contexts of both the migrant's country of origin and their arrival, their mixed experiences of these places, their sense of up-rootedness and their search for identity. Therefore, the tension between the self and the other, between the migrant's safe zone, including their homelands, languages or cultures, and the foreign others' zones, can be seen as a prominent feature of diaspora literature. Through illustrations of migrant's ambivalences towards conflicting zones, diaspora writing demonstrates how the diasporic characters affirm and restructure their new selves and identities based on the others' selves. The varied and multiple conversations and manifestation/representation of diasporic characters, which constantly revolve around their "being" as well as their "becoming" within globalized societies are indeed the very essence of what diaspora literature is.

As for the second question, diaspora literature in the case of Vietnamese in Germany is a collection of narratives describing the circumstances and experiences of the Vietnamese community in Germany. The diversity in the backgrounds of community groups has been reflected in the variety of literary topics: the topic of Vietnamese people crossing the border, of Vietnamese people living and adapting to new societies, of nostalgia and remembrance about the homeland. Regarding the authors, diaspora literature in Germany has a number of writers, one opposing the other; those who write not only for themselves but also for the groups they represent, and those who immersed themselves in their creative worlds. In the former, diaspora literature is viewed as a way of articulation, like any other means of fighting for a cause. In the latter, there is no distinction between literature and diaspora literature. For this group of writers, literature is itself a value, and literature does not need to be a spokesman for political inclination. Diasporic experiences expressed through the writings of these authors, such as diasporic lives, obsession with memory or the search for identity, re-appear not only because of a writers' preference for a certain political trend but also due to their compulsion to reenact the vivid reality. The documents of diaspora's lives are therefore treated and valued equally to any material about another reality or another writer's experience. The complexities of the creative trends reflect diversity during the formation of Vietnamese community groups in Germany. Analyzing memories and identities, therefore, allows us

to encounter the sophistication and complexity of how different selves are formed, developed, faced or compromised by harsh realities.

The last questions raised in this dissertation are used to elicit new directions of research related to Vietnamese diaspora literature. That is to what extent Vietnamese diaspora literature affects Vietnamese literature in Vietnam? More than that, how Vietnamese diaspora literature can shape the conversation about the relationship between the two countries - the country of origin and the country of settlement? How are gender identities are formed and negotiated in multi-cultural contexts? What about the issue of the reception of diaspora literature in the host and home countries? What is the future of Vietnamese diaspora literature?

These questions are big ones that I, as the writer of this dissertation, am still concerned in the study of Vietnamese literature abroad, which I hope to be able to explore more thoroughly in long-term research projects in the future. At this moment, instead of exaggerating or imposing the missions that the diasporic literature must take, I emphasize the most fundamental contribution that diaspora literature brings to readers: Diaspora literature provides a new reality from another perspective. The most interesting point of Vietnamese diaspora literature in Germany is its comparison. The authors regard Germany with “foreign” but “native” (immigrant) eyes. At the same time, they regard Vietnam with the “former native” but somehow “alienated” eyes. This “strange look” offers new insights and new perspectives.

APPENDIX

Vietnamese authors and their works used for the analysis in the first chapter

| Authors | Publications |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Đan Hà | <i>Tìm trong yêu dấu</i> (In Search of the beloved), 1997 |
| Đan Hà and Huy Giang | <i>Nỗi nhớ</i> (Nostalgia), 1995 |
| Hạ Long (Vũ Ngọc Long) | <i>Nỗi buồn viễn xứ ai buồn hơn ai</i> (The sadness of being far-away country worse than anything else), 1987 <i>Tìm nẻo đường về</i> (Finding a way back), 1992 <i>Quê hương tôi bây giờ là như thế đó</i> (My hometown is now just like that) (unknown year of publishing) |
| Huy Giang | <i>Những nụ hồng</i> (Rosebuds), 1996 <i>Những nụ hoa bản</i> (The flower buds of Bản tree), 1994 |
| Lê Minh Hà | <i>Trăng goá</i> (Last quarter of Moon), 1998 <i>Gió biếc</i> (Beloved Wind), 1999 <i>Những giọt trầm</i> (Drops of Silence), 2002 <i>Những gặp gỡ không ngờ</i> (Unexpected Meetings), 2012 |
| Lê Xuân Quang | <i>Canh bạc cuộc đời</i> (The Gamble of Life), 2005 |
| Mai Lâm | <i>Từ xa Hà Nội</i> (Far from Hanoi), 2014 <i>Xa rồi ngày xanh</i> (Away from green days), 2014 |
| Ngô Nguyên Dũng | <i>Đêm</i> (Night, 1989), |

