

BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

A STUDY OF SELECTED WORKS BY VIETNAMESE FRANCOPHONE

WRITERS FROM 1930 TO 1990

By

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ABSTRACT I

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As a subject of research, Vietnamese Francophone literature has remained relatively unexplored. There are only two major works, and a number of articles, on the subject. The two works, both theses which appeared in 1982, are Jack A. Yeager's *The Vietnamese Novel in French*, a general overview of the Vietnamese Francophone novel, and a thesis by Nguyen Hong Nhiem on the writer Pham Van Ky.

My purpose in this thesis is to focus on four primary themes which particularly distinguish the Vietnamese Francophone novel, and to analyse a number of novels in the light of these four themes. I will examine sixteen novels by twelve writers. The earliest is *Bà-Dâm*, published in 1930, and the latest *Retour à la saison des pluies*, published in 1990. The first theme is the influence of the Vietnamese classic, the *Kim-Van-Kieu*, on these modern novels. The second theme is the portrayal of women, the double colonization of women within a colonial and post-colonial context.

I will contrast a woman writer, Ly Thu Ho, with a prominent male writer, Pham Van Ky. The third theme is the nature of interracial relationships, in particular between Vietnamese men and Frenchwomen. The last theme is alienation: alienation within the self and within one's environment.

The novels are the writers' individual response to the dilemma of being Vietnamese writing in French. In examining them, one must move beyond the concept of a conflict between East and West. The novels reveal the influence of both East and West. They are an amalgamation of Eastern and Western elements: philosophical, cultural, and literary. They express an interplay of both thoughts and words across cultures.

ABSTRACT II

BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

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As a subject of research, Vietnamese Francophone literature has remained relatively unexplored. There are only two major works, and a number of articles, on the subject. The two works, both theses which appeared in 1982, are Jack A. Yeager's *The Vietnamese Novel in French: A Literary Response to Colonialism*, and Nguyen Hong Nhiem's *L'Echiquier et l'antinomie Je/Moi comme signe et substance du conflit Occident/Extrême-Orient dans les œuvres de Pham Van Ky*. Yeager's dissertation was published in book form in 1987. Yeager's study is an introduction to the field. The first three chapters in his book deal with the general historical and literary background and the last three chapters with broad themes relating to the novels themselves: *Initiation and Confrontation*, *Socio-Political Reality* and *Women as Character and Symbol*. Nguyen Hong Nhiem, on the other hand, concentrates on the writer Pham Van Ky. She analyses his major

novels within the theoretical framework of a game of chess, specifically Chinese Chess, and in the light of the conflict between the *Je* and the *Moi*. Her thesis deals with numbers, grids, diagrams, pattern and configuration. Yeager's study is therefore a general overview of the Vietnamese Francophone novel, while Nguyen Hong Nhiem's thesis focuses on the work of one writer.

Vietnamese Francophone literature arose out of a specific historical context: the French colonization in Indochina. The arrival of the French in the second half of the nineteenth century had a significant impact on Vietnamese literature and on the language itself. In the twentieth century, the use of Chinese lettering and of *chu nom* (Vietnamese demotic characters) gradually disappeared and *quoc ngu* (the Romanized form of the Vietnamese language) came into use. The advent of the French saw the 'introduction and adoption of new literary genres, such as the essay, the short story, the prose novel and journalism'.¹

Vietnamese Francophone writers such as Pham Quynh and Nguyen Tien Lang advocated the use of *quoc ngu* on a national basis. The advantage of *quoc ngu* lay in by-passing the compulsory study of Chinese language and literature. The flexibility of *quoc ngu* also meant that the transfer of European words and technical terms was feasible and that the language itself was more receptive to the modern world. *Quoc ngu* provided a practical means with which to diffuse literature, news and political tracts. The first two Vietnamese prose novels to be written in the new mode were Nguyen Trong Thuat's *Qua dua do* (The Watermelon) and Hoang

¹ Jack A. Yeager, *The Vietnamese Novel in French: A Literary Response to Colonialism* (Hanover and London, 1987), p. 33.

Ngoc Phach's *To Tam* (To Tam being the name of the heroine).² Both were published in 1925. One of the first Vietnamese to have a Francophone novel published to his credit was Nguyen Phan Long, a journalist and editor of *L'Echo Annamite*. His novel *Le Roman de Mademoiselle Lys* appeared in Hanoi in 1921.³

The majority of Vietnamese Francophone novels were published in France. Twenty-four novels, including Kim Lefèvre's two *récits*, appeared in Paris, and six in Vietnam. Many writers won literary awards. Pham Van Ky was shortlisted for the Prix Goncourt a number of times, before being awarded the Grand Prix de l'Académie Française for his novel *Perdre la demeure* in 1961. The Académie Française granted the Prix Louis Barthou to Pham Duy Khiem for his novel *Nam et Sylvie* in 1957. The last of Ly Thu Ho's trilogy, *Le Mirage de la paix*, won the Prix littéraire de l'Asie in 1987. The bulk of this literature was published between the 1930s and the 1960s, in Paris, and yet most works are now out of print and have been quietly forgotten.

The relative obscurity into which the work of Vietnamese Francophone writers has fallen contrasts with the interest generated by African Francophone literature. There was no movement similar to the African Négritude movement in the 1940s in Indochina. Francophone literature in Africa recreated itself out of an oral literature. The majority of African Francophone novels have been produced from 1954 to the present, 'au moment

² Nguyen Tran Huan, 'La littérature vietnamienne de langue française', *Culture française*, 22, 1 (printemps 1973), 6-23 (p. 10).

³ Earlier examples of Vietnamese Francophone literature include a collection of poetry, *Mes heures perdues* by Nguyen Van Xiem, and *Contes et légendes du pays d'Annam* by Le Van Phat, both of which appeared in 1913. Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 46.

même où la cité africaine commençait à prendre conscience d'elle-même'.⁴ As can be seen, the situation is unlike that of Vietnamese Francophone novels, most of which were published from the 1930s to the 1960s.

Vietnamese Francophone writers came up against a different set of problems from those faced by their African Francophone counterparts. Vietnam has a long literary tradition, which in turn rests on the bulwark of Chinese literature and philosophy: the Classics for Vietnamese scholars. The French encountered in Vietnam a civilization far older than their own.⁵ Vietnamese Francophone writers face the difficult task of combining two different literary traditions in the novel. The result, in some cases, is difficult to decipher and to absorb.

Writers wrote in French for a number of reasons. Pham Duy Khiem states that he had no choice. He made the point that as a Vietnamese living under the French protectorate, he could not do otherwise.⁶ He likens his use of French as a writer to the use of classical Chinese by Vietnamese scholars for two millennia.⁷ Nguyen Tien Lang writes an impassioned plea in his *Indochine la douce*: 'Il s'agit d'un élan impossible à réfréner, qui ressemble à l'amour'.⁸ Writers were aware of the regional limitations of their indigenous language and wanted to broadcast their ideas further afield. They expressed themselves in the language of the colonizer

⁴ Jacques Chevrier, 'Le français en Afrique Noire', in *Guide culturel: Civilisations et littérature d'expression française*, sous la direction de André Reboullet et Michel Tétu (Laval, 1977), 256-296 (p. 275).

⁵ Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 11.

⁶ Pham Duy Khiem, 'Réponse de Pham Duy Khiem' dans 'Le Viêt-Nam et la Culture Française', *Revue de la Méditerranée*, 4, 17 (1957), 635-651 (p. 648).

⁷ Pham Duy Khiem, 'Réponse', p. 649.

⁸ Nguyen Tien Lang, *Indochine la douce* (Hanoi, 1935), pp. 44-45.

as a means of reaching the French public and through them a wider audience internationally. Thai Van Kiem states: 'comme notre langue a des limites territoriales, qui ne nous permettent pas de prétendre à une universalité immédiate, il nous faut bien recourir au français'.⁹ French therefore gave these writers access to a wider audience. Thuong Vuong-Riddick summarizes in the clearest terms the dilemma confronting Vietnamese Francophone writers: 'Symbole de servitude et pourtant outil révolutionnaire, le français jouit donc d'un statut ambigu qui explique en partie le drame que vivent les écrivains vietnamiens francophones'.¹⁰

My purpose in this thesis is to focus on four primary themes which particularly distinguish the Vietnamese Francophone novel, and to analyse a number of novels in the light of these four themes. These novels illustrate the dilemma of writers who were educated with a political system which they saw disintegrate and disappear. They reflect a conflict of interests, identity and language. They encompass the encounter of two cultures and literary traditions, an encounter which was moreover subject to the particular stresses resulting from colonialism. I will examine sixteen novels by twelve writers. The earliest is *Bà-Dâm*, published in 1930, and the latest *Retour à la saison des pluies*, published in 1990. There are four women writers among a total of twelve writers overall, and seven works by women writers. I am interested in analysing the works of women writers because they represent a minority voice in an already 'marginal' literature. I will set their novels against those of their male colleagues, who are more numerous

⁹ Thai Van Kiem interviewed in 'Autour de la francophonie', *Présence francophone*, 2 (printemps 1971), 72-75 (p. 75).

¹⁰ Thuong Vuong-Riddick, 'Le drame', p. 145.

and are also struggling to expose the submerged voice of the colonized.

The first theme is the influence of the Vietnamese classic, the *Kim-Van-Kieu*, on these modern novels. The scholar Nguyen Du (1765-1820) composed *Doan truong tan thanh* (New plaint of a broken heart) in the early years of the nineteenth century. This poem, which became a classic of Vietnamese literature, is known in modern times as the *Tale of Kieu* or the *Kim-Van-Kieu*. The *Kim-Van-Kieu* surfaces as theme, moral, poetry and fate in these novels. The use of Nguyen Du's classic poem, especially in Ly Thu Ho's *Printemps inachevé* (1962), highlights the dilemma of the individual caught within the context of changing social mores. Ly Thu Ho's subversive rewriting of the epic of Kieu underlines the destructive effect of traditional morality on the lives of women. The fate of her protagonist echoes to some extent that of her country. The *Kim-Van-Kieu* has been described as 'le miroir de l'âme vietnamienne'.¹¹ It leaves a pervasive imprint on the works of many Vietnamese Francophone writers. For this reason, its omission is also notable. Chapter One will examine the use that modern writers made of this classical poem.

The second theme is the portrayal of women, the double colonization of women within a colonial and post-colonial context. Chapter Two will examine the work of a woman writer, Ly Thu Ho. She was the only woman, among a host of male writers, to write and publish Vietnamese Francophone novels between 1962 and 1986. Ly Thu Ho published three novels which form part of a loose

¹¹ Xuan-Phuc and Xuan-Viet, 'Introduction' in Nguyen Du, *Kim-Van-Kieu*, traduit du vietnamien par Xuan-Phuc and Xuan-Viet (Paris, 1961), 11-27 (p. 15).

trilogy: *Printemps inachevé* (1962), *Au Milieu du carrefour* (1969) and *Le Mirage de la paix* (1986). Her approach is characterized by subversion, the surface convention of her characters and plots masking a much deeper critique of the condition of women in modern Vietnamese society. Chapter Three, in contrast, will present the portrayal of women by a prominent male writer, Pham Van Ky. I will contrast an early novel, *Frères de sang* (1947) with a later one, *Des Femmes assises çà et là* (1964). The first, unlike the novels of Ly Thu Ho, contains a violent denunciation of patriarchy. *Frères de sang* exposes the stifling of women's lives and the lives of lesser beings under the authority of the patriarch in a traditional Vietnamese village. The second and more complex novel is set in France, and portrays the male protagonist's relationship with European women and with his dying mother in Vietnam. The male protagonist remains at the end a perpetual outsider and stranger, not only as a Vietnamese in France but as an outsider to the lives of these women.

The third theme is the nature of interracial relationships, in particular between a Vietnamese man and a Frenchwoman. Two novels, nearly thirty years apart, deal explicitly with this theme. The first is Truong Dinh Tri and Albert de Teneuille's *Bà-Dâm* (1930) and the second Pham Duy Khiem's *Nam et Sylvie* (1957). Chapter Four will compare the treatment of this theme in both novels and the way in which they illustrate the stresses to which such a relationship was subject in the 1930s. Their focus differs from earlier French renditions of interracial relationships, where the emphasis lay on the portrayal of a white male protagonist with a native woman. Both novels, in their differing ways, chart the

essential failure of a cross-cultural relationship within the colonial context. Pham Duy Khiem's novel reflects the stresses of this relationship within its very structure. The disparate excerpts from diary, letter, past and present consciousness illustrate the fragmented perceptions which initially shaped the relationship and later led to its breakdown.

The last theme is alienation: alienation within the self and within one's environment. Chapter Five will examine the alienation of the individual in Nguyen Huu Chau's *Les Reflets de nos jours* (1955), and Pham Duy Khiem's *La Place d'un homme* (1958). The first novel illustrates the despair of an individual, isolated and alone, caught between two cultures, and eventually driven to seek a violent death in combat. The breakdown of the individual is reflected in the fragmented structure of the novel itself. The second novel, although more orderly in form, charts the decision of a Vietnamese to enlist as a common soldier in the French Army at the outbreak of the Second World War. The novel depicts the ultimate irony of this action and also ends with the death of the protagonist in combat. In each novel, death provides a solution to an unresolved conflict of identity. Chapter Six, the last chapter, will look at the representation of alienation within a traditional setting: Pham Van Ky's *Frères de sang*, and Cung Giu Nguyen's *Le Fils de la baleine* (1956). Both novels depict the ultimate alienation of their protagonists. Both protagonists are Vietnamese who were educated in the metropolis. Each returns to the homeland, to the traditional village and there discovers that he is a perpetual outsider: a stranger in France, and a stranger at home. They fit in neither world. One escapes, and one loses his sanity.

They belong in a world apart. Their fate remains uncertain and reflects the situation of Vietnamese Francophone literature.

The tangled values and loyalties of the Vietnamese Francophone writers are evident in their works: in the subjects and themes dealt with and in the style of the novels. To understand these, it is necessary to understand the background, mentality and particular pressures experienced by these writers. The novels are the writers' individual response to the dilemma of being Vietnamese writing in French. In examining them, one must move beyond the concept of a conflict between East and West. The novels reveal the influence of both East and West. They are an amalgamation of Eastern and Western elements: philosophical, cultural, and literary. They express an interplay of both thoughts and words across cultures.

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INTRODUCTION

A grain of sand contains all land and sea.
- Zen saying

Vietnamese Francophone literature is a literature born of two worlds. It arose out of eighty years of French colonization in Indochina. Much of this literature chronicles the dilemma of writers who were educated within a political system which they saw disintegrate and disappear. Their novels illustrate a conflict of interests, identity and language. They encompass the encounter of two cultures and literary traditions, an encounter which was moreover subject to the particular stresses resulting from colonialism.

The arrival of the French in Indochina in the second half of the nineteenth century had a significant impact on Vietnamese literature. Vietnamese classical literature prized poetry¹ and its

¹'La poésie [était] aux yeux des anciens lettrés le genre littéraire par excellence.'
Bui-Xuan-Bao, *Naissance et évolution du roman vietnamien moderne 1925-1945* (Paris, 1985), p. 4.

'highest and most original manifestation'² was the verse romance or *truyen nom*. Texts were written either in Chinese lettering³ or in *chu nom* (Vietnamese demotic characters). The former included 'annals such as *Dai Viet su ky toan thu* (Complete history of the Great Viet), published in 1697 but actually a conflation of earlier official annals by Le Van Huu (1272) and Ngo Si Lien (1479), with additions up to 1662 by Pham Cong Tru and Le Hi',⁴ semi-historical accounts such as *The Chronicles of the Le Dynasty* (fifteenth century) and anthologies of fantastic tales such as *Linh-Nam trich quai* (Anthology of the extraordinary beings of Linh-Nam).⁵ The first texts in *chu nom* appeared in the thirteenth century.⁶ The verse romance took the form of long fables such as *Trinh Thu* (The Virtuous Mouse) and *Tre Coc* (The Catfish and the Toad) in the fourteenth century and was to flourish in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,⁷ culminating in the poet Nguyen Du's famous verse romance *Doan Truong Tan Thanh* (The New Song of the Broken Heart) better known as the *Kim-Van-Kieu*, which 'combines the elements of epic, romance and love song'.⁸ Literature was considered a moral vehicle and therefore laid great emphasis on the traditional Confucian values of filial piety, conjugal fidelity, loyalty and honesty. 'Required was a

²On this subject Duong Dinh Khue declares: "Il faut...admettre que le roman en vers, très rare dans les autres littératures, a trouvé son terrain d'élection dans la littérature vietnamienne, qu'il constituait presque un genre spécifiquement vietnamien". Jack A. Yeager, *The Vietnamese Novel in French: A Literary Response to Colonialism* (Hanover and London, 1987), p. 30.

³Vietnam was under Chinese domination from the second century B.C. to the tenth century A.D.

⁴Maurice M. Durand and Nguyen Tran Huan, *An Introduction to Vietnamese Literature*, translated by D. M. Hawke (New York, 1985), p. 12.

⁵Bui, *Naissance*, p. 8.

⁶Bui, *Naissance*, p. 9.

⁷Bui, *Naissance*, p. 9.

⁸Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 31.

complicated plot based on the same general scheme: the hero or heroine, forced to undergo misfortune after misfortune, finds happiness in the end because of a solid moral character'.⁹

Vietnamese literature was to take a radical turn at the beginning of the twentieth century as the writings of eighteenth-century French philosophers became available,¹⁰ and French novels were translated into Vietnamese.¹¹ The advent of the French saw the 'introduction and adoption of new literary genres, such as the essay, the short story, the prose novel and journalism'.¹² The first two Vietnamese prose novels to be written in the new mode were Nguyen Trong Thuat's *Qua dua do* (The Watermelon) and Hoang Ngoc Phach's *To Tam* (To Tam being the name of the heroine).¹³ Both were published in 1925. One of the first Vietnamese to have a Francophone novel published to his credit was Nguyen Phan Long, a journalist and editor of *L'Echo Annamite*. His novel *Le Roman de Mademoiselle Lys* appeared in Hanoi in 1921.¹⁴ The year 1935 saw the establishment, also in Hanoi, of the literary group *Tu-Luc Van Doan*, 'à qui revient le mérite d'avoir su promouvoir un nouveau style dans la littérature, un style clair, concis, imité de la langue française et débarrassé le

⁹ Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 31.

¹⁰ 'The Vietnamese intelligentsia had access to the works of these writers through the medium of Chinese translations'. Ellen J. Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina* (Stanford, 1954), p. 60.

¹¹ 'En ce qui concerne le roman, mentionnons la traduction de *Gil Blas de Santillane* (LESAGE), de *Manon Lescaut* (Abbé PREVOST), des *Trois Mousquetaires* (A. DUMAS), de *La peau de chagrin* (BALZAC), des *Misérables* (VICTOR HUGO), des *Aventures de Télémaque* (FENELON)'. Bui, *Naissance*, p. 24.

¹² Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 33.

¹³ Nguyen Tran Huan, 'La littérature vietnamienne de langue française', *Culture française*, 22, 1 (printemps 1973), 6-23 (p. 10).

¹⁴ Earlier examples of Vietnamese Francophone literature include a collection of poetry, *Mes heures perdues* by Nguyen Van Xiem, and *Contes et légendes du pays d'Annam* by Le Van Phat, both of which appeared in 1913. Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 46.

plus possible de termes chinois sophistiqués ou d'allusions littéraires trop compliquées'.¹⁵ Writers turned away from traditional subject matter and chose instead to deal with topical issues such as the conflict between the old and the new and the ways in which Western culture threatened values which the country had long held sacred: filial piety and obedience, and a belief in the orderly structure of society.