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| | <i>Hòn còng lửa</i> (The Island of Fire Crabs), 2002 |
| Nguyễn Văn Thọ | <i>Vàng xưa</i> (Old Gold), 2003 <i>Mưa thành phố</i> (City Rain), 2010 <i>Thất huyền cầm</i> (The guqin), 2006 <i>Sẫm Violet</i> (Dark Violet), 2013 |
| Nhiều tác giả | <i>Tuyển tập Viết về châu Âu</i> (The Collections of Works about Europe), 2003 <i>Tuyển tập thơ Viên Giác</i> (Viên Giác Collection of poems), 1990 <i>Những cây bút nữ 1 and 2</i> (Female Writers), 2008 and 2014 <i>Văn bút Âu Châu 1, 2 and 3</i> (Collection of European Writers), 1989, 1994 and 1996 |
| Phong Hưng Lưu Nhơn Nghĩa | <i>Như cánh chuồn chuồn</i> (Like the dragonfly wings), 2001 |
| Thế Dũng | <i>Hoa hồng đến muộn</i> (Rose comes late), 1990 <i>Người phiêu bạt</i> (Wanderer), 1992 <i>Mùa xuân dang dở</i> (Unfinished Spring), 2003 <i>Tự vấn</i> (Self-questioning) 2003 <i>Từ tâm</i> (Philanthropic heart), 2005 <i>Tiếng người trong đá Giáp Sơn</i> (The Human Voice in Giáp Sơn Stone), 1993 <i>Chuyện tình dang dở</i> (Unfinished Love Story), 2000 <i>Tình Cuội</i> (Cuội's Love story), 2006 |
| Thế Giang | <i>Thằng người có đuôi</i> (Man with Tail), 1988 |

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Trúc Giang | <i>Tình yêu nuôi tôi lớn</i> (Love grows me up), 1999 |
| Tuỳ Anh (Phù Vân) | <i>Ngoài xa dấu chân mây</i> (Beyond the Footprint of Clouds), 1994 |
| Venerable Thích Như Điển | <i>Giọt mưa đầu hạ</i> (Early Rain Drops), 1979 <i>Ngõ ngàng</i> (Perplexity), 1980 |
| Vũ Nam | <i>Sau ngày tang</i> (After the Date of the Funeral), 1987 <i>Bên dòng sông Donau</i> ((On the side of Danube River), 1990 <i>Nơi cuối dòng sông</i> (At the End of the River), 1994 <i>Câu chuyện từ con tàu Cap Anamur</i> (The Story of the Cap Anamur Boat), 1997 <i>Bên này bức tường Bá Linh</i> (On this side of Berlin Wall), 1993 <i>Một đêm ở Geneva</i> (One Night in Geneva), 2004 <i>Hoa Liên Kiều</i> (Forsythia), 2007 <i>Quê người nhớ quê nhà</i> (Remembering the homeland in the host land), 2016 |

Table 2: Vietnamese authors and their works used for the analysis in the first chapter (apart from works which are mentioned in **Table 1**, pages 28-29)

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List of tables

Table 1: Vietnamese authors and their works used for in-depth analyses in four chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Table 2: Vietnamese authors and their works used for the analysis in the first chapter.

List of abbreviations

| | |
|--------|---|
| ASLE | Association for the Study of Literature and Environment |
| DAAD | The German Academic Exchange Service |
| FRG | The Federal Republic of Germany |
| GDR | The German Democratic Republic |
| MOET | Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training |
| MOLISA | The Ministry for Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs |
| SRV | The Socialist Republic of Vietnam |
| UNHCR | The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |
| USSR | The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics |
| VWA | Vietnamese Writers Abroad |
| VWP | The Vietnam Workers Party |

List of publications

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Summary

Centered on the two key concepts of memory and identity, this dissertation focuses on works written in Vietnamese by Vietnamese writers who live or lived in the Federal Republic of Germany. The first chapter of the dissertation is devoted to a general introduction of the Vietnamese community in Germany to emphasize its diversity and complexity. The thesis is centered on the formation and development of diaspora literature by introducing two main literary spaces in these compositions: the interest towards the homeland and the host land. The way the authors reflect on their experiences made in the places of their settlement, and the nostalgia for their homelands, or even the ambivalence between the two worlds show the diverse and complex manifestations of the migrant subjects in reproducing memories and forming identities.

In the second, third, fourth and fifth chapters, the thesis focuses on specific authors and their works. First of all, the thesis argues how the characters reveal their sense of identities when they live and work abroad. This is presented in the second chapter through the narratives of departure and return reflected in the works of Thế Dũng, Nguyễn Văn Thọ, and some other former contract workers. The reasons for their social mobility are a combination of push and pull factors, including frustration with a stagnant working environment and the illusion of a bright future in the host land.

In Chapter Three, the relation between memory and identity in Lê Minh Hà's novels is viewed through the perspective of urban ecology. The heroines in Lê Minh Hà's works are characterized by their regrets and nostalgia for the old Hà Nội and their bewilderment about the spontaneous urban expansion in Hanoi at present. The protagonists' frequent reminiscences and recalling between past and present are themselves the vehicles that convey the representations of memory.

Nostalgia is regarded as the core theme to contribute to the formation of migrant memories and the emergence of identity in Ngô Nguyên Dũng's works which are discussed in Chapter Four. The topics in Ngô Nguyên Dũng's stories are diverse, ranging from depictions of the lives of refugees in the host lands, of their haunting memories in the homeland, and a re-enactment of the context of South Vietnam. The memory embodied in Ngô Nguyên Dũng's works reveals the characteristics of memory as fragmentary and ambiguous in time and space, intermingled with the subjective of the memory-makers.

Besides, the expression of identity is analyzed as an on-going process in which the immigrants are constantly mobilized to adapt and reposition themselves.

Chapter Five emphasizes how diasporic protagonists in Đoàn Minh Phượng's novels open up to new cultural spaces formed by a double consciousness between homeland and host land. The journeys of the protagonists are analyzed both as a real act and as a metaphor referring to the quest of exploring inner worlds. When the protagonists first start their journeys, they are marked by a state of lacking memory. At the end of the journeys, they gain a new awareness of their origins. Through their movements and experiences, the thesis argues that diasporic consciousness can be conceptualized through imaginary connections that diasporic characters create overseas as well as through the forms of culture they produce.

In the conclusions, an evaluation is presented on the literary achievements of Vietnamese writers through the research of Vietnamese diaspora literature in Germany. The aim is to eliminate misunderstandings or distortions (if they occur) and to make a positive impact on the progress of global interaction and integration of Vietnamese literature.

Zusammenfassung

Basierend auf den beiden Schlüsselkonzepten Erinnerung und Identität, fokussiert sich diese Dissertation auf die Arbeiten von vietnamesischen Schriftstellern, die in Deutschland leben und auf vietnamesisch schreiben. Das erste Kapitel der Dissertation ist einer allgemeinen Einführung in die vietnamesische Gesellschaft gewidmet, um deren Vielfalt und Komplexität aufzuzeigen, die sich in Deutschland herausgebildet hat. Ich konzentriere mich dabei auf die Entstehung und die Entwicklung der Diaspora-Literatur, indem ich zwei literarische Hauptbereiche vorstelle: Heimatland und Gastland. Die Art und Weise, wie die Autoren die Erfahrungen in der neuen Umgebung, das Heimweh sowie die Zerrissenheit zwischen den beiden Welten darstellen, zeigt die vielfältigen und komplexen Erscheinungsformen der Verarbeitung von Erinnerungen sowie der Identitätsfindung der Migranten auf.