In his *Naissance et évolution du roman vietnamien moderne 1925-1945*, Bui Xuan Bao divides modern Vietnamese literature into three periods: 1925 to 1932, in which it was characterized by the conflict between 'le rationalisme confucéen et la sensibilité romantique'; 1932 to 1940, which saw the flowering of romanticism until 1936 and the beginnings of realism; and lastly 1940 to 1945, in which period most writers observed contemporary society and the future of their nation in grave and realistic terms.¹⁶

European colonization had a significant impact on the Vietnamese language itself. In the twentieth century, the use of Chinese lettering and of *chu nom* gradually disappeared and *quoc ngu* (the Romanized form of the Vietnamese language) came into use. The traditional competitive examinations for the mandarinat, installed in the country since the eleventh century,¹⁷ had entailed a thorough knowledge of the Chinese classics as well as versifying talents:

The doctorate was the highest degree in the examination system. It was ... a nation-wide

¹⁵Nguyen Tran Huan, 'Littérature vietnamienne', p. 10.

¹⁶Bui, *Naissance*, pp. 55-56.

¹⁷Le Thanh Khoi, *Le Viet-Nam: Histoire et civilisation* (Paris, 1955), pp. 148-9. The first examinations took place in 1075.

competition held once every three years in the capital to recruit a limited number of mandarins. ... The success rate was in the order of one percent. ... Candidates sat for a total of four subjects. In the first, called *Commentaries on Confucian Classics*, they had to write no less than eight essays on topics taken from the Four Books and the Five Canons, each essay to be of three hundred Chinese characters or more. In the second, they were required to draft a series of administrative documents, including three royal proclamations in the style of the Chinese Han Dynasty, three royal decrees and three submissions to the king in the style of the Tang period in China. The third subject was the composition of poems and literary essays on given topics, the essays in classical Chinese and the poems in the Tang style. The last - and most important - subject was a dissertation on a theme chosen from ancient books or from history. This had to be of one thousand characters or more and was designed to test the candidates' general knowledge and judgement.¹⁸

These examinations were abolished in 1918.¹⁹ Vietnamese Francophone writers such as Pham Quynh and Nguyen Tien Lang advocated the use of *quoc ngu* on a national basis. The advantage of *quoc ngu* lay in by-passing the compulsory study of Chinese language and literature. As Nguyen Tien Lang pointed out: 'Grâce au quoc ngu ... il a été possible ... de faire des études vietnamiennes sans avoir besoin, pour cela, d'aborder au préalable des études sinologiques'.²⁰ The flexibility of *quoc ngu* also meant that the transfer of European words and technical terms was feasible and that the language itself was more receptive to the modern world. *Quoc ngu* provided a practical means with which to diffuse literature, news and political tracts. Nguyen Tran Huan writes that:

¹⁸Nguyen Trieu Dan, *A Vietnamese Family Chronicle: Twelve Generations on the Banks of the Hat river* (Jefferson and London, 1991), pp. 162-163.

¹⁹The civil service examinations were suppressed in Tonkin in 1915 and Annam in 1918. Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 27.

²⁰Nguyen Tien Lang, 'Culture française et culture vietnamienne', *Culture française*, 6, 3 (juillet 1957), 18-25 (p. 21).

Non seulement l'Administration française de la colonie ainsi que les intellectuels avertis de notre pays ont trouvé tout de suite dans le *Quoc ngu* l'instrument idéal pour propager la culture française et promouvoir la nouvelle culture vietnamienne débarrassée de son carcan chinois, mais même les intellectuels vietnamiens récalcitrants et révoltés contre la domination française, par une ironie du sort, devaient reconnaître que le *Quoc ngu* était nécessaire pour la construction d'un Vietnam nouveau.²¹

It was unfortunate that in the time lapse between the destruction of the mandarin system of education, already well under way by 1883,²² and the slow installation of Franco-vernacular and vernacular schools, a large segment of the Vietnamese population should have become illiterate. The mandarin system had been structured in such a way that all levels of society had had access to education.²³

'Il y a très peu d'illettrés: même parmi les paysans les plus déshérités, on en trouve toujours sachant quelques centaines de caractères'. L'instruction est en effet laïque et libre au sens le plus large du mot. Elle est dispensée dans les moindres villages par des lettrés ou des mandarins retirés.²⁴

Under the French, educational facilities were provided for only a small minority.²⁵ The Vietnamese populace as a result had to be educated over several decades to become conversant with *quoc ngu*, this new manifestation of their language.²⁶ *Quoc ngu* itself had

²¹Nguyen Tran Huan, 'Littérature vietnamienne', p. 9.

²²When the French took possession of Vietnam, its system of free universal and higher education was in shambles. It collapsed because the mandarins and scholars, opposed to serving under the French, vanished, and the subsequent policy of 'assimilation', aimed at making the colonial peoples French, did not facilitate a revival.' Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Political History* (London, 1969), p. 120.

²³See Hammer, *Struggle*, p. 63; Donald Lancaster, *The Emancipation of French Indochina* (London, 1961), p. 65; Paul Mus, *Le Viet Nam chez lui* (Paris, 1946), p. 28.

²⁴Le Thanh Khol, *Le Viet-Nam*, p. 355.

²⁵Ralph Smith, *Vietnam and the West* (London, 1968), p. 30. 'The French were too afraid of the political consequences of education to embark upon a thoroughgoing expansion of schools and colleges'. Smith, *Vietnam*, p. 97.

²⁶In the 1930s, after most of the members of the elite classes had accepted *quoc ngu*, a society was created by a group of Vietnamese intellectuals to combat the 80

originally been devised in the seventeenth century by Spanish and French missionaries (in particular the Jesuit Alexandre de Rhodes) as a means of evangelization. One of the earliest Vietnamese scholars to resort officially to *quoc ngu* and to the use of French was Pétrus Truong-Vinh-Ky (1837-1898). He was one of the first Vietnamese administrators to collaborate with the French.²⁷ He did so 'out of a conviction in the transformation France could achieve in his country'.²⁸ As well as teaching, Truong-Vinh-Ky worked in an official capacity as an interpreter and translator and handled delicate negotiations between the Imperial Court in Hue and the French administration. He was also a prolific writer and was a firm believer in Confucian principles, which he felt accorded perfectly with his Catholic faith.

Travailleur assidu et méthodique, alliant à une solide culture chinoise et vietnamienne, une connaissance profonde de la langue et de la civilisation française, il a été considéré comme un des plus grands érudits du XIXe siècle.²⁹

Truong-Vinh-Ky dreamed of a future Vietnam in which 'une culture franco-annamite, synthèse des idéaux communs'³⁰ would flourish. His last years were marked by illness and he died fearing that he had been misunderstood by his compatriots.³¹

percent illiteracy rate in Viet Nam. With the formation of the Vietnamese government after World War II, universal, compulsory instruction in reading and writing was decreed. Day and night classes were instituted for pupils of all ages. The phenomenal result was that, by 1961, roughly 85 percent of the population could read and write'. Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 27.

²⁷Nguyen Tien Lang, *Pétrus Truong-Vinh-Ky - Lettré et Apôtre Franco-Annamite* (Hanoi, 1939), p. 9.

²⁸Milton Osborne, 'From Conviction to Anxiety: The French Self-Image in Viet-Nam', *Flinders Asian Studies Lecture*, 7 (1976), 1-27, F1-F6, (p. F2).

²⁹Nguyen Tran Huan, 'Littérature vietnamienne', p. 15.

³⁰Nguyen Tien Lang, *Pétrus*, p. 21.

³¹Nguyen Tran Huan, 'Littérature vietnamienne', p. 15.

The system of education installed by the French allowed only a restricted number of Vietnamese students to gain access to French education, and these mostly from the well-to-do and middle classes. An increasing number were sent to study in France. In the late 1920s, the Vietnamese student population in Paris consisted largely of young men from wealthy Southern families.³²

The first move to provide an institutional framework for Vietnamese in France was the creation of an *Association Mutuelle des Indochinois* in Paris in 1920. It was reorganized in 1922 ... During the 1920s study in Paris became increasingly fashionable, and in 1928 moves were made to create a *Maison d'Indochine* at the University City, which still exists there.³³

The French-speaking University of Hanoi was founded under the governorship of Paul Beau in 1907, then shut down the following year due to student unrest, to be reopened in 1917.³⁴ The establishment of the university had led Beau's detractors to declare that 'an educated native no longer simply meant "one coolie less" but one rebel more.'³⁵ The policy of assimilation had rather different results from those originally intended. It was said that 'the bitterest opponents of the French were the ones who knew the language best'.³⁶ It was inevitable that students should contrast the high-minded ideals of Western democracy with their own position as members of the colonized.

Sending the most brilliant students to France had another adverse effect in that upon their return to Vietnam, they

³²Scott McConnell, *Leftward Journey: The Education of Vietnamese Students in France 1919-1939* (New Brunswick and Oxford, 1989), p. 54.

³³R. B. Smith, 'The Vietnamese Elite of French Cochinchina', *Modern Asian Studies* 6, 4 (1972), 459-482 (p. 478).

³⁴Buttinger, *Vietnam*, p. 121.

³⁵Buttinger, *Vietnam*, p. 120.

³⁶D. G. E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia* (London, 1968), p. 761.

discovered that all important administrative posts were barred to them. They found themselves working under Frenchmen with lower qualifications than themselves and bore the added humiliation of knowing that they were paid a lower salary than Frenchmen in a similar position.³⁷ This state of affairs led to feelings of bitterness and resentment in the Vietnamese intelligentsia. As a group, they were not vested with political power. There were 'jobs for educated Vietnamese as government officials, as school teachers, or in modest positions in the existing French firms, but there were few professional positions in economically productive activities'.³⁸ The higher echelons of the administration, banking, commerce and industry were the preserves of the French.³⁹ Many in the intelligentsia were professionals and withdrew entirely from political life, others saw no future in Vietnam and preferred to make their careers in France, others still became active politically and canvassed for political rights through newspaper editorials and articles, essays and pamphlets.

Journalism first took root in the South of the country (Cochinchina) as this part came earliest under the direct control of the French in 1862.⁴⁰ The Centre (Annam) and the North (Tonkin) became French protectorates in 1883.⁴¹ The period

³⁷See Hammer, *Struggle*, p. 73; Dennis J. Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam* (London, 1968), p. 103.

³⁸McConnell, *Leftward Journey*, p. 96.

³⁹Lancaster, *Emancipation*, p. 67.

⁴⁰Ralph Smith, *Antecedents of the 'Viet-Cong'*, in *Nationalism, Revolution and Evolution in South-East Asia*, edited by Michael Leifer (Hull Monographs on SEA, 2, 1970), pp. 1-15 (p. 3).

⁴¹'After the French conquest, the name of Vietnam was practically forgotten by the rest of the world. ... The French deliberately partitioned the territory into three separate regions giving each an arbitrarily chosen name and a different administrative status. These new regions were called: Annam, Tongking (in

between the two world wars saw a significant output of Vietnamese Francophone works. Many writers were from the north of the country - writers such as Pham Quynh, Nguyen Tien Lang and Pham Duy Khiem. The North had historically enjoyed a prestige of intellect and leadership.⁴² This situation was to change in later years. After the country was partitioned under the 1954 Geneva Agreement into two separate states north and south of the seventeenth parallel (the North to form part of the Communist bloc and the South part of the Western bloc), the number of French teachers in the North declined sharply (there were only nine French teachers left by 1962⁴³) while French *lycées* flourished in the South. However, the output of Francophone literature gradually decreased in the South due the growing influence of America and the increased use of English. Francophone books and periodicals which did appear in the South were produced solely through the efforts of private individuals and groups, without government assistance.⁴⁴ In the North on the other hand, the output of works in French was steadily kept up - principally as a means of political propaganda.⁴⁵

A number of Vietnamese Francophone writers settled in France. They may have felt that they enjoyed a greater freedom with which to express themselves and could see with a clearer eye

French spelling Tonkin) and Cochin China'. Hoang Van Chi, *From Colonialism to Communism: A Case History of North Vietnam* (London and Dunmow, 1964), p. 10.

⁴²Duncanson, *Government*, p. 24.

⁴³Bernard Clergerie, 'Essai de prospective pour l'ancienne Indochine', *Esprit*, 30 (1962), 723-736 (p. 729).

⁴⁴Nguyen Tran Huan, 'Des difficultés de l'édition française au Vietnam', *Culture française*, 22, 4 (hiver 1973), 40-43 (p. 42).

⁴⁵Nguyen Tran Huan, 'Difficultés', p. 40.

away from the polemics and conflicts of their homeland. Thuong Vuong-Riddick wrote of the exiled writer Pham Van Ky:

Comme Joyce, Beckett, Ionesco et tant d'autres, c'est à l'étranger et en exil qu'il aura à approfondir son appartenance et ses racines.⁴⁶

The experience of exile could in itself inspire greater insight on the part of the writer: 'Ainsi l'écriture dans l'exil peut ouvrir des horizons, des chemins nouveaux, encore non tracés. Elle aide à supporter l'exil. Et inversement, l'exil et le choc créé par l'affrontement de différentes cultures, la souffrance de la séparation, le désir de retour alimentent le souffle de l'écriture'.⁴⁷ As for those in Vietnam who wrote in French, they may have been motivated by the fact that 'la législation coloniale se montrait plus tolérante pour les écrits en cette langue dont l'action, si elle était nocive, avait des limites'.⁴⁸

Bui Xuan Bao divides Vietnamese Francophone literature into the following four periods: 1850 to 1913, which saw the introduction of the French language and the decline of Chinese studies;⁴⁹ 1913-1940, in which bilingual writers safeguarded and developed the national culture; 1940-1954, which was marked by nascent nationalism, and 1955-1975, at which stage the literature became nationalist and universalist. Pham Van Ky's works, for example, universalized the East-West conflict.⁵⁰ The second

⁴⁶Thuong Vuong-Riddick, 'Le drame de l'occidentalisation dans quelques romans de Pham Van Ky', *Présence francophone*, 16 (printemps 1970), 141-152 (p. 145).

⁴⁷Evelyne Accad, 'L'écriture (comme) éclatement des frontières', *Esprit créateur*, 33, 2 (Summer 1993), 119-128 (p. 127).

⁴⁸Marc Laurent, 'Cung Giu Nguyen - Ecrivain vietnamien de langue française', *Présence francophone*, 5 (automne 1972), 53-59 (p. 54).

⁴⁹Bui, *Naissance*, p. 56.

⁵⁰From Bui Xuan Bao, 'Introduction historique', in *Littératures de langue française hors de France*, Fédération Internationale des Professeurs de Français (Sèvres, 1976), 633-640 (pp. 634-639).

period corresponded with two movements in modern Vietnamese literature: romanticism and the beginnings of realism.⁵¹ Although the output of Vietnamese Francophone literature has declined sharply since the 1960s, a number of autobiographical accounts have recently been published. Among the Vietnamese Francophone writers who published works in the 1960s are some who went on writing into the 1980s. Mme Ly Thu Ho's *Le Mirage de la paix*, the third part of a trilogy begun in 1962, appeared in 1986. Yeager states that 'both Pham Van Ky and Cung Giu Nguyen have several completed manuscripts in hand',⁵² although they have not published any works recently. Nguyen Huu Khoa published two novels in 1985 and 1987. There have been a number of autobiographical accounts of life in Vietnam after 1975, mostly describing internment in prison camps such as *Enfer rouge mon amour* (1980) by Lucien Trong and *Le Goulag vietnamien* (1979) by Doan Van Toai.

Most of the writers are men. Since the bulk of Vietnamese Francophone literature was written in the years immediately following the Second World War, it indicates the inter-war generation of students: largely men. Links were formed between foreign students from the colonies studying in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s. The writer Pham Duy Khiem was a friend of Léopold Sédar Senghor. Both, along with Georges Pompidou, attended 'la classe de Khâgne de Louis-le-Grand' in 1929-1930, in preparation for the Ecole Normale Supérieure. Senghor stated:

Mes meilleurs amis restent encore, aujourd'hui, mes anciens camarades de Khâgne. ... C'est le Vietnamien

⁵¹Bul, *Naissance*, p. 55.

⁵²Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 163.

Pham Duy Khiem, qui m'a révélé l'humanité jaune sinon l'humanisme d'Extrême-Orient.⁵³

Pham Duy Khiem dedicated a copy of his novel *Nam et Sylvie*, published under the pseudonym Nam Kim in 1957, to Senghor in the following terms: 'Au "Bou Diop" de la p. 148, 182, etc... Fraternellement. Khiem'.⁵⁴

Fewer women wrote because fewer had access to education. Sons were generally given priority in education. It was only among the later generations of the wealthy middle-class that daughters were also sent to study in the metropolis. Among the women writers, Mme Ly Thu Ho settled in France and began to write after having raised six children. Trinh Thuc Oanh, who published two novels jointly with Marguerite Triaire in 1939 and 1941, was Principal of a school in Hanoi.⁵⁵ Trinh Thuc Oanh, Ly Thu Ho and Kim Lefèvre are three Vietnamese women writers among a group of eleven men. Kim Lefèvre's two autobiographical *récits*, *Métisse blanche* and *Retour à la saison des pluies* appeared in 1989 and 1990 respectively. Lefèvre refers to *Métisse blanche* as a novel.⁵⁶ She is Eurasian. I classify her as a Vietnamese Francophone writer because she spent her first twenty-five years in Vietnam, had a Vietnamese upbringing and was educated as such in vernacular and Franco-vernacular institutions. The situation of these three writers is unlike the one which Amy Ling describes in *Between*

⁵³Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Liberté 1* (Paris, 1964), p. 405.

⁵⁴Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Bibliothèque Nationale* (Paris, 1978), p. 30.

⁵⁵Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 182.

⁵⁶Jack A. Yeager, 'Kim Lefèvre's *Retour à la saison des pluies*: Rediscovering the Landscapes of Childhood', *L'Esprit créateur*, 33, 2 (Summer 1993), 47-57 (p. 47).

Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry.⁵⁷ Vietnamese Francophone women writers constitute a minority.

The majority of Vietnamese Francophone novels were published in France. Twenty-four novels, including Kim Lefèvre's two *récits*, appeared in Paris, and six in Vietnam. The definitive edition of Cung Giu Nguyen's *Le Fils de la baleine* was published in Quebec in 1978, illustrating a continuing interest in Francophone literature and the connection between non-metropolitan Francophone literatures. Many writers won literary awards. Pham Van Ky was shortlisted for the Prix Goncourt a number of times, before being awarded the Grand Prix de l'Académie Française for his novel *Perdre la demeure* in 1961. The Académie Française granted the Prix Louis Barthou to Pham Duy Khiem for his novel *Nam et Sylvie* in 1957. The last of Ly Thu Ho's trilogy, *Le Mirage de la paix*, won the Prix littéraire de l'Asie in 1987. The bulk of this literature was published between the 1930s and the 1960s, in Paris, and yet most works are now out of print and have been quietly forgotten.

The relative obscurity into which the work of Vietnamese Francophone writers has fallen contrasts with the interest generated by African Francophone literature. There was no movement similar to the African Négritude movement in the 1940s in Indochina. Francophone literature in Africa recreated itself out of an oral literature. Jean-Pierre Makouta Mboukou divides Francophone literature from Central and West Africa into

⁵⁷In this very specialized field, literature written in English by ethnic Chinese and Chinese Eurasians and published in the United States, the women not only outnumber the men but the women's books are more authentic, more numerous, quite simply - better'. Amy Ling, *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (New York and Oxford, 1990), p. xii.

three periods: the pre-Classical period, covering the nineteenth century; the Classical period, covering the years 1920 to 1960, and the Modern period, covering literature after Independence in 1960.⁵⁸ The Classical period, according to Makouta Mboukou, is the best known:

Elle correspond au grand éveil du monde noir. ... La Négritude qui se mettait debout au Caraïbes, se mettait debout aussi, moins par contagion que par affinité, en Afrique Noire. ... A cette littérature se rattachent de grands noms comme ceux des poètes L. S. Senghor, David Diop, Birago Diop, Fodeba Keita. ... La revendication et le retour aux sources sont les seuls thèmes valables; c'est la littérature de l'accusation.⁵⁹

The concept of Négritude, however, entailed its own set of problems.

The concept of Négritude developed by the Martinican Aimé Césaire (1945) and the Senegalese poet and politician Léopold Sédar Senghor ... was the most pronounced assertion of the distinctive qualities of Black culture and identity. But in making this assertion it adopted stereotypes which curiously reflected European prejudice. Black culture, it claimed, was emotional rather than rational; it stressed integration and wholeness over analysis and dissection; it operated by distinctive rhythmic and temporal principles, and so forth. Négritude also claimed a distinctive African view of time-space relationships, ethics, metaphysics, and aesthetics which separated itself from the supposedly 'universal' values of European taste and style. The danger was that, as a result, it could easily be reincorporated into a European model in which it functioned only as the antithesis of white supremacy, a new 'universal' paradigm.⁶⁰

The conversion from oral to written literature involves adjusting to a different conceptual framework: "The "intersection" of language

⁵⁸Jean-Pierre Makouta Mboukou, 'Une ouverture au monde: Littérature négro-africaine en Afrique Occidentale et Equatoriale francophones', *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, du 3 au 9 décembre 1973, pp. 9-10.

⁵⁹Makouta Mboukou, 'Une ouverture', p. 9.

⁶⁰Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London and New York, 1989), p. 21.

which occurs in the literatures of formerly oral societies does not take place simply between two different languages but between two different ways of conceiving the practice and substance of language'.⁶¹ The majority of African Francophone novels have been produced from 1954 to the present, 'au moment même où la cité africaine commençait à prendre conscience d'elle-même'.⁶² As can be seen, the situation is unlike that of Vietnamese Francophone novels, most of which were published between the 1930s and the 1960s.

Vietnamese Francophone writers came up against a different set of problems from those faced by their African Francophone counterparts. Vietnam has a long literary tradition, which in turn rests on the bulwark of Chinese literature and philosophy: the Classics for Vietnamese scholars. The French encountered in Vietnam a civilization far older than their own.⁶³ Vietnamese Francophone writers face the difficult task of combining two different literary traditions in the novel. The result, in some cases, is difficult to decipher and to absorb. Why did these Vietnamese write in French?

The writers speak for themselves in this respect. Pham Duy Khiem states that he had no choice. He made the point that as a Vietnamese living under the French protectorate, he could not do otherwise:

La vérité m'oblige à préciser que je n'ai pas eu à choisir, sous le protectorat français. Une fois le cycle d'études achevé dans notre pays ... si quelques-uns

⁶¹Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Empire*, p. 81.

⁶²Jacques Chevrier, 'Le français en Afrique Noire', in *Guide culturel: Civilisations et littérature d'expression française*, sous la direction de André Reboullet et Michel Tétu (Laval, 1977), 256-296 (p. 275).

⁶³Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 11.

d'entre nous obtenaient l'autorisation de s'expatrier pour continuer à s'instruire, il n'y avait pour eux de bateau qu'à destination de la France.⁶⁴

He likens his use of French as a writer to the use of classical Chinese by Vietnamese scholars for two millennia:

Pendant deux mille ans, nos ancêtres chantaient les vers chinois, ils composaient eux-mêmes des vers chinois. Sans cesse envahis par nos voisins du Nord, ils réussissaient à se libérer chaque fois. Cependant, s'ils ne cessaient jamais de s'affirmer différents d'eux et de se vouloir indépendants, ils continuaient, de père en fils, à étudier la langue de la Chine, avec sa littérature et sa poésie.⁶⁵

As a Vietnamese using the language of the colonizer, he is asserting his independence in the same way his ancestors did when they used Chinese. He had no other means with which to express himself. Nguyen Tien Lang writes an impassioned plea in his *Indochine la douce*:

C'est une âme qui a besoin de se confier, et si elle choisit une langue qui n'est pas la sienne maternelle, c'est, hélas, qu'elle se sent déjà plus proche par ses plus profondes aspirations de ceux qui parlent cette langue que de son propre sang. Mais ce sang le lie, le tient, le commande; tirillé, il se sent humilié de n'être ni assez près de ce qui l'attire, ni assez loin de ce qu'il croit pouvoir fuir mais qu'il continue à aimer. Les critiques tombent sur lui, les approbations même qu'il recueille souvent s'accompagnent de conseils qui le dissuadent de tenter l'impossible. Faut-il qu'il abandonne ou qu'il se contente d'une notoriété locale? Non, il s'agit de tout autre chose. Il s'agit d'un élan impossible à réfréner, qui ressemble à l'amour.⁶⁶

Writers were aware of the regional limitations of their indigenous language and wanted to broadcast their ideas further afield. They expressed themselves in the language of the colonizer as a means

⁶⁴Pham Duy Khiem, 'Réponse de Pham Duy Khiem' dans 'Le Viêt-Nam et la Culture Française', *Revue de la Méditerranée*, 4, 17 (1957), 635-651 (p. 648).

⁶⁵Pham Duy Khiem, 'Réponse', p. 649.

⁶⁶Nguyen Tien Lang, *Indochine la douce* (Hanoi, 1935), pp. 44-45.

of reaching the French public and through them a wider audience internationally. Thai Van Kiem states:

Je dirais que le français est une langue véhiculaire internationale. Nous avons plus de possibilités de faire connaître notre pensée grâce à cette langue internationale et, comme notre langue a des limites territoriales, qui ne nous permettent pas de prétendre à une universalité immédiate, il nous faut bien recourir au français.⁶⁷

French therefore gave these writers access to a wider audience. Thuong Vuong-Riddick summarizes in the clearest terms the dilemma confronting Vietnamese Francophone writers:

Symbole de servitude et pourtant outil révolutionnaire, le français jouit donc d'un statut ambigu qui explique en partie le drame que vivent les écrivains vietnamiens francophones.⁶⁸

Writers wrote in French probably for a combination of the above reasons. Their tangled values and loyalties are evident in their works: in the subjects and themes dealt with and in the style of the novels. To understand these, it is necessary to understand the background, mentality and particular pressures experienced by these writers.

As a subject of research, Vietnamese Francophone literature has remained relatively untouched. There are only two major works on the subject: Jack A. Yeager's *The Vietnamese Novel in French: A Literary Response to Colonialism*, and Nguyen Hong Nhiem's *L'Echiquier et l'antinomie Je/Moi comme signe et substance du conflit Occident/Extrême-Orient dans les œuvres de Pham Van Ky*, both theses, which appeared in 1982. Yeager's dissertation was published in book form in 1987. A number of

⁶⁷Thai Van Kiem interviewed in 'Autour de la francophonie', *Présence francophone*, 2 (printemps 1971), 72-75 (p. 75).

⁶⁸Thuong Vuong-Riddick, 'Le drame', p. 145.

articles have been published, notably two perceptive pieces by Thuong Vuong-Riddick.⁶⁹ A couple of anthologies contain information on Vietnamese Francophone literature. General guides, however, tend to omit it altogether. For example, the *Guide Culturel: Civilisations et littératures d'expression française* concludes with:

Nous aurions aimé consacré un chapitre à l'Extrême-Orient où le français fut florissant et donna l'occasion à de merveilleux poèmes et très bons romans dans l'ex-Indochine. Depuis que le Viêt-nam a été unifié, le destin des langues occidentales a été scellé qu'on le veuille ou non. ... On sait néanmoins que le français ne peut exprimer aujourd'hui qu'une partie de la vie nationale, et compte tenu de la complexité politique du pays, il aurait fallu de longues pages pour en faire comprendre l'histoire, son évolution et l'originalité de ses traits culturels.⁷⁰

This extract conveys the main points for this omission. In the first instance, French, as a language, no longer plays an important role in Vietnam and in the second, Vietnam's history and culture necessitate a lengthy study, which there is neither time nor space, in this general guide, to explore. The subject, in short, is seen as confined to a past - and closed - episode of history. One reason for the quietus surrounding Vietnamese Francophone literature could simply be the geographical distance between France and South-East Asia, as well as the decline of French studies in Vietnam. Africa on the other hand, lies across the Mediterranean. The political role of figures like Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire should also be taken into account.⁷¹ A further reason - and

⁶⁹In *Présence francophone*, 1970 and 1979.

⁷⁰Reboulet et Têtu, *Guide culturel*, pp. 377-378.

⁷¹Senghor was a *député* from 1945 to 1960, and *Secrétaire d'Etat à la Présidence du Conseil* from 1955 to 1956. He became President of the Republic of Senegal in 1960. Césaire has been *maire* of Fort-de-France and a *député* since 1945.

this is conjecture - is an underlying, and unacknowledged, burden of colonial guilt or embarrassment relating to Indochina. Yeager notes that if information exists in encyclopaedic dictionaries, entries are often erroneous.⁷²

Yeager's *The Vietnamese Novel in French* is a general introduction to the field:

This study is intended to introduce Vietnamese Francophone literature, especially its most fully developed genre, the novel. Although it is not meant to be exhaustive in any sense, the analysis will attempt to explain the existence and elucidate the character of extended narrative prose pieces in French from Vietnam. ... The background information and literary analysis provided here may serve as a point of departure for further study.⁷³

The first three chapters deal with the general historical and literary background and the last three chapters with broad themes relating to the novels themselves: *Initiation and Confrontation*, *Socio-Political Reality* and *Women as Character and Symbol*. The Vietnamese Francophone novels describe a dichotomized environment. The characters end up reverting to their respective cultural and political roles or places after having come to grief attempting to break away from these roles. They are reflective of the circumstances which produced them: French colonialism in South-East Asia. There are two levels to these narratives: French colonialism and its aftermaths and the fictional environment in the novels. The authors convey their subjective vision through these novels. The Vietnamese women in the novels symbolize the transmission of culture or the failure of such a transmission, while Western women become objectified as symbols of a technically

⁷²Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 2.

⁷³Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 187.

advanced culture. Yeager relates that there has been a decline of Francophone culture in Vietnam and that the Vietnamese in France have been absorbed into mainstream culture. There is a lack of recent Vietnamese Francophone publications. Vietnamese Francophone novels portray:

universals - alienation, fear, justice, decency, loyalty, and love. [They] rise above the specifics to transcend time and history and become original and unique portrayals of human nature, culturally cross-cutting and timeless.⁷⁴

Yeager's approach is largely descriptive. Extending across the whole range of Vietnamese Francophone novels, his analysis is necessarily superficial. He writes that 'these novels adapt an inherited set of narrative esthetics - the French social novel, the romantic confession - and tint the codes with Vietnamese literary values'.⁷⁵ I would suggest that the issues go much further than a tinting of French literary codes with Vietnamese literary values. Much of the literary codes within the novels is Vietnamese in origin. The 'inherited set of narrative esthetics' is, I would argue, both Vietnamese and French. This is why they are so hard to reconcile. Yeager does not analyse, for example, the imprint of the Vietnamese literary classics on these modern works. He acknowledges that 'the narratives are suffused with the literary values of Vietnamese literature'⁷⁶ but does not explore this. His study, however, is an essential introduction to the subject area. It contains comprehensive historical and archival information. Biographical details and a list of the writers' publications are

⁷⁴Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 164.

⁷⁵Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 164.

⁷⁶Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 7.

featured at the end of the book. *The Vietnamese Novel in French* as such forms an important basis for further studies.

Nguyen Hong Nhiem's *L'Echiquier et l'antinomie Je/Moi dans les romans de Pham Van Ky*, as its title indicates, concentrates on the writer Pham Van Ky. She analyses his major novels within the theoretical framework of a game of chess, specifically Chinese Chess, and in the light of the conflict between the *Je* and the *Moi*. Her thesis deals with numbers, grids, diagrams, pattern and configuration. Opponents in chess are not adversaries, as in the West, but complement each other. The chessboard provides a framework for the examination of the East-West conflict in Pham Van Ky's novels. Pham Van Ky wrote that the characters in his novels resembled chess-pieces: 'Mes personnages ressemblent à des échecs. Je range chacun d'eux à la place qui lui est assignée d'avance'.⁷⁷ The East is represented as Yin: 'fossilisé, déchu, occupé'.⁷⁸ The West is represented as Yang: 'véhiculé et communiqué'.⁷⁹ The relationship between East and West, between Yin and Yang, is that of alternating rhythms, patterns which complement each other and are harmonious, in the Eastern sense. Pham Van Ky's narrators are divided between the westernized *Je* and the traditional *Moi*:

Entre les parenthèses du Je/Moi, Pham Van Ky enferme ainsi son aventure intellectuelle, sentimentale, mystique, métaphysique, en Occident.⁸⁰

⁷⁷Quoted in Nguyen Hong Nhiem, 'L'Echiquier et l'antinomie Je/Moi comme signe et substance du conflit Occident/Extrême-Orient dans les œuvres de Pham Van Ky' (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1982), p. 32.

⁷⁸Nguyen Hong Nhiem, 'L'Echiquier', p. 57.

⁷⁹Nguyen Hong Nhiem, 'L'Echiquier', p. 57.

⁸⁰Nguyen Hong Nhiem, 'L'Echiquier', p. 356.

Nguyen Hong Nhiem writes that for Pham Van Ky, the geographical voyage to the West is accompanied by an inner voyage to the East, the return from the *Je* to the *Moi*:

Pham Van Ky, en tant qu'autobiographe, réaccomplit, au rebours de son voyage géographique en Occident, son itinéraire spirituel, en direction de l'Extrême-Orient du taoïsme, du bouddhisme et du Zen. Il rejoint, en ce sens, sa *Mère qui l'attend pour mourir*.⁸¹

Pham Van Ky's use of the Chinese chessboard is an assertion of his culture and origins. It is to counterbalance his writing in French, the language of the colonizer: 'l'utilisation de l'échiquier, pour Pham Van Ky, sert de contrepoids à l'adoption du français comme langue d'expression'.⁸² It is a means of uncovering his own roots through the medium of a foreign language and literary mode.

Nguyen Hong Nhiem and Yeager's theses illustrate two distinctive approaches to the subject. Yeager provides an introduction to the Vietnamese Francophone novel, while Nguyen Hong Nhiem concentrates on one particular writer. Yeager's is from a traditional Western perspective, a historical study of the field. Nguyen Hong Nhiem's is from an Eastern perspective. She analyses the work of one writer within the overall framework of Eastern philosophy. Hers is therefore a concentrated emphasis, as opposed to Yeager's broadly descriptive approach. Both studies are useful and interesting, and both have their shortcomings: a general and limited outlook in the first and a restricted focus in the second.

My purpose in this thesis is to focus on four primary themes which particularly distinguish the Vietnamese Francophone novel,

⁸¹Nguyen Hong Nhiem, 'L'Echiquier', p. 345.

⁸²Nguyen Hong Nhiem, 'L'Echiquier', p. 33.

and to analyse a number of novels in the light of these four themes. I will examine sixteen novels by twelve writers. The earliest is *Bà-Dâm*, published in 1930, and the latest *Retour à la saison des pluies*, published in 1990. Four of these writers, Trinh Thuc Oanh and Marguerite Triaire, Truong Dinh Tri and Albert de Teneuille, collaborated on joint novels, Trinh and Triare on *En s'écartant des ancêtres* (1939) and *La Réponse de l'Occident* (1941), and Truong and de Teneuille on *Bà-Dâm*. There are four women writers among a total of twelve writers overall (in this number I include the two French writers Triaire and de Teneuille), and seven works by women writers. I am interested in analysing the works of women writers because they represent a minority voice in an already 'marginal' literature. For the women, marginalization occurs on three levels: within the context of Vietnamese Francophone literature in the first place, within French literature in the second place, and within the field of literature overall. I will set their novels against those of their male colleagues, who are more numerous and are also struggling to expose the submerged voice of the colonized. Of the writers and novels I have chosen to examine, I will deal with some in greater depth than others.

The first theme is the influence of the Vietnamese classic, the *Kim-Van-Kieu*, on these modern novels. The scholar Nguyen Du (1765-1820) composed *Doan trung tan thanh* (New plaint of a broken heart) in the early years of the nineteenth century. This poem, which became a classic of Vietnamese literature, is known in modern times as the *Tale of Kieu* or the *Kim-Van-Kieu*. The *Kim-Van-Kieu* surfaces as theme, moral, poetry and fate in these novels. The use of Nguyen Du's classic poem, especially in Ly Thu

Ho's *Printemps inachevé* (1962), highlights the dilemma of individuals caught within the context of changing social mores. Ly Thu Ho's subversive rewriting of the epic of Kieu underlines the destructive effect of traditional morality on the lives of women. The fate of her protagonist echoes to some extent that of her country. The *Kim-Van-Kieu* has been described as 'le miroir de l'âme vietnamienne'.⁸³ It leaves a pervasive imprint on the works of many Vietnamese Francophone writers. For this reason, its omission is also notable. Chapter One will examine the use that modern writers made of this classical poem.

The second theme is the portrayal of women, the double colonization of women within a colonial and post-colonial context. Chapter Two will examine the work of a woman writer, Ly Thu Ho. She was the only woman, among a host of male writers, to write and publish Vietnamese Francophone novels between 1962 and 1986. Ly Thu Ho published three novels which form part of a loose trilogy: *Printemps inachevé* (1962), *Au milieu du carrefour* (1969), and *Le Mirage de la paix* (1986). Her approach is characterized by subversion, the surface convention of her characters and plots masking a much deeper critique of the condition of women in modern Vietnamese society. Chapter Three, in contrast, will present the portrayal of women by a prominent male writer, Pham Van Ky. I will contrast an early novel, *Frères de sang* (1947) with a later one, *Des Femmes assises çà et là* (1964). The first, unlike the novels of Ly Thu Ho, contains a violent denunciation of patriarchy. *Frères de sang* exposes the stifling of women's lives

⁸³Xuan-Phuc and Xuan-Viet, 'Introduction' in Nguyen Du, *Kim-Van-Kieu*, traduit du vietnamien par Xuan-Phuc and Xuan-Viet (Paris, 1961), 11-27 (p. 15).

and the lives of lesser beings under the authority of the patriarch in a traditional Vietnamese village. The second and more complex novel is set in France, and portrays the male protagonist's relationship with European women and with his dying mother in Vietnam. The male protagonist remains at the end a stranger, not only as a Vietnamese in France but as an outsider to the lives of these women.

The third theme is the nature of interracial relationships, in particular between a Vietnamese man and a Frenchwoman. Two novels, nearly thirty years apart, deal explicitly with this theme. The first is Truong Dinh Tri and Albert de Teneuille's *Bà-Dâm* (1930) and the second Pham Duy Khiem's *Nam et Sylvie* (1957). Chapter Four will compare the treatment of this theme in both novels and the way in which they illustrate the stresses to which such a relationship was subject in the 1930s. Their focus differs from earlier French renditions of interracial relationships, where the emphasis lay on the portrayal of a white male protagonist with a native woman. Both novels, in their differing ways, chart the essential failure of a cross-cultural relationship within the colonial context. Pham Duy Khiem's novel reflects the stresses of this relationship within its very structure. The disparate excerpts from diary, letter, past and present consciousness illustrate the fragmented perceptions which initially shaped the relationship and later led to its breakdown.

The last theme is alienation: alienation within the self and within one's environment. Chapter Five will examine the alienation of the individual in Nguyen Huu Chau's *Les Reflets de nos jours* (1955), and Pham Duy Khiem's *La Place d'un homme* (1958). The

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first novel illustrates the despair of an individual, isolated and alone, caught between two cultures, and eventually driven to seek a violent death in combat. The breakdown of the individual is reflected in the fragmented structure of the novel itself. The second novel, although more orderly in form, charts the decision of a Vietnamese to enlist as a common soldier in the French Army at the outbreak of the Second World War. The novel depicts the ultimate irony of this action and also ends with the death of the protagonist in combat. In each novel, death provides an end to an unresolved conflict of identity. Chapter Six, the last chapter, will look at the representation of alienation within a traditional setting: Pham Van Ky's *Frères de sang*, and Cung Giu Nguyen's *Le Fils de la baleine* (1956). Both novels depict the ultimate alienation of their protagonists. Both protagonists are Vietnamese who were educated in the metropolis. Each returns to the homeland, to the traditional village, and there discovers that he is a perpetual outsider: a stranger in France, and a stranger at home. They fit in neither world. One escapes, and one loses his sanity. Their fate remains uncertain and reflects the situation of Vietnamese Francophone literature.