Im zweiten, dritten, vierten und fünften Kapitel beschäftige ich mich mit einzelnen Autoren und deren Arbeiten. Beginnend mit Kapitel 2 und den Berichten über Ankunft und Rückkehr, die in den Arbeiten von Thế Dũng, Nguyễn Văn Thọ, sowie von anderen ehemaligen Vertragsarbeitern reflektiert werden, erörtere ich, in welchen Formen sich die Identitäten der Charaktere zeigen, während diese im Ausland leben und arbeiten. Die Gründe für deren Auswanderung sind eine Mischung aus verschiedenen „Push- und Pull-Faktoren“, beispielsweise der Frustration aufgrund stagnierender Arbeitsbedingungen, oder der Fantasie einer rosigen Zukunft im Gastland.

Im Kapitel 3 wird die Beziehung zwischen Erinnerung und Identität in Lê Minh Hà's Novellen im Kontext der Stadtökologie betrachtet. Die Hauptcharaktere in Lê Minh Hà's Arbeit sind gekennzeichnet durch den Wehmut und das Heimweh nach dem alten Hà Nội sowie deren Verwunderung über die plötzliche Stadterweiterung des heutigen Hanoi. Der ständige rückblickende Vergleich zwischen Gegenwart und Vergangenheit stellt hier das Medium dar, dass die Erinnerungen der Protagonisten transportiert.

Heimweh ist das Kernelement, das zu der Bildung von Migrationserinnerungen und zur Entstehung von Identität in Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's Werk im Kapitel 4 beiträgt. Die Themen in Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's Erzählungen sind vielfältig, sie reichen von der Beschreibung des Alltags der Auswanderer im Gastland, bis hin zur Schilderung ihrer nicht enden wollenden Erinnerungen an das Heimatland, welche in der Umgebung Süd-Vietnams spielen. Die Erinnerungen, die in Ngô Nguyễn Dũng's Werken dargestellt

werden, zeigen ihre Charakteristik als zersplittert und mehrdeutig, sowohl in Zeit als auch in Raum, und sie vermischen sich mit der Subjektivität der Erinnerungs-Geber. Hier wird der Ausdruck von Identität als ein fortlaufender Prozess dargestellt, in welchem sich die Immigranten andauernd bewegen müssen, um sich neu anzupassen und zu positionieren.

In Kapitel 5 habe ich den Schwerpunkt darauf gelegt, wie sich den im Ausland lebenden Protagonisten in Đoàn Minh Phượng's Novellen neue Kulturwelten eröffnen, gekennzeichnet durch deren zweifache Identität im Heimatland und Gastland. Die Reisen der Protagonisten werden in zweierlei Form analysiert, als reales Geschehen und in der Metapher einer Suche in der inneren Welt. Am Anfang der Reise sind sie durch einen Zustand an fehlenden Erinnerungen gekennzeichnet, am Ende erlangen sie ein neues Bewusstsein über ihre Herkunft. Durch ihre Wege und Erfahrungen und mithilfe der imaginären Verbindungen, so meine ich, kann sich ein diasporisches Bewusstsein der Auswanderer in Übersee entwickeln, ebenso wie die Kulturformen, die dadurch produziert werden.

Abschließend habe ich mit der Forschung an der vietnamesischen Diaspora-Literatur das Ziel verfolgt, die literarische Leistung der vietnamesischen Schriftsteller aufzuwerten, auch indem Missverständnisse oder Verdrehungen (wenn es welche geben sollte) beseitigt werden und ich versuche einen positiven Einfluss für die weitere Entwicklung der weltweiten Interaktion und Integration der vietnamesischen Literatur herzustellen

Eidesstattliche Erklärung

Hiermit versichere ich an Eides statt, dass diese Dissertation von mir selbständig und ohne unzulässige Hilfe verfasst wurde. Andere als die in der Dissertation angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmittel wurden nicht benutzt. Alle wörtlichen oder sinngemäßen Zitate wurden als solche gekennzeichnet.

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