In general, the works of women are accounts of survival (with the notable exception of Ly Thu Ho's *Printemps inachevé*), but in the main, of human survival against a background of oppression and of war. The works of men, on the other hand, indicate much greater fragmentation and destruction, perhaps because they, and their male protagonists, identify to a greater extent with society and the dominant discourse. Since Vietnamese society and the colonial system with which they were familiar

disintegrated and collapsed, this collapse, and the unsettled state of society, are mirrored in their works. Ly Thu Ho's female protagonist in *Printemps inachevé* symbolizes the destructive effect of traditional mores on women. Like the fabled figure of Kieu, heroine of the *Kim-Van-Kieu*, she also represents her country, a country in the midst of war and change.

Much of the beauty which surfaces in the images and in the prose of the novels draws its inspiration from Vietnam and Vietnamese literature, but it is always interlaced with a great deal of pain. If these works do not deal with the private anguish of individuals caught between two cultures and of divided loyalties, they deal with individuals caught in the grip of a collapsing system of traditional mores and a country undergoing rapid political changes.

Among the Vietnamese writers who expressed themselves in French, a significant number were journalists and newspaper editors. Many of them edited and contributed to more than one paper or periodical.⁸⁴ Nguyen Phan Long was editor of *L'Echo Annamite*, then co-editor of *Tribune Indochinoise* in the 1930s before founding *Vietnam bao*. After World War II, he was to manage *L'Echo du Vietnam*. Nguyen Tien Lang worked for various papers including *Huu-Thanh* and Pham Quynh's *Nam Phong*. He was chief editor of the weekly *Gazette* in Hue and wrote editorials for the French daily *La République*. He was also a contributor to the *Nouvelle Revue Indochinoise* in the 1930s. Pham Van Ky was editor-in-chief of the *Impartial Annamite* and *Vivre*, two Saigon

⁸⁴The following information is taken from Yeager's Appendix. Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, pp. 165-186.

weeklies and of *La Gazette de Hué*, the court's paper. Pham Duy Khiem and Tran Van Tung both contributed to the *Nouvelle Revue Indochinoise* in the late 1930s. Nguyen Duc Giang was at that time the director of the *Nouvelle Revue Indochinoise*. Cung Giu Nguyen contributed to Pham Quynh's *Nam Phong* among other journals and in the 1930s edited *Les Cahiers de la jeunesse*, and later became chief editor of *Le Soir d'Asie* and editor-in-chief of *La Presse d'Extrême-Orient* until 1954. Among these writers, Pham Van Ky, Pham Duy Khiem and Hoang Xuan Nhi carried out their tertiary studies in France. Pham Van Ky studied at the Sorbonne and the Institut des Hautes Etudes Chinoises. Pham Duy Khiem was the first Vietnamese to study at the Ecole Normale Supérieure from which he received his *agrégation de grammaire* in 1935. Hoang Xuan Nhi received a doctorate in French literature from the Sorbonne.

One possible avenue of exploration, which I have not taken up, is the study of the influence of journalism on the works of these writers. How did their articles and editorials compare with their novels? The journals of the various Vietnamese students' associations in France in the 1920s and 1930s⁸⁵ would provide a picture of the general concerns and political leanings of Vietnamese students in France.⁸⁶ How did these relate to

⁸⁵For example, the *Revue Mensuelle* of the *Association Générale des Etudiants Indochinois* was founded in 1927 to distinguish itself from the *Association Mutuelle des Indochinois*. *L'Etudiant indochinois*, 'organe de la jeunesse intellectuelle indochinoise: chronique des foyers', was founded in Aix in 1928. The *Comité d'organisation des Causeries amicales des Etudiants Indochinois* organized a *causerie* on 'la poésie annamite' in April 1929.

⁸⁶Because the French government perceived the students as a source of political instability, an overwhelming preponderance of official concern about the students concentrated on their political activities'. McConnell, *Leftward Journey*, p. 92.

Vietnamese Francophone literature? It is a topic for an archival and biographical study of these writers.

This thesis is a literary and analytical study. I have chosen to explore certain themes within the novels themselves. My particular interest in women's literature and in feminist scholarship⁸⁷ has proved stimulating and enriching in this respect: 'the parallel between the situation of post-colonial writing and that of feminist writing is striking'.⁸⁸ In his study on racism, Albert Memmi pointed to the links between racial and sexual oppression: 'L'inégalité biologique et culturelle conduisant ainsi à l'inégalité économique et politique, c'est-à-dire à la domination, ils pouvaient agir à leur guise, c'est-à-dire à leur profit. Les mêmes mécanismes jouent contre les Noirs, ou les femmes, en faveur des Blancs ou des hommes'.⁸⁹

Vietnamese Francophone writers are the product of colonialism, a political system which educated them and which ended. They attempt, through their novels, to convey some of this anguish, the notion of being outside. They are, in a sense, cultural and literary hybrids. As the writer Raja Rao expressed it in 1938:

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and

⁸⁷I am indebted to the works of Western feminists and to those of Black, Asian, and Arab feminists.

⁸⁸Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Empire*, p. 7. 'Feminist perspectives are of increasing importance in post-colonial criticism and indeed the strategies of recent feminist and recent post-colonial theory overlap and inform each other. Jean Rhys, Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, and Margaret Atwood have all drawn an analogy between the relationships of men and women and those of the imperial power and the colony, while critics like Gayatri Spivak ... have articulated the relationship between feminism, post-structuralism, and the discourse of post-coloniality'. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Empire*, pp. 31-32.

⁸⁹Albert Memmi, *Le Racisme: Description, définition, traitement* (Paris, 1982), p. 47.

omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language.⁹⁰

What these writers have done is to express and convey, through their novels, their individual response to the East-West dichotomy. Although the conflict of identity features in many novels, they take different forms. The writers' responses to language, structure, and theme differ from each other's. Solutions (or the lack of them) also differ from writer to writer. These responses indicate the plurality and individuality of views. The dilemma confronted by women provides yet another level of meaning. Women writers experience a double colonization, writing within a dominant male discourse not only with respect to men, but with respect to the colonizer or ex-colonizer. Their literature is subversive and often understated. Surface conventions mask an underlying critique of patriarchy and the stifling of women's lives under colonization and post-colonization. Vietnamese Francophone literature reflects the dilemma of individuals caught in this bind. Like them, it stands isolated. It belongs fully to neither France nor to Vietnam. Rather, it lays claim, in essence, to both. The concern with self-image, vision and identity reflects the central experience of post-colonial literature:

A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being: the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place.⁹¹

Vietnamese Francophone writers are a marginalized group, forgotten because of the uncomfortable memories and images

⁹⁰Raja Rao, Foreword to his novel *Kanthapura*, quoted in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Empire*, p. 61.

⁹¹Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Empire*, pp. 8-9.

which they conjure up in their writing and in their presence. They embody France's colonial past: a part of history which ended in the crushing French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and which is best relegated to memory. The later Vietnam War received massive coverage while the French colonial stage became history. However, the effects of this encounter between two cultures lives on beyond the end of colonialism, in the people and in the literature. In their depiction of alienation, these writers represent something, which, after all, is close to the heart:

Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself.⁹²

The subject is topical for the present-day reality of the many Vietnamese who have settled around the world as a result of the diaspora.

⁹²Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (London, 1991), p. 1.

CHAPTER ONE

THE INFLUENCE OF CLASSICAL LITERATURE

The Kim-Van-Kieu

*Kieu said: 'When one who shines in talent dies,
the body passes on, the soul remains'.*

– Nguyen Du

The first question which springs to mind regarding Vietnamese Francophone literature is the extent to which it is indebted to the literary heritage of Vietnam and of China. It is acknowledged that these works are written in French, the language of the colonizer or ex-colonizer. However, they are written by Vietnamese. How does the Vietnamese element impact on the language, the structure and the theme of these works? Classical literature, in particular the Vietnamese epic *Kim-Van-Kieu*, has left its imprint on the works of modern Vietnamese Francophone writers. The classic *Tale of Kieu* or *Kim-Van-Kieu* surfaces as theme, moral, allegory and fate in a number of novels and *récits*. Before examining the ways in which modern writers referred to or made use of the *Tale of Kieu*, I will present in detail

the background and major themes of this poem. These will explain the references and meanings drawn by later novelists.

The main questions I wish to examine are the following: What are the principal issues raised by the *Kim-Van-Kieu*? In what form does the poem emerge in the works of Vietnamese Francophone writers? What aspects of the poem do these writers focus on? Lastly, how does the use of the *Kim-Van-Kieu* comment on modern social and gender preoccupations?

Nguyen Du (1765-1820) composed *Doan trung tan thanh* (New Plaint of a Broken Heart) in the early years of the nineteenth century. This poem, which became a classic of Vietnamese literature, is known in modern times as the *Tale of Kieu* or the *Kim-Van-Kieu*. Nguyen Du culled the plot of his poem from a Chinese prose novel of the Ch'ing Dynasty entitled *Chin Yün Ch'iao chuan* (The Tale of Chin, Yün, and Ch'iao).¹ Nguyen Du may have found a copy of this novel while travelling in China from 1813 to 1814 as a diplomatic envoy to the Manchu Court.² The narrative is based on historical figures who lived and died under the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644),³ but its theme may well have originated from an even earlier Chinese work.⁴ Chinese novels of the Ming Dynasty grew out of the oral tradition of story-telling prevalent in the T'ang (618-906) and Sung (960-1279) Dynasties.⁵ As it was, the poet and scholar Nguyen Du created a literary masterpiece out

¹Huynh Sanh Thong, 'Introduction' in Nguyen Du, *The Tale of Kieu: A Bilingual Edition*, translated by Huynh Sanh Thong (New Haven and London, 1983), xix-xi (p. xxi).

²Huynh Sanh Thong, 'Introduction', p. xx.

³Huynh Sanh Thong, 'Introduction', p. xxi.

⁴Jacques Baruch, *Notes sur le Poème Viêt-Namien Kim-Vân-Kiêu de Nguyễn-Du* (Casteau, 1961), p. 8.

⁵See Lai Ming, *A History of Chinese Literature* (London, 1964), p. 9.

of this obscure and minor Chinese prose romance. A work of consummate artistry, the *Tale of Kieu* transcends and surpasses the original in its form and in its poetic rendition of an ancient tale. It is a 'celebration of the Vietnamese language in all its diversity, with all its resources of rhythm and tone, of sound and image, of tense and rich expression'.⁶

The poem generated a great deal of controversy. It had its detractors as well as admirers. With the *Tale of Kieu*, Nguyen Du 'created a scholarly storm for over a century with, among other things, his revisionist interpretation of chastity. Nonetheless, the basic tenets of female passivity, of a daughter's piety toward her parents, of fidelity to one's mate were upheld and perhaps even enhanced by the tremendous popularity of this work'.⁷ Among the Vietnamese Francophone writers, Ly Thu Ho would rewrite the *Tale of Kieu* within a modern setting. Tran Van Tung and Kim Lefèvre would draw directly on the poetry and the relationships portrayed in the epic. Trinh Thuc Oanh and Marguerite Triaire would refer to the element of fate so strongly prevalent in the poem. Yeager sets the *Kim-Van-Kieu* within its historical setting, and draws attention to the political and literary controversies which later erupted. However, he refers only once, and at that briefly, to the *Kim-Van-Kieu* in relation to the Vietnamese Francophone novel.⁸

I will provide a brief synopsis of the *Tale of Kieu*. Purportedly set in the time of Emperor Gia-Tinh (1522-1566),

⁶Huynh Sanh Thong, 'Introduction', p. xxi.

⁷David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley, 1981), p. 195.

⁸A short general comment on the *Kim-Van-Kieu* in a discussion of Nguyen Tien Lang's *Les Chemins de la révolte*. See Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 108.

under the Ming Dynasty, the *Tale of Kieu* deals with the vicissitudes in the life of a beautiful and virtuous young woman of bourgeois background, Kieu. Kieu's misfortunes begin when she sells herself into prostitution in order to save her father and brother from debtor's prison. In doing so, she sacrifices not only her self, but also her love for the young scholar Kim. In the course of the following fifteen years, she becomes the second wife of a scholar, Thúc Sanh, is sold as a servant by the latter's jealous first wife, seeks brief refuge in a pagoda, becomes a prostitute again, then the wife of the rebel Tù Hai, is given as wife to another dignitary upon the latter's death in a rebellion, attempts suicide by drowning, and is finally rescued by an *Immortelle*, having finally expiated the faults of her anterior life. Kieu returns to her family and, at long last, marries Kim. She abjures him however, to keep their union platonic since she feels herself to have been sullied as a woman. It is her sister Van who is to bear Kim children, hence the poem's other title the *Kim-Van-Kieu*, for the three main characters of the poem. Kim and Van are important symbolic figures, Kim representing her first love and the man she returns to after a separation of fifteen years, and Van the sister who marries Kim in Kieu's place, in order to fulfil Kieu's pledge to Kim, but both play a minor role in the tale. The *Tale of Kieu* is first and foremost the story of the moral pilgrimage of Kieu.

As a scholar, Nguyen Du lived through some turbulent times and changes of dynasty. His lifetime encompassed the fall of the Le Dynasty, the Tay-Son rebellion and the establishment of the Nguyen Dynasty in the early part of the nineteenth century. As a mandarin and therefore a bureaucrat, he had to deal with the

conflicting loyalties generated by these various changes. 'Kieu's story stood, in effect, as a parable of the questings and sadness of his own political life'.⁹ In recounting a tale set several centuries before in another country, Nguyen Du was doing what many of his predecessors had done. 'A very thin and shadowy line separated literature from sedition in late traditional Vietnam'.¹⁰ Huynh Sanh Thong comments: 'Beyond its literal meaning, Kieu's prostitution is interpreted as a metaphor for the betrayal of principles under duress, the submission to force of circumstance'.¹¹ As a woman and a victim, Kieu is ideally positioned to embody and symbolize these concepts.

Kieu is gifted with all the fragile and vulnerable attributes of womanhood in Confucian society: she is beautiful, chaste, and an obedient daughter. Nguyen Du makes an extensive use of simile in his description of Kieu:

Regard profond comme l'onde automnale, sourcils rêveurs comme la ligne des monts au printemps. Les fleurs lui enviaient son éclat, le saule était jaloux de sa fraîcheur. Capable de faire chavirer d'un sourire empire et citadelles, elle était sûrement unique par sa beauté, à supposer que ses talents puissent encore être égalés. (*Kim-Van-Kieu*, I. I. 25-27)¹²

Kieu's troubles stem from an excess of filial piety:

Le premier devoir d'un enfant est de payer la dette de la vie et de l'éducation. Ayant pris sa décision, elle la fit connaître: 'Arrêtez! Que je me vende pour payer la rançon de mon père!' (I. VII. 603-605). ...
Mais qu'importe le pauvre sort d'une goutte de pluie!
(I. VII. 620)

⁹Alexander B. Woodside, 'The Historical Background' in Nguyen Du, *The Tale of Kieu*, xi-xviii (pp. xv-xvi).

¹⁰Woodside, 'Background', p. xvi.

¹¹Huynh Sanh Thong, 'Introduction', p. xl.

¹²All excerpts from the *Kim-Van-Kieu*, unless they are direct quotations from novels, are from the prose translation by Xuan-Phuc and Xuan-Viet.

Young girls were compared to drops of rain in Vietnamese folklore: 'Jeunes filles, nos destins sont comparables aux gouttes de l'averse; telle goutte tombe dans un puits, telle goutte sur un jardin en fleurs'.¹³ The raindrops suggest ephemerality, fragility and sorrow. The haphazardness of life - whether the drops fall into a well, and hence loss and darkness, or into a flowered garden, with its connotation of light and joy - indicate the ultimate powerlessness of young women. The saying underlines the concepts of female passivity and resignation to one's fate.

Kieu becomes a prostitute and marries twice. This sexual licence proved to be unacceptable for some scholars and poets. Nguyen Cong-Tru was to write:

De Ma-Giam-Sinh jusqu'à Tu-Hai,
Fleur flétrie vendue et revendue dans les lieux de
plaisir
Où trouver trace encore de cette fameuse piété filiale,
Dans ce commerce éhonté d'abeilles et de papillons?¹⁴

Is Kieu reproached for having had the temerity to survive in the only way she could after having saved her family's fortunes? Or is he really saying that an unchaste woman is better dead? Yet Kieu does not emerge unscathed. When she returns to her family and to Kim, she says to him: 'le mariage implique, dans son essence, une fleur au pollen intact, une lune au miroir parfait' (III. II. 3092). 'Quand je pense à moi-même, je rougis de honte. Comment, impure et souillée, oserais-je aspirer aux vêtements de chanvre et à l'épingle d'épine?' (III. II. 3113-3114).

Kieu is the creation of a male writer. He gives her form, a certain amount of sexual affirmation, but in the end she is bound

¹³Xuan-Phuc and Xuan-Viet, 'Notes', in Nguyen Du, *Kieu*, 178-190 (pp. 180-181).

¹⁴Xuan-Phuc and Xuan-Viet, 'Introduction', p. 26.

by the rules of patriarchy: she embodies female selflessness and is punished for her lack of chastity at her marriage bed. In the last chapter of the poem, Kieu speaks repeatedly of her shame: 'j'ai passé la moitié de ma vie à éprouver toutes les hontes et les amertumes' (III, II, 3037), 'En parlant de ce passé, je me sens déjà plein de honte' (3080), 'Quand je pense à moi-même, je rougis de honte' (3103), 'en regardant la fleur d'or de la lampe, n'aurais-je pas honte de moi-même?' (3106), 'Déjà, j'en éprouve dans mon cœur une grande honte' (3150). She refers to herself in disparaging terms as 'fleur tombée' (III, II, 3032), 'impure et souillée' (3114), 'ce corps méprisable' (3148), 'la fleur tardive' (3152), 'une fleur flétrie' (3161), and finally expresses her deep gratitude to Kim: 'ce corps flétri, s'il est lavé de ses souillures et renaît à la pureté, c'est grâce à l'homme supérieur dont le cœur est hors du commun' (3181). She is humble indeed, considering that it was men's trouble, and because of and through men that she reached her present state. As a result, she is lauded by scholars in the following terms: 'Par sa grâce exquise, par sa délicate fémininité, elle est chère au cœur de tout Vietnamien, et mille fois plus précieuse encore pour avoir eu tant à souffrir et tant à supporter'.¹⁵ Their admiration for her is understandable. Kieu appeals to them while leaving their position and their authority untouched. Kieu becomes a symbol of virtuous, long-suffering and resigned womanhood.

As I see it, the *Tale of Kieu* portrays a woman who loses one aspect of her virtue (her chastity) through the fulfilment of another virtue (filial piety) and is in the end denied complete self-

¹⁵Xuan-Phuc and Xuan-Viet, 'Introduction', p. 26.

expression as a result of her transgression. It is this latter aspect which surfaces in the Vietnamese Francophone novels, most notably in Ly Thu Ho's *Printemps inachevé*. It seems to me that it is Kim, finally, who reaps the benefits: he has an intelligent and cultured companion, his first love, as one wife, and has another wife with whom he can share the sexual side of his nature and who, moreover, begets the desired heirs.

There are of course many possible interpretations and layers of meaning in the *Tale of Kieu*. The concept of fate is prevalent. It is reiterated from the beginning of the *Tale of Kieu* that beauty and talent inevitably lead to misery. Kieu has to pay the debts of an anterior life. Every act has consequences which in turn lead to further acts.

D'ailleurs, d'après le message, contenu dans le songe venu d'en haut, il n'est pas possible d'échapper, contre la volonté du Ciel, aux conséquences actuelles des vies antérieures. (II, I, 1019).

The *Tale of Kieu* illustrates elements of Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian philosophies and the motif of pre-ordained fate also provides a convenient literary device with which to explain the misfortunes which dog Kieu's life.

Despite the many upheavals, Kieu does survive, and in this sense has come to symbolize the fortitude of a people or a nation at war. The *Tale of Kieu* is a romance. It is also a political allegory, a book of divination, a tale of morals and the portrayal, at a remove, of the adjustments and compromises in the author's own chequered career. It depicts the struggles in an individual's life and the difficulty with which to account for circumstances outside our control. It is whatever the reader chooses to make of it. 'Dans

la littérature universelle, il est sans doute peu d'exemples aussi nets de la présence d'une grande œuvre du passé dans l'esprit public d'un peuple, que l'intérêt constamment manifesté par les Vietnamiens à l'égard du *Kiêu* depuis un siècle et demi'.¹⁶ It is important to note that Nguyen Du chose a woman as the heroine and protagonist of his poem - this work which became 'le miroir de l'âme vietnamienne'.¹⁷

The *Tale of Kieu* is peppered with allusions to Chinese classical literature, in particular Han (206 B.C. - A.D. 220) and T'ang poetry.¹⁸ A literary creation in its own right, it also rests on the bulwark of centuries of Chinese thought and philosophy, a heritage onto which Nguyen Du superimposed his own country's vernacular and indigenous literary traditions. In doing so he 'rescu[ed] Vietnamese poetry from the stranglehold of classical Chinese'¹⁹ and created a distinctly Vietnamese work. Early French translators of the *Tale of Kieu* found the work difficult to translate. Abel des Michels, who published the first complete French translation of the poem in 1884 accompanied by extensive footnotes, had this to say about it:

A côté de métaphores remarquables par leur profondeur et leur exactitude, il faut bien, pour être juste, reconnaître qu'il en est un grand nombre

¹⁶Jean Chesneaux and Georges Boudarel, 'Les Révolutionnaires vietnamiens face au *Kim Van Kieu*', in *Tradition et révolution au Vietnam*, sous la direction de Jean Chesneaux, Georges Boudarel, and Daniel Hemery (Paris, 1971), 356-384 (p. 356).

¹⁷Xuan-Phuc and Xuan-Viet, 'Introduction', p. 15.

¹⁸'A study in Hanoi has identified in it some fifty quotations from *The Book of Odes*, the Confucian anthology of verse; some fifty references to other Confucian classics; some sixty translations or adaptations of various Chinese poems; some seventy allusions to Chinese works of fiction; and about twenty mentions of Buddhist or Taoist scriptures. Such erudition, if indiscriminately displayed in an imaginative work runs the risk of boring or even offending. But in *Kiêu* it fits so gracefully into the texture of the poem, it is so apposite to the purpose in each case, that it may elude the average reader while it surprises and delights the connoisseur'. Huynh Sanh Thong, 'Introduction', p. xxii.

¹⁹Huynh Sanh Thong, 'Introduction', p. xxi.

d'autres qui sont si alambiquées que, sans une explication détaillée, il serait impossible de les faire saisir à un esprit peu familiarisé avec le langage poétique particulier à l'Extrême-Orient.²⁰

Baruch noted that there have been seven French translations of the *Kim-Van-Kieu*. The complex literary allusions, references and turns of phrase obviously baffled French translators (and presumably French audiences). Perhaps this is why early translators felt obliged to provide voluminous explanatory notes to accompany the poem. Poetry, of course, is notoriously difficult to convey in translation. When the language, culture and philosophy are radically different and alien, the difficulty is even greater. The definitive French version appears to be the prose translation by Xuan-Phuc and Xuan-Viet, first published in 1961 in the Gallimard-Unesco *Collection d'œuvres représentatives: Série vietnamienne*. Xuan-Phuc and Xuan-Viet do not explain why they chose to produce a prose rather than a verse translation of the poem. They may have felt that it was easier to translate the *Tale of Kieu* in this form and that the result would be more accessible to the French public.

The appearance of the *Tale of Kieu* in a number of Vietnamese Francophone novels therefore entails layer upon layer of literary expression. For this reason, its omission is also noticeable, since the poem is acknowledged as one of the greatest classics of Vietnamese literature.

C'est en *chu-nom* [en langue nationale] que furent écrites les plus grandes œuvres classiques du Vietnam: *Gia-huan ca* (*De l'éducation des familles*) de Nguyen-Trai, *Chinh-phu Ngam* (*Complainte de la*

²⁰Abel des Michels, *Kim Vân Kiều Tân Truyện*, publié et traduit pour la première fois par Abel des Michels (Paris, 1884), pp. xi-xii.

femme d'un guerrier) de Doan-thi-Diem, *Cung oan ngam khuc* (*Les plaintes d'une odalisque*) de Nguyen-gia-Thieu, et d'autres, pour en finir par la plus célèbre, le *Doan-truong tan-thanh* (*Nouvelles plaintes d'un cœur meurtri*), plus connue sous le nom de *Kim-Van-Kieu* de Nguyen Du.²¹

Che Van Lien notes: 'La femme à travers les siècles, fut le personnage principal de nos œuvres littéraires'.²² Tran My-Van wrote of the scholar Nguyen Khuyen (1835 - 1909): 'At times he used the traditional image of a stone figure, or a woman, to identify his own weakness, predicament and reliance on others'.²³ The issue of gender itself however, is seldom examined at any length.²⁴

I would like to conjecture as to the various reasons for the use of a female protagonist. It was perhaps more acceptable to let a woman rather than a man voice personal anguish. The use of a woman protagonist could also have provided, superficially, a further distancing device to protect the male author from direct accusations of sedition and subversion. Vietnam had always had a more liberal approach to the situation of women than China. The tenets of Confucianism were a result of ten centuries of Chinese domination on a country which had seen women warriors, women

²¹Baruch, *Notes*, p. 4.

²²Che Lan Vien, 'De la vallée des larmes à la plaine du rire', in *Anthologie de la poésie vietnamienne*, Les Editeurs français réunis (Paris, 1969), 9-18 (pp. 14-15).

²³Tran My-Van, *A Vietnamese Scholar in Anguish: Nguyen Khuyen and the decline of the Confucian Order, 1884-1909* (Singapore, 1992), p. 87. This aspect also characterized Chinese literature: 'Since the second century A.D. numerous male poets, including Li Po and Su Tung-p'o, wrote poems in the person of a disconsolate woman'. Ling Chung, 'Women and Literature: A Brief Survey', in *The Orchid Boat: Women Poets of China*, translated and edited by Kenneth Rexroth and Ling Chung (New York, 1972), 139-146 (p. 140).

²⁴In their article on 'Les Révolutionnaires vietnamiens face au Kim Van Kieu', Jean Chesneaux and Georges Boudarel refer to Marxist interpretations of the poem. The critics discuss feudalism, prostitution, money and motives in relation to the *Kim-Van-Kieu*. They are silent, however, on the subject of gender. Jean Chesneaux and Georges Boudarel, 'Les Révolutionnaires vietnamiens face au Kim Van Kieu', in *Tradition et révolution au Vietnam*, sous la direction de Jean Chesneaux, Georges Boudarel, and Daniel Hemery (Paris, 1971), 356-384.

generals, and surprisingly enlightened legislation regarding women. Vietnamese women enjoyed greater freedom than their Chinese counterparts. There is evidence that in early Vietnamese history, women and men were on an equal footing as far as privileges and the division of labour were concerned.²⁵ There were both male and female army leaders during the short-lived rebellion of the Trung sisters against their Chinese overlords in the first century A.D.²⁶ Foot binding was never practised in Vietnam.²⁷

Women were allowed to receive instruction but were not allowed to take part in the State examinations through which public administrators (or mandarins) were recruited. From the pool of educated women, there were a number of talented female scholars and poets whose work has been preserved through the ages and is part of the Vietnamese literary heritage.²⁸

Until the fifteenth century women were on a par with men in matters of inheritance and marriage.²⁹ The Code of the Le dynasty (1428-1788) was far more liberal towards women than the Chinese Codes of the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties.

The [Hong Duc] Code ... contained provisions that sought to secure the personal rights of women, who were protected from abuse, abduction or sale by members or servants of powerful families. Women were also given the right to divorce for neglect or abandonment by the husband. The basis for granting such rights to women has been attributed to an attempt by the Vietnamese, after the defeat of the Chinese, 'to separate its identity from China's by

²⁵Marr, *Tradition*, p. 191.

²⁶Nguyen Trieu Dan, *A Vietnamese Family Chronicle: Twelve Generations on the Banks of the Hat River* (Jefferson and London, 1991), p. 142.

²⁷Marr, *Tradition*, p. 191.

²⁸Cam Nguyen, 'Women of the World: The Vietnamese', *Women at Work* (Melbourne, March-May 1985), 2-3 (p. 2).

²⁹Nguyen Trieu Dan, *Vietnamese Chronicle*, p.122.

incorporating traditional laws and customary practices in their legal and political framework'.³⁰

Women enjoyed a greater degree of protection under criminal law provisions and were entitled to significant property interests which had to be respected by their spouse's family.³¹ Although these rights suffered a setback with the promulgation of the Nguyen Code in the nineteenth century, the Le Code influenced mores in Vietnam into the twentieth century and much of it was incorporated into modern Vietnamese law.³² However, the tenets of Confucianism - the emphasis on male dominance, male heirs and the woman's observance of The Three Submissions and The Four Virtues, were accepted and internalized by Vietnamese society and mores.

These historical factors may provide a partial explanation for the apparent propensity among male scholars to let female protagonists illustrate and embody the great tragedies and triumphs of life. Part of it may have been a subconscious desire to identify with the underdog, since Vietnam has always felt dwarfed by China. Chinese writers in turn referred to Annam ('Pacified South') to highlight oppression in an indirect manner. Po Chü-yi (772-846) wrote the following:

The Red Cockatoo

Sent as a present from Annam-
A red cockatoo.
Coloured like the peach-tree blossom,
Speaking with the speech of men.
And they did to it what is always done

³⁰Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London and New Jersey, 1986), p. 198.

³¹Tan Van Tai, 'The status of women in traditional Vietnam: A comparison of the Code of the Lê dynasty (1428-1788) with the Chinese code', *Journal of Asian History*, 15 (1981), 97-145 (p. 136).

³²Tan Van Tai, 'Status of women', p. 136.

To the learned and the eloquent.
They took a cage with stout bars
And shut it up inside.³³

There is an inherent paradox in painting women in literature as victims of life and fate, and yet simultaneously granting them voice and presence as the focus of theme or plot or moral. Literature, in this way, gave women an illusory prominence. Women, after all, only had validity through association with men. They were the daughters, principal wives, secondary wives, concubines, mistresses and servants of men. When they lament their lives, they do so in relation to their men and not as autonomous beings. This is hardly to be wondered at since, by and large, they were created and painted by men. They are a far cry from Ho Xuan Huong, a rare female voice in literature, who spoke of the female condition from a woman's viewpoint and came out with a different emphasis:

Que celui qui tient le gouvernail
Ait ou non le bon plaisir d'accoster
Mais que celle qui hisse la voile
Puisse naviguer librement.³⁴

A popular Vietnamese saying stated: 'Femme sans mari, barque sans gouvernail'. Ho Xuan Huong also distinguished herself from her male counterparts by rarely using Chinese literary or mythological allusions. She relied on her native language and native wit. Coming as she did from a scholarly background, her originality suggested considerable independence from the accepted literary mores of her times.³⁵ As Huu Ngoc and Françoise Corrèze note:

³³Po Chū-yi, 'The Red Cockatoo' in *Anthology of Chinese Literature*, edited by Cyril Birch, Volume 1: From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century (New York, 1965), p. 277.

³⁴Huu Ngoc et Corrèze, *Fleurs de pamplemoussier*, p. 31.

³⁵In this respect, she resembles her Japanese predecessors. Japan was also heavily influenced by China. The greatest classics of Japanese literature from the Heian

Ho Xuan Huong est plus qu'un poète. Elle est un symbole d'indépendance d'esprit et de cœur, de courage et de lutte contre l'hypocrisie, la contrainte, les interdits et les tabous sociaux. Personne n'a eu plus qu'elle le sens de la justice, de la plénitude de l'amour, et la conscience de la dignité de la femme.³⁶

Of all female figures in literature, however, it is the nineteenth-century figure of Kieu which is the most prominent. She provides a striking example of a (male) literary focus on woman's role in society. I will now examine the ways in which she is referred to in Vietnamese Francophone texts and what use these later writers made of Kieu and of her tale.

I shall divide the novels into three groups: those which make significant use of the *Kim-Van-Kieu*; those in which the references are relatively unimportant; and those which do not refer to it at all.

Of the Vietnamese Francophone novels and *récits* written and published between 1930 and 1990, four fall into the first category: *En s'écartant des ancêtres* by Trinh-Thuc-Oanh and Marguerite Triaire, *Bach-Yên ou la fille au cœur fidèle* by Tran Van Tung, *Printemps inachevé* by Ly Thu Ho which contains no direct borrowings from the *Tale of Kieu* but which exhibits significant parallels with it, and *Retour à la saison des pluies* by Kim Lefèvre.

In the second category, Nguyen Tien Lang's *Les Chemins de la révolte* (1953), contains three references to the *Kim-Van-Kieu*. Trinh-Thuc-Oanh and Triaire's *La Réponse de l'Occident*, published in Hanoi in 1941, contains two lines from the poem. Bà-

Period (*The Tale of Genji* and *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*, eleventh century) were written by women in the vernacular, while men wrote in Chinese, the 'scholarly' language. See W. G. Aston, *A History of Japanese Literature*, new edition (New York, 1972), pp. 55-57.

³⁶Huu Ngoc et Corrèze, *Fleurs de pampelmoussier*, p. 34.

Dâm ('Madame la Française') by Truong Dinh Tri and Albert de Teneuille, published in Paris in 1930, contains only one brief reference to the *Kim-Van-Kieu*, which is described oddly enough in the explanatory footnote as 'un roman réaliste connu à travers l'Indochine'.³⁷

In the last category, Tran Van Tung makes no mention of the *Kim-Van-Kieu* in his *Rêves d'un campagnard annamite*, published in Paris in 1940. Pham Van Ky, who published seven novels in Paris from 1947 to 1966, makes only this one brief reference to Nguyen Du in *Des Femmes assises çà et là*:

Etrange, toutefois, que je n'aie pas invoqué de préférence un Nguyen Du ou un Tchouang Tsu? Pudeur d'écrivain asiatique attentif à ne pas trop agacer ses lecteurs par de continuelles références à ses origines? Certainement.³⁸

He may have felt that his compatriots had used and abused the theme of *Kieu* in their novels. Yet the evidence would appear to be otherwise. Hoang-Xuan-Nhi makes no reference to Nguyen Du or *The Tale of Kieu* in *Heou-Tâm*, published in Paris in 1941, although he does mention two other classical poems: *Plaintes d'une femme dont le mari part en guerre* also known as *Complainte de la femme d'un guerrier* (of which he published a French rendition in 1943) and *L'Epouse délaissée*. Nguyen Huu Chau, in *Les Reflets de nos jours*, published in Paris in 1955, makes a single allusion to a Vietnamese legend in part of a sentence, which the writer carefully points out to the reader: 'Ce n'est pas l'amour qui devient cristal au fond des rivières'.³⁹

³⁷Truong Dinh Tri et Albert de Teneuille, *Bà-Dâm* ('Madame la Française') (Paris, 1930), p. 82.

³⁸Pham Van Ky, *Des Femmes assises çà et là* (Paris, 1964), p. 111.

³⁹Nguyen Huu Chau, *Les Reflets de nos jours* (Paris, 1955), p. 169. The reference is to a legend about a poor fisherman dying for love of a beautiful princess. It is retold

Otherwise he does not refer to or quote from Vietnamese or Chinese literature - a particularly striking omission since the novel is replete with references to European writers, artists and their works. Pham Duy Khiem, writing under the pseudonym Nam Kim, is equally silent on Vietnamese or Chinese literature in his novel *Nam et Sylvie*, published in Paris in 1957, and Cung Giu Nguyen also omits any references to *The Tale of Kieu* in both *Le Fils de la baleine* (originally published in Paris in 1956) and *Le Domaine maudit*, which appeared in 1961. As with *Les Reflets de nos jours*, *Le Domaine maudit* refers to European authors and works but avoids any mention of Vietnamese literature. Ly Thu Ho's second published novel, *Au milieu du carrefour*, contains an excerpt from another classical Vietnamese poem, the *Chinh phu Ngam* (Lament of a Soldier's Wife) but none to the *Kim-Van-Kieu*. The poem does not feature in her last novel, *Le Mirage de la paix*. There is a very brief reference to the *Kim-Van-Kieu* along with other classic texts in Kim Lefèvre's *Métisse blanche*, published in Paris in 1989 and the book contains an excerpt from, again, the *Chinh phu Ngam*, translated here as the *Chant de la femme du combattant*. Despite or perhaps because of its prominent position in the world of Vietnamese letters, the *Kim-Van-Kieu* is either omitted from a novel altogether, or if referred to, is used for a specific purpose. The degree of politicization around the poem may be responsible for this, and also the fact that its protagonist is a woman. The writers may deliberately avoid the poem because of its centrality in traditional scholarship, or, on the other hand, as some have

as 'Le crystal d'amour' in Pham Duy Khiem, *Légendes des terres sereines* (Paris, 1951), pp. 7-12.

consciously done, choose to reexamine it within a modern context. In much of this lies the question of whether to turn away from classical Vietnamese and Chinese literature in favour of European literature or to eschew reference to either tradition.

In the second category, Nguyen Tien Lang's *Les Chemins de la révolte*, published in Paris in 1953, contains three references to Nguyen Du's poem. These three references explain and underline the predicament of Nguyen, the protagonist of the novel. As a mandarin, Nguyen is taken away and imprisoned without trial in the fluctuating politics of Vietnam in the 1940s. In prison and later on in solitary confinement, as he tries to come to terms with this brusque reversal in his fortunes, Nguyen identifies himself with Kieu:

Avait-ce été des amours? ... Et maintenant, il fallait payer par la souffrance la grande dette d'amour. 'Tant que je n'aurai pu la payer, cette dette d'amour, mon cœur, sous la terre, dans l'au-delà des Neuf Sources, restera en bloc, un cristal impossible à dissoudre'. Brusquement, ces vers lui revenaient en mémoire, comme pour le juger. 'Tout homme, se disait-il, porte en son cœur, dans ses minutes de sincérité parfaite, le secret de quelque coupable amour'.⁴⁰

The verse is a direct quotation from the the *Tale of Kieu*, duly acknowledged in an explanatory footnote. The writer, it seems, does not expect his readers to be familiar with the poem (implying a largely French audience?). The extract is from Part I, Chapter VIII, verse 710 of the *Kim-Van-Kieu* as Kieu ponders her fate before leaving the family home, the crystal in this context alluding to her love for Kim, which she seeks to keep untouched, whatever awaits her. These two lines from the *Kim-Van-Kieu* in

⁴⁰Nguyen Tien Lang, *Les Chemins de la révolte* (Paris, 1953), pp. 62-63.

turn refer to an ancient Vietnamese legend.⁴¹ In *Les Chemins de la révolte*, Nguyen, like Kieu, provides the following explanation for the turn his life has taken: 'Nguyen s'était persuadé qu'il lui fallait expier des fautes inconnues commises par lui en des existences antérieures'.⁴² Later on in the novel, Nguyen Du is referred to as 'l'immortel auteur du *Kim-Van-Kieu*'⁴³ and the protagonist voices his objection to Marxist interpretations of the works of Nguyen Du and Nguyen Binh Khiem.⁴⁴ He refers to the political controversies which erupted between Confucianists, Nationalists and Marxists over the merits or otherwise of the poem. The furor arose in the 1920s and 1930s over the scholar Pham Quynh's endorsement of the *Kim-Van-Kieu* as a masterpiece of Vietnamese literature. To Pham Quynh: 'as long as *The Tale of Kieu* lasts, our language will last; as long as our language lasts, our country will last'.⁴⁵ Pham Quynh occupied a number of administrative posts under the French.⁴⁶ Scholars who opposed the French control over their country raised their objections to this. As his political enemies, they denounced what he endorsed. It is not surprising that Nguyen Tien Lang, as a political conservative, makes a reference to this. Pham Quynh was his father-in-law and was assassinated by the Viet-Minh in 1940. Nguyen Tien Lang is the only writer to allude to Marxist or

⁴¹Pham Duy Khiem, *Légendes*, p. 9. See note 39 above.

⁴²Nguyen Tien Lang, *Chemins*, p. 83.

⁴³Nguyen Tien Lang, *Chemins*, p. 86.

⁴⁴Nguyen Tien Lang, *Chemins*, p. 160.

⁴⁵Pham Quynh quoted in Huynh Sanh Thong, 'Introduction', p. xxxix.

⁴⁶Co-Fondateur et Secrétaire Général de l'Association pour la Formation Intellectuelle et Morale des Annamites (AFIMA), de 1920 à 1932. Ministre de l'Education Nationale le 2 Mai 1933. Ministre de l'Intérieur le 12 Mai 1942. From the back cover of Pham Quynh, *Le Viet-Nam: A la croisée des civilisations (Essais 1922-1932)* (Yerres, 1985).

otherwise interpretations of the poem. Other writers, such as Ly Thu Ho, also discuss the current politics of the time, but her use of the *Tale of Kieu* eschews doctrinal interpretations put upon it.

There are no other references to the poem or to Nguyen Du in *Les Chemins de la révolte*. Kieu here symbolizes the blameless victim of circumstances, which is clearly what the protagonist feels himself to be. He does not believe he has committed any crimes during his career or knowingly done anyone any wrong as a mandarin and bureaucrat and his sudden arrest and separation from his wife and children, his long incarceration followed by life in the *maquis* are perceived somehow as expiation for past mistakes, perhaps a test of his ability to survive, and an opportunity for him to reassess his own life and contemplate his likely future. He feels himself swept by events greater than his own person: an individual caught in a maelstrom of circumstances, like Kieu.

Les Chemins de la révolte provides a rare example of a male protagonist openly identifying himself with the unfortunate figure of Kieu as a means of understanding his own life. The *Kim-Van-Kieu* is used as a political allegory. *Les Chemins de la révolte* relates an individual's attempt to overcome life's adversities within a hostile political environment. Although the references are brief, this is a significant use of the classical poem since the writer is using the figure of Kieu in much the same manner as the author of the *Tale of Kieu* himself. Unfortunately, this identification with a heroine of classical literature did not engender enlightened views with respect to women. Nguyen Tien Lang's portrayal of the women in his life remains conservative.

The two lines from the *Tale of Kieu* which appear in Trinh-Thuc-Oanh's and Triaire's *La Réponse de l'Occident* refer respectively to the poem as a book of portents and as a romance. The first instance is prefaced by the warning that: 'En pays d'Annam, se lamenter sur son sort, c'est tendre la perche au malheur'.⁴⁷ When Mai, one of the female protagonists, quotes a verse from *Kieu* which signifies future misfortune, her mother promptly makes her repeat the line but with different accents on the words: a device which changed the meaning of the said words and therefore rendered the line ineffective. The verse in question was: 'O sort, pourquoi es-tu ingrat comme la chaux?' and the changed meaning became inoffensive as: 'O poudre, pourquoi es-tu blanche comme la chaux?'.⁴⁸ The mother has a superstitious fear that if her daughter went on reading and saying these verses, they would predict future unhappiness for her in the way they had done for Kieu. The reference is Part I, Chapter VIII, verse 752. Kieu was lamenting her fate prior to leaving her home. As it turned out, the line was prophetic for Mai, up to a certain point. Her marriage failed, but on the other hand, she had a successful career as the first recognized European-trained woman doctor.

The next brief reference to *Kieu* is a romantic one. Vinh, the young lover, whispers a line which contains the names of both his sister and his fiancée: 'Le parfum du lis et de l'orchidée embaume toute la maison'.⁴⁹ Both extracts from the *Tale of Kieu* are given in the original Vietnamese. A French translation is provided in the

⁴⁷Trinh-Thuc-Oanh et Marguerite Triaire, *La Réponse de l'Occident* (Hanoi, 1941), p. 15.

⁴⁸Trinh-Thuc-Oanh et Triaire, *Réponse*, p. 15.

⁴⁹Trinh-Thuc-Oanh et Triaire, *Réponse*, p. 262.

text in the first instance, and a translation in footnote in the second. The text itself clearly informs the reader that the excerpts are from the *Kim-Van-Kieu*. This suggests that the authors were directing their novel at a largely French audience - an audience familiar with the Indochinese colony (the novel was published in Hanoi) since some Vietnamese words are not explained or translated - but one obviously not familiar enough with the *Kim-Van-Kieu* to be able to recognize a quotation from it. On the other hand, the use of the *Kim-Van-Kieu* in this context also suggests an audience at least informed about the broad outlines of Kieu's tale. The reference to fate and misfortune would otherwise appear irrelevant. In this novel, unlike the earlier *En s'écartant des ancêtres*, the authors apparently provide their own translation of these lines from the poem. In their previous book, all excerpts from the *Kim-Van-Kieu* were conveyed in direct French translation, with footnotes acknowledging that the translation used was that of a certain 'M. Crayssac'. This presumably referred to René Crayssac's French translation of the poem, entitled "*Kim-Van-Kieou*", *le célèbre poème annamite*, published by Le Van Tan in Hanoi in 1926.⁵⁰ *La Réponse de l'Occident* and *Les Chemins de la révolte* are the only novels (apart from the four I will look at in greater detail) in which the references to *The Tale of Kieu* are not simply passing notations of a well-known classic but are there to either illustrate, underline or bring into prominence incidents in the lives of the protagonists. In *La Réponse de l'Occident*, the fate of Kieu as a woman is the primary object, while *Les Chemins de la révolte* focuses on her

⁵⁰Listed in the Bibliography of Nguyen Du, *The Tale of Kieu*, p. 210.

situation as an individual caught in circumstances outwith her control. The four novels which do make a marked use of the *Kim-Van-Kieu* were to concentrate on both these motifs - the woman and the individual as victim - and usually in conjunction.

Trinh-Thuc-Oanh and Marguerite Triaire published *En s'écartant des ancêtres* in Hanoi in 1939. The three protagonists are female: Mai, Gaby and Dân, and the novel chronicles the development in the lives of these three young women. The setting is Indochina in the 1920s and 1930s, a time of rapidly changing social norms and one which saw education and careers gradually opening up to women. All three women mirror an aspect of Kieu's fate. All three have their early hopes and dreams blighted in one form or another. Mai is the main focus of the novel. *En s'écartant des ancêtres* begins with her childhood and upbringing. Signs of trouble are there from the time of her birth when it is predicted that: 'Cette petite aura du caractère comme un homme; ce corps de fille abrite un esprit masculin'.⁵¹ Her crime is to be an intelligent child and to yearn to be educated. This was compounded by having an indulgent father who saw no harm in letting his daughter learn to read and write and later on, go to college. Her mother on the other hand, attempted to block each move of her daughter's burgeoning independence. She believed that: 'Il est contraire aux usages que cette petite reçoive l'instruction réservée aux hommes' (p. 35). She could not understand this literate, inquisitive daughter. She wanted her to conform to a properly womanly mould.

⁵¹Trinh-Thuc-Oanh et Marguerite Triaire, *En s'écartant des ancêtres* (Hanoi, 1939), p. 7. Subsequent references will be given in the main text.

Mai therefore, like Kieu, was too gifted and she would have to suffer the penalty for this. From the beginning of the novel, Mai's capabilities are portrayed as unfeminine. Mai says herself: 'Je m'habillerai comme un garçon: je mettrai un pantalon blanc, une tunique noire et personne ne saura que je suis une fille' (p. 35). Later on, her father reiterates: 'N'avais-je pas dit que cette petite aurait un esprit de garçon dans un corps de fille?' (p. 39). Her enthusiasm for her studies, her ambitions for a medical career are assumed to be masculine qualities. In this respect, she resembles her literary predecessors. Courage and intelligence were deemed to be manly attributes. In *Six Records of a Floating Life* (1809), the scholar Shen Fu mourns a talented and beloved wife: 'Alas! Yün came to this world a woman, but she had the feelings and abilities of a man'.⁵² Mai however, is feminine and dutiful enough as a daughter to refuse the advances of Hùng, a student she loves, because her parents had already arranged a match for her. The first reference to the *Kim-Van-Kieu* takes place. Hùng recites the following passage from the *Kim-Van-Kieu*:

Kiêu, le cœur bien gros souffre mille tourments
Triste, elle rêve et suit des yeux pensivement
Les barques du vieux port, à l'heure vespérale,
Comme des ailes étendant leurs grandes voiles. (pp. 130-131).

The reference (II, I, 1049) is a melancholy one. Kieu is a prostitute far from home and dreams wistfully of escape. The sails on the boats are as fleeting and unreachable as her dreams, as the different paths her life may have taken. This image would have its reflection in the fate of Mai and Hùng. For Mai, her potential

⁵²Shen Fu, *Six Records of a Floating Life*, translated by Leonard Pratt and Chiang Su-Hui (Harmondsworth, 1983), p. 89.

relationship with Hùng would remain a transitory dream. Mai and Hùng share a love of poetry and the *Kim-Van-Kieu* features again, this time in direct relation to them. Hùng speaks openly of his love for Mai, but she reminds him that she is already engaged (to a man whom she has never met).

Triste, mais résolue, Mai se défendait:

- Ce ne sont pas seulement les personnages de Corneille qui luttent contre leur cœur. Kiêu, la célèbre héroïne de Nguyễn-Du, a sacrifié son amour par piété filiale.

- Elle estimait ce sacrifice nécessaire pour sauver son père, répliqua Hùng. Mais aucune circonstance fatale ne nous oblige à sacrifier le nôtre; seule, une convention ridicule, d'ailleurs locale. (p. 42)

Mai identifies herself with the figure of Kieu and the same dilemma confronts her when Hùng leaves on a scholarship to finish his medical studies at Montpellier. He offers to take her with him. Mai '[est] cruellement partagée entre son amour et sa piété filiale' (p. 179). She agonizes over her decision. Like Kieu, she chooses filial obedience. A lecture from her father, whom she loves deeply, on the intrinsic worth of duty stiffens her resolution.

Au soir de notre vie, notre seule richesse est de n'avoir démerité ni de nos parents, ni de nos ancêtres: tout le reste, le temps l'emporte et les fous qui poursuivent leur satisfaction sans égard pour les grandes règles édictées par ceux qui possédaient la sagesse se trouvent les mains vides. Ils ont sacrifié, pour un bonheur égoïste et passager, un leurre, ils ont sacrifié la véritable joie, celle du devoir accompli. (p. 183)

A joyless prospect indeed. What eventuates is that Mai is denied even a small measure of 'selfish pleasure'. Her perfectly correct marriage would leave her abandoned while pregnant with her third child, and see her undergo a humiliating and fruitless attempt to win her husband back. In the end, her only consolations are her work and her children and she is luckier

than the majority of women of her generation in having an interesting and challenging profession. She may have a premonition of this when she makes the resolve not to follow Hùng.

Hùng! Tout son amour, tous ses espoirs, de bonheur, toute sa jeunesse! Un élan fou, un élan de toute son âme la soulevait vers lui. Cependant elle ne partirait pas. (p. 184)

Mai is trapped, and her dreams of young love, of discovery, and of escape were to remain as fleeting as the sails Kieu contemplated far from her birthplace. The verses recited by Hùng were prophetic.

Mai's two friends, Gaby and Dân, were to have equally chequered lives. Gaby, given great freedom by her father, made what she thought was a love match, only to discover that her husband had married her for her money. Her marriage became empty, a purely surface arrangement while she entertained a succession of lovers and gradually turned towards opium. Unlike Mai, she refused to contemplate divorce out of respect for her mother's feelings. She also is trapped by filial duty: 'Ma mère m'a suppliée de ne pas divorcer; elle est trop désolée pour que je lui impose ce surcroît de chagrin' (p. 282). The third friend, Dân, chooses a path indicative of resignation. She marries a widower many years her senior and in many ways regresses into tradition. Having witnessed her friends' disappointment in love, she opts for a safe and sober contract with a mandarin. She dutifully bears his children and goes to extraordinary lengths in her effort to fit into a delineated female role. She does not love her husband. She entered into her marriage contract with no illusions. This option

seemed preferable to her since it precluded disappointment or heartbreak. She is conscious that it also precluded any great happiness, but she had made her decision and her choice, and she would abide by them.

These three young women were caught in a rapidly changing society. As women with a mind and a will of their own, with dreams and ambitions which stretched beyond the limited confines of a purely dependent role as wife and mother, they suffered the penalty for standing apart. As Mai's father observed: 'Tu souffres parce que tu es évoluée; une autre, à ta place, s'estimerait heureuse. Je t'ai laissé t'émanciper, peut-être est-ce contraire au bonheur' (p. 381). Despite these many obstacles, they took control of their lives and carved their own paths, and in some ways succeeded. In the end, as Gaby remarks: 'Vaut-il mieux avoir connu nos rêves un peu fous, nos joies si brèves, nos déceptions si amères? Vaut-il mieux le demi-sommeil de nos mères?' (p. 431).

The only other reference to the *Kim-Van-Kieu* in *En s'écartant des ancêtres* is the following:

Si vous n'êtes de ceux qui portent un insigne
De jade précieux, du moins êtes-vous digne
De la société des gens qui pour décor
Peuvent, par leur talent, prétendre aux portes d'or:
Académiciens, lettrés, hauts dignitaires. (p. 338)

The context is a civilized evening hosted by M. Tam, a friend of Gaby's, in which the *chanteuses*, who are slowly becoming obsolete in Vietnamese society, still entertain the guests with poetry, music and the arts. M. Tam explains to his French guest:

Il n'y a plus guère que trois ou quatre chanteuses
suivant la tradition. C'étaient des femmes très
cultivées, connaissant des recueils de chansons, le
Kim-Vân-Kiêu. Certaines improvisaient des strophes ...

en l'honneur des visiteurs. Elles exerçaient sur les hommes une influence et une attraction extraordinaires. (pp. 328-329)

These well-bred and literate courtesans became a dying breed as literacy spread among women and the younger generation gradually lost interest in classical literature and music, preferring entertainment elsewhere. The verses refer to Part I, Chapter V of the *Kim-Van-Kieu*, in which the young lovers exchange confidences. Kieu honours Kim for being a scholar, while underlining her own humble credentials:

J'ai osé jeter un regard sur la lumière de vos traits.
Vous faites partie des porteurs de jade, ou des habitués
de la Porte d'Or. Ma destinée semble avoir la minceur
d'une aile de libellule. (I, V, 410-412).

As is noticeable, the verse translation provided in the novel is far longer than the one-line rendition in Xuan-Phuc and Xuan-Viet's prose translation. In the context of the novel, the *chanteuse* is singing these lines as a sign of courtesy towards the French guest. In a similar way to Kieu, she is honouring him while disparaging her own modest accomplishments.

Each of the female protagonists, Mai, Gaby and Dàn, illustrates a different aspect of Kieu. Mai, like Kieu, acquiesces in her filial duty (although with less dramatic results) and makes a respectable and in the end, failed marriage. Fortunately for her, her self-respect is bolstered by her profession and her independence. The outlook for her would have been bleak otherwise. However the weight of duty and of tradition was enough to stifle her emotional freedom and inhibit her judgement, as a woman, on loving where she pleased rather than obeying her parents. Mai is an intelligent and gifted woman, and like the

unfortunate Kieu, she had to atone for these advantages. She is punished by the social and emotional failure of her marriage.

Her friend Gaby exhibits the licentious side of the figure of Kieu. She enjoys an emancipated youth, largely through the indulgence of a male figure of authority (her father) and is disappointed in the man she chooses as her husband. Her numerous affairs and lovers do not succeed in filling the emotional gap in her life. She is also bound by filial duty in acquiescing to her mother's wish not to divorce, in this way trapping herself in an empty marriage. Her increasing reliance on opium provides her with an illusory refuge from her various disappointments. The image of opium also carries with it associations of corruption and disintegration. Gaby is a woman who attempted to exert her will on the running of her life, with unfortunate consequences.

Dân, the most subdued of the three, exemplifies the price to be paid for conforming. She portrays the virtuous, dutiful side of Kieu. She is a woman whose early hopes and desires have been dulled and stifled. She abides by convention and makes a conscious decision to enter into a loveless but stable marriage. She is in some ways the saddest and most colourless of the three characters. All three women illustrate a different facet of the personality of Kieu, and all three in the end, suffer for it. It seems that simply being a woman is enough to lead to misfortune. The dilemmas, difficulties and sorrows which Kieu had to deal with found echoes in the lives of women a century and more later. Despite changing mores and different expectations, the condition of women still bore an underlying similarity with that of the society portrayed in *The Tale of Kieu*.

It should be noted that *En s'écartant des ancêtres* is the first Vietnamese Francophone novel to be written and published by women. It is also a collaborative effort, not the only one (Truong Dinh Tri and Albert de Teneuille had collaborated nine years earlier on the novel *Bà-Dâm*) but one between a Vietnamese woman and a French woman, which suggests considerable adjustment and compromise. The French colonizers are not overly lauded or the Vietnamese vilified. The novel provides both a sympathetic portrayal of a country in transition between ancient and modern and a credible account of the particular struggles which women underwent in this context. It could conceivably have been wholly written by a French-educated Vietnamese woman. It is more successful than its sequel, *La Réponse de l'Occident*, in which the intrinsic 'superiority' of European culture and religion suddenly comes into prominence - this despite numerous excerpts from Vietnamese poems, songs and idioms (which unfortunately take on a rather quaint aspect as examples of local colour) and the occasional assertions of the validity of Vietnamese culture and philosophy. The two verses from the *Kim-Van-Kieu* which feature in the novel are reproduced in the original Vietnamese, not in direct French translations. The references this time are fleeting and descriptive. The *Kim-Van-Kieu* loses much of its symbolic significance in this later novel, echoing in some measure the reduced importance of Vietnamese mores. It is as if in this later work, both writers moved further apart, each attempting to assert a view which gradually became more incompatible with the other's. At one point, *La Réponse de l'Occident* reads like a rationale of French colonization. The result

is a more discordant and less balanced novel than the first and is perhaps reflective of the increasing political and racial tension in the colony.

Tran Van Tung's *Bach-Yên ou la fille au cœur fidèle*, published in Paris in 1946, provides on the other hand a striking example of a direct use of the *Tale of Kieu* to highlight both protagonists and events in the novel. The novel is set in Tonkin in the 1930s and deals with the tragic love story of Van and Bach-Yên, two young people of different backgrounds. Van is Buddhist and of the scholar-gentry class, while Bach-Yên's family background is mercantile and Catholic. Neither family approves. Van finally buckles to social pressure and marries Hông, a mandarin's daughter, as a death-bed promise to his father, and Bach-Yên commits suicide upon hearing the news.

The plot of *Bach-Yên* echoes that of many romantic novels and short stories which appeared in Vietnam in the 1920s and 1930s and which traditionalists claimed were corrupting women.⁵³ These stories were adaptations of the 'talented scholar and beautiful girl' motif inherited from Yüan drama and which was prevalent in Chinese novels and plays from the thirteenth century onwards, but with a tragic ending. In these modern tales, two young people who are ill-fated in love are forced apart by social restrictions and in the end either die or turn to religion. *Bach-Yên* appears to be partly autobiographical. The author's career in many ways parallels that of his protagonist Van. In the short biographical note on Tran Van Tung provided by Yeager,⁵⁴ he is portrayed as a

⁵³Marr, *Tradition*, p.206.

⁵⁴Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p.179.

young man who rebelled against both his classical education and an arranged marriage. He left Vietnam for France. His scholastic heritage is certainly apparent in his work. The heritage of poetry is a feature of the ancient mandarinal system of education. A poet himself, Tran Van Tung published two volumes of poetry in Paris: *Muses de Paris* in 1942 and *Chants du dragon d'or* in 1945.

There is a great deal of poetry in *Bach-Yên*; this is unique among the Vietnamese Francophone novels. The majority are prose narratives interspersed with short (or occasionally no) excerpts of poetry. The significant use of poetry and poetic prose is particular to *Bach-Yên*. This narrative device is a legacy from classical Chinese and Vietnamese texts. The novel appears as a modern version of *pien wen*, a literary form which evolved in Han Dynasty China and 'combin[ed] straight narration with rhymed verses, descriptive prose and allegories'.⁵⁵ The prose itself is lyrical and this gives a dreamlike setting to Van's first meeting with Bach-Yên. Their entire courtship is conducted largely through the medium of poetry. An extensive use of simile, reminiscent of Nguyen Du's description of Kieu, is used, as seen in the following example:

Votre regard est tumultueux comme l'Océan en hiver.
Vos dents scintillent comme un collier de perles sous
le soleil. Vos lèvres sont fraîches et roses comme les
pétales du Lotus au matin. Votre visage est radieux
comme la Lune au quinzième jour. Vos cheveux
ressemblent à des nuages au printemps. Votre taille
est plus flexible qu'une liane.⁵⁶

⁵⁵Lai Ming, *Chinese Literature*, p. 6.

⁵⁶Tran Van Tung, *Bach-Yên ou la fille au cœur fidèle* (Paris, 1946), p. 45. Subsequent references will be given in the main text.

The description of woman in terms of natural elements is also a feature of Tang poetry. Van later quotes directly from the *Tale of Kieu* to express his admiration for Bach-Yên:

D'une voix pleine d'ivresse, il dit des vers du grand poète Nguyen-Du:

Son visage a la rondeur de la lune, les lignes de son esprit chantent l'harmonie,
Ses lèvres s'ouvrent parfumées comme les pétales d'une fleur, ses paroles sont aussi rares et précieuses que des jades.

Les nuages sont moins beaux que ses cheveux, la neige moins blanche que sa peau divine.

...
Ses regards ondulent comme les vagues en automne, ses sourcils évoquent le pittoresque des forêts au printemps;

Les fleurs sont jalouses de se voir moins éclatantes qu'elle, les saules s'attristent de n'avoir pas sa fraîcheur idéale,

Ses sourires magiques bouleversent les Royaumes et renversent les Citadelles,

Sa beauté est unique, son talent incomparable! (pp. 15-16)

The verses refer to Part I, Chapter I of the *Kim-Van-Kieu*. The two sections actually refer to the description of two different women, the younger sister Van first of all and then Kieu. Tran Van Tung's translation is longer and more ornate than the relatively spare version provided by Xuan-Phuc and Xuan-Viet. It is presumably his own, since he does not acknowledge an official translation. The elaborate rendition in *Bach-Yên* is characteristic of Tran Van Tung's literary style. The corresponding prose translation for the first three verses above is:

Visage harmonieux, sourcils au noble dessin. Dans son sourire de fleur, dans sa voix de jade régnait la bienséance. Les nuages s'avouaient vaincus par sa chevelure, la neige le céda à son teint. (I, I, 21-23)

In quoting both stanzas, Van endows Bach-Yên not only with the quieter beauty of the younger sister, but also with the more poignant and devastating charm of Kieu. Bach-Yên also resorts to poetry to express her love for Van and her verses, like his, contain numerous references to classical texts.

Il n'existait de plus beau couple que Thoi et Truong
Mais les 'Nuages et la Pluie' avaient renversé la 'Pierre
d'Or'
Et à force de s'étreindre, 'l'Hirondelle' finissait par se
lasser du 'Loriot'. (p. 82)

The imagery consists of classical metaphors. 'L'Hirondelle' and 'le Loriot' for example, symbolize lovers, conjugal bliss or, if used in the plural, a gaily-dressed crowd, depending on the context.⁵⁷ When, in the midst of conversing with Van, Bach-Yên speaks of 'ces "paroles de papillons et d'abeilles" '(p. 87), the metaphors refer to sexual relations between men and women. Kieu relates in similar terms her descent into prostitution:

Depuis que le malheur s'est abattu sur moi, le
commerce des abeilles et des papillons m'a plongée
dans l'abjection. (III, II, 3099)

Van seeks to initiate sexual relations with Bach-Yên. In attempting to persuade her, he refers once again to Nguyen Du's *Kieu*:

Ecoute, Bach-Yên, ces plaintes de 'Kieu', quand, loin
de son bien-aimé, elle perdit sa virginité:

Ornement des anges, entre des mains vulgaires, hélas,
je suis tombée!
Je regrette de m'être défendue si longuement contre
la pluie et le vent des désirs de mon bien-aimé.
Que n'avais-je pressenti ma déchéance actuelle?
A mon bien-aimé, j'aurais offert la primeur de ma
grâce de pêcher,
Qui donc a arrêté le vent favorable de nos amours?
Près de moi, il a souffert, loin de moi, il souffrira.

⁵⁷Xuan-Phuc and Xuan-Viet, 'Notes', p.177.

Si un jour, par un heureux hasard, nous nous
retrouvions,
De mon corps souillé, il n'aurait plus rien à attendre!
(pp. 154-155)

The verses refer to Part I, Chapter IX. Once again, Tran Van Tung's version is elaborate and far lengthier than the prose translation. The episode actually occurs before Kieu loses her virginity, as she waits alone in the room she was taken to after her fictive marriage. She laments the state to which she has been reduced and regrets her earlier scruples with her lover Kim. The rape itself takes place further along, in verses 848-851. After listening to these lines, Bach-Yên, however, refuses to identify herself with Kieu. The reference appears morbid and ill-omened to her. She believes that they will both be able to defy convention and their families and eventually marry. She says to Van:

Je n'aurai pas, je l'espère bien, un destin aussi
malheureux que celui de Kieu. Tôt ou tard, nous nous
marierons et, ce jour-là, nous serons aussi libres, aussi
heureux que des couples de 'phénix et d'hirondelles
fabuleux'. (p. 155)

As events were to reveal, however, she was to suffer a more tragic fate than Kieu.

The other woman in *Bach-Yên* who also refuses to identify with the figure of Kieu and yet unwittingly becomes a victim of this tragedy is the other female protagonist: Hông, the match Van's parents had arranged for him. The lovely daughter of a mandarin, she had loved Van upon meeting him, and was not aware that he loved another woman. After this first encounter, she turns for inspiration to her copy of the *Kim-Van-Kieu*:

Religieusement, elle prend le 'Kim-Van-Kieu'
(considéré comme livre d'horoscope), s'agenouille sur
son lit, balbutie une longue prière, l'ouvre en fermant

ses yeux. Elle tombe sur ces vers qu'elle récite à voix basse:

Pourquoi le Dieu du Mariage s'acharne-t-il contre nous?

Nous goûtons à peine les joies de la rencontre que déjà nous buvons l'amertume de la séparation

Par de solennels serments envers vous je suis liée

Même si l'âge change la couleur de mes cheveux, mon cœur ne changera pas de maître!

Les mois et les années d'attente ne me font pas peur

Mais mon cœur se serre à l'idée de vous voir battu par la pluie et le vent pendant votre voyage

Puisque nous nous sommes promis de forger un "cœur unique" pour nos deux corps,

Je vous jure, ô mon bien-aimé, pendant mon existence de cent ans de ne jamais monter avec ma guitare sur d'autres barques d'Amour.

Tant que persistent ces Montagnes et ces Fleuves,

Mon amour vous demeurera intact jusqu'au jour de votre retour. (pp. 61-62)

An unfortunate and unhappy passage to fall upon. The verses, in Part I, Chapter VI, refer to Kim's farewell of Kieu, as he leaves her with great regret to attend to the unexpected death of his uncle. The episode is an early presage of the ills which were to fall on Kieu. Kim bitterly regrets their enforced separation, so soon after their having met, loved and exchanged vows. Hông draws immediate potential parallels between Kieu and Kim's fate and that of herself and Van:

D'un geste désespéré, Hông jette son livre et pousse un long soupir: 'Grand Ciel! se peut-il que tant de nuages s'accumulent à l'horizon de mon avenir? ... Quelle faute ai-je commise, Grand Ciel, pour subir une si triste destinée? Non! Non! la vie de Kieu est trop laide. Je ne pourrai jamais accepter une telle vie!' (p. 62)

The passage, however, was to prove prophetic. Despite Hông's rejection of its presage and her refusal to contemplate Kieu's fate, her relationship with Van was to follow the melancholy pattern of Kim and Kieu's early separation. Upon hearing of Bach-Yen's

suicide, Van immediately abandoned his newly-wed wife and eventually left the country, never to return. Hông's relationship with Van had barely begun before it had ended, and she is also the innocent victim in this set of circumstances. She had simply obeyed her parents as a good daughter should, acquiesced in their choice for her and married in good faith, having found the young scholar attractive. These traditional feminine attributes and dutiful behaviour were to bring her no more happiness or fulfilment than Bach-Yen's attempted rebellion against these same social mores. Bach-Yên however, had at least enjoyed the fleeting experience of loving and being loved before her early death and like the young women in *En s'écartant des ancêtres*, had attempted to forge her own path, this time with tragic consequences. In this novel, it is once again the female protagonists who are identified with the classical figure of Kieu. The extracts from the *Tale of Kieu* serve to draw parallels between Kieu's beauty and fate with the beauty and early doom of both Bach-Yên and Hông.

Bach-Yên is outwardly a more stringent critique of social mores than the earlier *En s'écartant des ancêtres*. Van takes part in a revolutionary group. They discuss female emancipation and the freedom to determine one's own fate. Despite these ideals, Van acquiesces to paternal authority and agrees to undergo a contracted marriage. Bach-Yen's suicide becomes a symbol for the oppression and coercion of the young and the weak by family and society, and by the ancient concepts of filial duty and obedience. The political implications of Bach-Yen's suicide are absorbed by young men and women, a large number of whom follow her funeral *cortège*. Her death is the ultimate message of rebellion and

powerlessness. The scene is reminiscent of similar scenes in China in the 1920s and 1930s when male revolutionaries (including Mao) enthusiastically seized on dramatic cases of female suicide (usually just prior to a forced marriage) to illustrate the destructive effect of patriarchal authority.⁵⁸ *Bach-Yên* ends with a despairing bid for freedom on the part of Van. He leaves his country for France, only to be disillusioned by Fascism and war in Europe.

The author may have rebelled against his Confucian education and upbringing but he is very much a product of the classical literary culture, in which the verse romance often provided a convenient vehicle to display the writer's erudition through the use of numerous literary and historical allusions. This feature in turn harks back to Han poetry, which was notable for rare words and obscure references.⁵⁹ Tran Van Tung's prose is strewn with expressions such as 'le fil de soie rose', 'ces pensées de Vent et de Lune', 'le bouvier et la tisserande célestes', 'le Lac de l'Épée Restituée'. It seems that he expects the reader to be familiar with the great works of Vietnamese literature: the *Lament of a Soldier's Wife*, the *Lament of a Royal Concubine* and the *Kim-Van-Kieu*, as well as the Vietnamese legacy of folk literature and to therefore recognize the metaphors and analogies in *Bach-Yên*. The novel bears the clear imprint of this literary past in its makeup. However, in resorting to classical allegory in order to transmit a

⁵⁸Jayawardena, *Femrism and Nationalism*, pp. 186-187.

⁵⁹Interestingly enough, the Chinese style at the time (second century B.C.) possessed such a rich, inexhaustible vocabulary and such an ornateness of usage that its nearest counterpart in English is to found in the euphuistic exaggerations and conceits of certain early Elizabethan writers in England some sixteen centuries later'. Liu Wu-chi, *An Introduction to Chinese Literature* (Bloomington and London, 1966), p. 53.

message of rebellion, *Bach-Yên* subverts the use of these literary traditions.

A significant thread which links this work with the earlier and stylistically different *En s'écartant des ancêtres* is the use of the *Kim-Van-Kieu* as a book of divination, a horoscope of events to come. The references to the *Tale of Kieu* are generally unfortunate and ill-omened, and occur to point out that the relationships these passages relate to are already presaged by loss and misfortune. There is already tragedy in each burgeoning relationship, for example that between Mai and Hùng in *En s'écartant des ancêtres*, and Hông and Van in *Bach-Yên*. In Trung and Triaire's *La Réponse de l'Occident*, the speedy remonstrance of the mother to her daughter heedlessly quoting a line from the poem attests to the force of superstition relating to the prophetic, fateful and fatalistic elements of the *Kim-Van-Kieu*. Since the main characters in the *Tale of Kieu* all come to grief in one way or another, any reference to Kieu will necessarily entail a negative portent. In *Bach-Yên*, as in *En s'écartant des ancêtres*, the use of the *Kim-Van-Kieu* highlights the different facets of the verse romance which have been transposed onto the modern text: first, a political allegory in the form of the personal drama between Van and Bach-Yên and Van and Hông and the wider drama of the society around them; second, a book of divination, one whose negative portents inevitably bear fruit in the end; third, a tale of morals, in the form of thwarted love and the destructive weight of filial duty; and last, a romance, in the aborted and tragic relationship between Van and Bach-Yên and to a lesser extent between Van and Hông.

The clearest parallel with the ancient tale of Kieu in a modern novel is Mme Ly Thu Ho's *Printemps inachevé* published in Paris in 1962. Written in a very different style from Tran Van Tung's *Bach-Yên*, it does not contain any direct references to or quotations from the *Kim-Van-Kieu*, but there are a number of close parallels which are clearly intentional.

Printemps inachevé is a straightforward narrative. It is set in Vietnam, and covers the 1930s to the 1950s, but the bulk of events take place in 1945. The novel is neatly divided into three parts: the first and the last are third-person narratives and the second consists of the diary of Tran, the main female protagonist. Family, society and the upheavals of war are largely seen through women's eyes, since in addition to Tran's diary, Part One mostly relates the observations of her older sister Tuoi. Both sisters are described as models of loveliness and gentleness but their lives were to follow very different paths. It is the story of Tran which is of particular relevance here.

Tran's diary opens in February 1945 and ends in July 1947. She is a self-sufficient young woman and works as an embroiderer. Her father had died in the late 1930s and Tran earns enough to supplement the household's income. She remarks wryly that her mother 'comme toutes les mères qui ont des filles à marier, s'impatiente' (p. 55). Mme Thai reminds Tran reproachfully that her sister Tuoi married at the age of twenty. Tran on the other hand enjoys her life, her work and her freedom and is fully aware of the constraints under which her sister Tuoi lives. The mother is so determined that she uses a matchmaker, Mme Vi, to find a

suitable man.⁶⁰ 'Pour toi, ma fille, je pense que c'est un très bon parti, un garçon de bonne famille avec une situation bien assise, un âge qui est en harmonie avec le tien' (p. 57). This had been Mme Thai's own fate as a young woman. She met her future husband on the day of their engagement and tells her daughter: 'crois-tu que tes grands-parents m'ont demandé mon opinion pour me marier?' (p. 58). She does not see why her daughter should object to a similar treatment. Tran, however, refuses to comply. She later confides to her diary:

J'ai l'impression d'être une marchandise qu'on cherche à vendre, un objet cher dont on veut se débarrasser à bon prix et entre de bonnes mains. Je sais que c'est injuste de ma part de juger ainsi ma mère qui, j'en suis sûre, ne désire que mon bonheur.
(p. 59)

What ensues is that in the natural course of events, Tran meets a young man at the house of one of her clients, Mme Sang - actually the latter's nephew - and the two young people eventually fall in love. Tran, however, is characteristically concerned about the difference in social standing between them: 'Qui suis-je? Tout au plus une pauvre orpheline, un peu plus aisée que ma voisine peut-être, mais sans plus. Et lui, c'est un intellectuel, un professeur et l'unique héritier de Mme Sang' (p. 79). It is a repetition of the 'beautiful girl and talented scholar' motif. Like Kieu, Tran is all too aware of her own shortcomings while she admires Châu's scholarly attributes. Châu is Tran's superior in every way - socially, professionally and intellectually. She has to look up to him. Both

⁶⁰In this respect, Vietnamese society resembled Chinese society. 'In a culture where male descent was so central to the preservation of the traditional family, it is perhaps ironic that the question of marriage and the selection of a suitable mate was almost entirely handled by women, usually the mothers in the family concerned'. Phyllis Andors, *The Unfinished Liberation of Chinese Women: 1949-1980* (Bloomington, 1983), p. 14.

families agree to the match and the couple are engaged in July 1945. Mme Thai has this slightly sour comment to make, despite her daughter's eminently suitable catch: 'ma deuxième fille, comme la première fille, a choisi elle-même son fiancé, son mari, sans avoir besoin ni de mes conseils, ni d'intermédiaire' (p. 89), and both daughters are cognizant of this: 'Nous sentions, ma sœur et moi, que notre mère était, malgré sa joie, blessée dans son autorité maternelle' (p. 90).

If Mme Thai felt ineffective in the matter of arranging her daughters' marriages, she is determined to do her duty and at least inculcate in Tran the classic virtues of a wife. Her admonitions are: 'La femme doit être soumise, douce, attentive et toujours souriante. Pour elle, le mariage est une source de dévouement, de sacrifices et de principes; les quatre vertus féminines' (p. 99). She makes marriage an attractive prospect: years of unremitting devotion to all except oneself. She does not speak of self-fulfilment for the woman. Despite her own modern views, Tran is to internalize her elders' strictures on women's virtue and honour with punishing results. As she notes in her diary: 'Encore les traditions, les principes; ils me révoltent. Mais le pire, c'est que, tout en me révoltant, malgré moi, je subis leur influence' (p. 138).

Her fiancé Châu decides to join the *maquis* and there ensues a long and painful separation, during which Châu sends occasional lengthy letters informing Tran of the current military and political situation. The last entry in Tran's diary is dated July 1947. She encloses a long letter to Châu. It begins with the traditional appellation 'Mon grand frère chéri' (p. 165). In the letter, Tran

informs him of the death of her mother and of an incident in February when their house was subject to a search by the military in the course of which Tran was brutally raped by a French soldier. While she begins the letter to Châu with the term 'brother', the appellation gradually changes to its literal meaning.

Adieu, grand frère ... je me confie à toi comme à un grand frère, et non comme à un fiancé, un frère dont je connais les sentiments. Je n'ai plus droit à ton amour. J'en suis indigne. Je renonce à toi à jamais. Si je n'ai ni le bonheur, ni la chance de devenir ta femme, si j'ai été condamnée à subir cette ignominie, c'est peut-être parce que j'ai à payer les méfaits que j'ai commis dans une vie antérieure. (p. 167)

She blames herself for having been raped. She feels soiled and tarnished. She renounces Châu and says she is perhaps paying for the misdeeds of a previous life. She is punishing herself for the wrong that was done to her. At heart, she is conforming to all the lessons ingrained in her by her mother, grandmother and the weight of generations before on the importance of a woman's virtue. At this point the diary stops.

Eight years later, the Geneva Accords are signed, and Châu returns. Tran now works as a nurse. He pleads with her, blames himself for having left her without any protection and reiterates that he loves her and wishes them to build a life together. She, however, is implacable and refuses to go back on her self-imposed word. Tran's attitude is strongly reminiscent of Nguyen Du's Kieu.

There are marked parallels between the story of Kieu and that of Tran. Both women are victims of circumstances: one becomes a prostitute, the other is victim of rape. Both were engaged before misfortune overtook them. Each had refused to become the lover of the man she loved. Both, after many years of

separation and misery - ten in the case of Tran and fifteen in the case of Kieu - are finally reunited with their love. Both are offered marriage by the men and both refuse this chance of happiness because they feel soiled and unworthy of love. Kieu finds a measure of serenity and happiness but Tran on the other hand, having rejected Châu despite the pleas of her sister Tuoi, literally works herself to death and dies a year afterwards. An independent woman, with a vocation and a profession of her own, she is emotionally crushed by this last, symbolic loss of Châu. Her sister and friend discuss the tragedy of her life after her death:

- Oui, Tuoi, le vie de Tran était comme une rose dont la tige s'est rompue au moment de son éclosion, comme une aube à peine dorée, souillée par le mauvais temps, comme un printemps inachevé. (p. 205)

Ly Thu Ho's novel is a dark rewriting of the story of Kieu. In highlighting such clear parallels between her story and that of the most famous of classical heroines, and then twisting the ending, Ly Thu Ho questions and criticizes the weight of virtue and honour on the lives of women. The fate of Tran has none of the reassuring merit of virtue rewarded and conscience soothed, which characterizes the fate of Nguyen Du's Kieu. Ly Thu Ho retains an ironical distance between her protagonist and the legendary figure of Kieu. Rather than admiring Tran as the reader presumably admires the classical heroine, her insistence on abiding by socially ingrained rules strikes one as needlessly wasteful and pathetic, and raises questions about the laudability of Kieu's judgement of her own person as unworthy of the man she loves. The *Tale of Kieu* resonates in the work of this modern writer, but the reality

which Ly Thu Ho chose to illustrate was the painful and unnecessary destruction of a woman's life.

The last work I will examine is an autobiographical *récit*: Kim Lefèvre's *Retour à la saison des pluies*, published in Paris in 1990. This is an account Lefèvre wrote after making the painful and difficult decision to return to Vietnam after an absence of thirty years. She had published an earlier book *Métisse blanche*, in 1989, which detailed her experiences as a Eurasian child and woman in Vietnam, growing up in the 1940s and 1950s. One of the clearest and most moving images from this earlier *récit* is that of her mother, whom she associates with the country of her birth:

Je ne charge pas le Viêt-nam. C'est un pays cher à mon cœur. Je l'ai aimé d'un amour qu'il ne m'a jamais rendu. Les souvenirs de mon enfance sont imprégnés de son climat, de ses paysages, de ses odeurs, de la musique de sa langue. Je me surprends parfois à fredonner des airs anciens que je croyais ensevelis dans l'oubli. Le Viêt-nam, c'est la douceur du visage de ma mère.⁶¹

The writing of *Métisse blanche* was a cathartic experience. As an illegitimate child, female and of mixed blood, Kim was never fully accepted by Vietnamese society. Her crime was also that her father was French, representative of the hated *colons*. She never met her father. He had been a young officer and had lived for a year with her mother before abandoning her while she was pregnant. He simply disappeared without any explanation. Kim Lefèvre slowly pieces together the life of her mother in *Retour à la saison des pluies*. In this later book, it is the figure of her mother which is identified with that of Kieu.

⁶¹Kim Lefèvre, *Métisse blanche* (Paris, 1989), p. 340.

Kim Lefèvre's mother forms the focus of this later *récit*. Her search for herself and the country of her birth are inextricably bound to her search for her mother's identity, towards uncovering the woman her mother was and is. She describes her mother in the following terms:

Sur la couverture de mon premier livre, il y a son portrait ... Elle était âgée alors d'une quarantaine d'années, elle avait un ovale parfait, une beauté souveraine et cependant innocente, une beauté qui semblait ignorer sa propre perfection. On disait en la contemplant: 'Elle est plus belle que l'impératrice Lan Phuong, femme de l'empereur Bao Dai dont on voit le portrait sur les timbres-poste'. J'ai étudié à la loupe le timbre-poste dont il est question, je peux témoigner du bien-fondé de ce jugement. (p. 68)

Like the classical and fabled figure of Kieu, Lefèvre's mother was gifted with beauty, an asset which was of little use to her and, if anything, brought her great misfortune.

Te voici, ma mère, telle que je t'ai gardée dans ma mémoire, telle que tu demeureras toujours dans mes pensées. ... Beauté inutile que nul poète n'a chantée, que nul artiste n'a peinte. Beauté que tu as toujours portée comme le sceau du malheur.
Ma mère humiliée, ma mère douloureuse. Ma mère aux pleurs nocturnes, ma mère des nuits de solitude. Ma mère aux ongles cassés, au dos courbé, ma mère au visage d'argile séché. (pp. 68-69)

Her mother stands as a fitting symbol of the suffering and vulnerability of a woman's existence. As if to make up for long years of silence, her mother sends her letter after letter detailing her own childhood, life and loves: 'Elle écrit tous les jours sans répit, comme si elle voulait à tout prix rattraper le temps perdu' (p. 89). This is the story which Lefèvre gathers. She never refers to her mother by name. The mother is simply 'ma mère'.

She had come from a wealthy northern family. Her father was enlightened enough to send her to school. Her mother was his

first wife and was respected by the concubines. She would have carried on with further education except that her father called her home to assist him with keeping the company ledgers. Her life began to go awry upon the sudden death of her mother. The second wife took over and the father sent his daughter off to some relatives in Son Tay, a distant garrison town. There, a number of young French officers came regularly to play cards and to converse with the daughter of the house, a free and emancipated young woman. This was where Lefèvre's mother met her father: 'Elle n'était pas une fille de joie. Elle vivait son premier amour'.⁶² She was twenty years old. Alone and pregnant, she returned to her father, who promptly chased her off. She found refuge with another French officer whom she married and to whom she later bore a son. It was a short-lived idyll however. He was recalled to France and wanted to take her and their son back with him, but not her illegitimate daughter. She chose to stay in Vietnam with Kim, and let her baby son go with his father, one of the most painful decisions of her life.

It is at this point that Kim Lefèvre's mother began to identify herself with the figure of Kieu. She sought consolation, and a means of explaining her own life, in the *Kim-Van-Kieu*. She is alone, among the woman protagonists, in voluntarily seeking to identify herself with the figure of Kieu. In this way she resembles the male narrator-author of *Les Chemins de la révolte*, who makes a brief and direct allusion to the *Kim-Van-Kieu* and uses the figure of Kieu as a symbol of individual and universal suffering. The

⁶²Kim Lefèvre, *Retour à la saison des pluies* (Paris, 1990), p. 80. Subsequent references will be given in the main text.

difference is that she is a woman. The female characters in the novels generally have the identification with Kieu imposed upon them. In *En s'écartant des ancêtres* and *Bach-Yên*, Mai, Hông and Bach-Yên resent any direct reference to Kieu. They do so because Kieu is generally a portent of misfortune to come. The heroine of *Printemps inachevé* does not identify herself with Kieu, but her own story mirrors that of the classical heroine very closely. The figure of the mother in Lefèvre's *Retour à la saison des pluies* is the sole example of a female protagonist consciously seeking understanding and inspiration in the *Tale of Kieu*, perhaps because she had already undergone great tragedy and loss in her life. Unlike the female protagonists of the earlier novels, she did not seek understanding of her future, but understanding of her past. Hers is a conscious self-identification. She sought an explanation for the blows which buffeted her life and perhaps guidance for the fortitude with which to endure:

C'est à ce moment que se produisit chez elle la métamorphose intérieure qui transforma en femme brisée la jeune fille active qu'elle avait été. Et comme pour donner un sens à son infortune, elle commença à identifier son destin à celui de la belle et malheureuse Kiêu - personnage central du célèbre poème de Nguyễn Du. Elle en savait des centaines de vers qu'elle récitait de mémoire et qui lui tenaient lieu de philosophie et de morale. Elle en avait un adapté à chaque circonstance, soit pour justifier les épreuves qu'elle devait endurer, soit pour critiquer mes défauts ou louer mes efforts. Mon enfance et ma jeunesse entières furent nourries, je dirais même bercées, de la mélodie pathétique du récit des infortunes de la belle Kiêu. (p. 85)

She was left alone once again, with an illegitimate child and no educational qualifications or diploma. She moved to the South and there married a Chinese, seven years her senior, a man of cold and

severe temperament. This is a union which Kim Lefèvre witnessed and grew up under: a loveless and unhappy marriage, which produced three daughters and ended when he died thirty years later.

Lefèvre writes: 'Le mélodrame, c'est le produit des sociétés traditionnelles où chacun a sa place préétablie; celui qui s'en écarte est inévitablement projeté dans la déchéance' (pp. 88-89). This was her mother's fate. She had glimpsed a different life, had loved and expressed herself in a way which was not acceptable in her milieu and suffered as a result. 'Tu n'aurais pas dû goûter à l'instruction, ni lire ces livres qui parlent de liberté et de bonheur' (p. 89). Both concepts were to prove fleeting and irredeemable. This one brief love affair in her youth led to her ostracization from family and society and to moving far South to seek legal protection for herself and her illegitimate daughter with a man whom she did not love. She was twenty-two years old. In contemplating her mother's life, a life which reads like fiction and yet encompasses so much personal tragedy, Lefèvre finally understood 'l'engouement que toi comme le peuple vietnamien portes bien à ce merveilleux poète Nguyễn Du, qui, tout en racontant la vie saccagée de la belle Kiêu, donna ses titres de noblesse aux malheurs des gens ordinaires' (p. 89).

The *Kim-Van-Kieu* is quoted again later on in the *récit*. This is Lefèvre's striking and shocking account of the fate of her younger sister Oanh. Born in the chaos of war, Oanh was an extraordinarily beautiful child. This is the way their mother reacted to this:

'Elle est trop parfaite', murmurait-elle pour elle-même. Et elle accompagnait sa réflexion de quelques vers du célèbre poème *Kiêu*:

Elle évoquait
Par son regard l'eau des lacs en automne
Par ses sourcils la verdure des bois au printemps
Jalouses, les fleurs pâlissaient de n'avoir son éclat
Le saule se désolait de ne posséder sa grâce
Belle elle était, comme dit la légende
A renverser citadelles et cités...

Ma mère croyait qu'à l'instar de *Kiêu*, la beauté de sa fille ne pouvait lui apporter qu'une vie de malheurs et de souffrances. (p. 102)

The excerpt is the famous description of Kieu's loveliness in Part I, Chapter I of the *Kim-Van-Kieu*. The verse translation is presumably Kim Lefèvre's and it is a simpler and more beautiful rendition than Tran Van Tung's. The corresponding passage from Tran Van Tung is:

Ses regards ondulent comme les vagues en automne,
ses sourcils évoquent le pittoresque des forêts au printemps;
Les fleurs sont jalouses de se voir moins éclatantes qu'elle, les saules s'attristent de n'avoir pas sa fraîcheur idéale,
Ses sourires magiques bouleversent les Royaumes et renversent les Citadelles,
Sa beauté est unique, son talent incomparable! (pp. 15-16)

Lefèvre's has a cadence and simplicity to it which is more readable and more easily recited for that matter, than Tran Van Tung's heavier and more ornate rendition. It also has a poetic rhythm which Xuan-Phuc and Xuan-Viet's prose translation lacks. The following is their equivalent passage from the *Kim-Van-Kieu*:

Visage harmonieux, sourcils au noble dessin. Dans son sourire de fleur, dans sa voix de jade régnait la bienséance. Les nuages s'avouaient vaincus par sa chevelure, la neige le cédait à son teint. (I, I, 21-23)

Kim's mother need not have worried about the sorrows this beauty would cause her daughter. At the age of six Oanh underwent a horrendous change in looks:

Le nez fin, délicat, se calcifia en une arête disgracieuse, barrant sa figure. Ses yeux se creusèrent. Et au fond de ces cavités, un regard perdu. (pp. 102-103)

Oanh has already been punished for her early beauty. It seems that the child herself felt a sudden change: 'Ses yeux semblaient dire inlassablement: "Pourquoi?" A cela il n'y avait pas de réponse' (p. 103). While Kim, at that time sixteen years old, railed against the injustice of fate, her mother, on the other hand, breathed a sigh of relief:

'Enfin elle est délivrée du poids de sa beauté! Maintenant elle est comme tout le monde, elle aura une vie normale.'
Car ma mère savait par expérience que la beauté est un cadeau empoisonné. (pp. 103-104)

It is Kim Lefèvre's mother who whispers to her daughter the last few lines of poetry in *Retour à la saison des pluies*. As Kim leaves to begin her journey back to France, her mother says to her:

'Que notre joie est brève, ma fille!
A peine avons-nous levé la coupe des retrouvailles
Que déjà nous guette le douloureux moment des adieux' (pp. 221-222).

These verses echo Kim's farewell words to Kieu: to have found someone only to lose them so soon. There is a bittersweet ending to *Retour à la saison des pluies*. Lefèvre will probably never see her mother again. However she writes: 'Ne te tourmente pas, ma mère. Maintenant que nous nous sommes retrouvées, tu ne me perdras jamais plus' (p. 222).

The mother sought and found consolation in *The Tale of Kieu*. Perhaps the poem allowed her to feel that she was not alone in having had such a harsh destiny. That Kim Lefèvre's mother is never given a name underlines her condition as a victim. It is only as a mother that she has validity and substance. It is as a mother that her daughter sees her and has known her. The young girl who had braved convention and lived openly with her young French lover is a side of her mother's identity which her daughter can only guess at. And lastly, it is the mother who finally gives voice to her daughter by writing to her letter after letter, allowing Kim Lefèvre to rediscover this woman: her mother.

The *Tale of Kieu* in *Retour à la saison des pluies* is used both as an allegory of human suffering and a tale of morals. Within this allegory lay some consolation for the vicissitudes in the life of 'the mother' and an explanation also of her fear of beauty. The fragility of the feminine condition is another parallel between Kieu and the figure of the mother. Both women were beautiful and fragile and both endured great suffering. Lefèvre's mother felt that, like the classical figure of Kieu, she was buffeted to and fro by fate. Like Kieu, she was also heavily dependent on relationships with men. She could not stand on her own. She did not have the means or the qualifications with which to be independent, especially not with a child to support. Bereft of the protection of a lover and rejected by her father, she had to find refuge with a male protector. The potential happiness of her first marriage and the birth of a son were destroyed by the withdrawal of the French. She had to seek legal protection for herself and her illegitimate daughter in a second and this time, cold and loveless marriage.

Her life does bear many similarities with the life of Kieu. She must have felt equally at the mercy of events. Her daughter, in this *récit*, recounted her mother's life and her mother's identification with Kieu. *Retour à la saison des pluies* enmeshes the *Tale of Kieu*, the mother's self-identification with Kieu and the daughter's account of the mother's life, which echoed in many ways the vagaries of Kieu's life.

In *En s'écartant des ancêtres*, *Bach-Yên*, *Printemps inachevé*, and *Retour à la saison des pluies*, it is the female characters who are identified with the figure of Kieu. The most quoted passages are those which deal with Kieu's beauty, with the enforced separation of Kim and Kieu, and Kieu's loss of chastity. The interwoven themes of woman's vulnerability, loss of virtue and resulting suffering appear in all four contexts. The dilemmas confronting women remain essentially unchanged despite the shift in time and history.

The only male protagonist who identifies with Kieu is Nguyen, in Nguyen Tien Lang's *Les Chemins de la révolte*. The only woman to consciously identify with Kieu is the figure of the mother in *Retour à la saison des pluies*. Although Kieu has been commented on, criticized and lauded by male scholars, and attention is drawn to the universality of the poem, writers on the other hand appear to be remarkably reluctant to refer to her or to draw any parallels and analogies with the themes in this famous tale. Perhaps they are still uncomfortable after all with a female hero. It is interesting to conjecture also as to why writers like Pham Duy Khiem, Pham Van Ky, Nguyen Huu Chau and Cung Giu Nguyen could refer to and make use of European literary sources

while remaining almost silent on the literary heritage of the Far East.

The classical *Tale of Kieu*, which Trinh-Thuc-Oanh and Marguerite Triaire, Tran Van Tung, Ly Thu Ho and Kim Lefèvre made use of in their modern novels, is a many-faceted poem upon which a multitude of meanings can be (and has been) imposed. It is this multiplicity of interpretations to which these later writers allude and of which they avail themselves. The major threads which surface most strongly however are the twin facets of the heroine's dilemma: her condition as a woman and as a victim of circumstances. Kieu is not only an individual whose life is particularly subject to the vagaries and blows of fate, she is also a woman, with the added vulnerabilities which her sex imposed upon her. These five writers have made a point of identifying and drawing out both these concepts.

In all three novels and one *récit*, the *Kim-Van-Kieu* resonates as a composite of the following elements: romance, allegory and fate. Romance appears in all four books: in the abortive relationships between Mai and Hùng, between Gaby and her husband and the colourless understanding between Dân and hers in Trinh-Thuc-Oanh and Marguerite Triaire's *En s'écartant des ancêtres*; between Van and Bach-Yên and between Van and Hông in Tran Van Tung's *Bach-Yên*; between Tran and Châu in Ly Thu Ho's *Printemps inachevé*; and lastly in the tragic relationships between the mother and her lover and later her first and second husbands in Kim Lefèvre's *Retour à la saison des pluies*. All these relationships mirror, in their failure, the difficulties and failures in Kieu's love relationships, but the result in the modern novels is

inevitably starker and the reality portrayed encompasses a greater tragedy. None of the novels end with a neat if somewhat ambiguous 'happy ever after' model, in the manner of the serene three-way relationship between Kieu, Kim and Van.

Allegory, in the form of individual questing and endurance, also appears in all four books: in Mai's, Gaby's and Dân's attempts to forge their own paths and to deal with reverses in *En s'écartant des ancêtres*; in Bach-Yên's and Van's attempts to defy paternal authority in *Bach-Yên*; in Tran's attempt to retain her independence and to resist traditional strictures in *Printemps inachevé*; and in the vicissitudes in the life of the mother in *Retour à la saison des pluies*. The difficulties and setbacks in the lives of these individual characters (mostly women) find their echo in Kieu's manifold reverses. Unlike Kieu however, two women, namely Bach-Yên in *Bach-Yên* and Tran in *Printemps inachevé*, do not survive these reverses.

Fate, in the form of dire prophecy, also appears in all four books: in the lines predicting the difficulties in Mai's life and the ephemerality of her relationship with Hùng in *En s'écartant des ancêtres*; in the lines referring to academic qualifications, which indicate a slowly changing order of society as more and more women become literate; in the lines highlighting the doomed relationship between Van and Bach-Yên and later on, the predicted separation between Van and Hông in *Bach-Yên*; in the inevitable and tragic consequences of a woman raped while separated from her fiancé and protector in *Printemps inachevé*; and the identification with doomed and fateful beauty which characterized the mother in *Retour à la saison des pluies*.

The *Tale of Kieu* emerges as short and pertinent extracts from the poem in Trinh-Thuc-Oanh's and Triaire's *En s'écartant des ancêtres* and Kim Lefèvre's *Retour à la saison des pluies*, as lengthy extracts in Tran Van Tung's *Bach-Yên* and as plot and characterization in Ly Thu Ho's *Printemps inachevé*. In *En s'écartant des ancêtres*, *Bach-Yên*, and *Printemps inachevé*, the identification with Kieu is externally imposed on the female characters. The protagonists are inevitably distressed by any allusion to or direct comparison with the figure of the classical heroine, and their misgivings are consequently proven right. Identification with this famous female heroine leads to loss, despair, resignation and sometimes death, which raises questions about the significance and symbolism of Kieu.

Kieu, as a female model, reinforces the victimizing and powerless aspects of female existence. These modern novels expose the corrosion and destruction of women's existence, the gradual dampening of self-affirmation and self-fulfilment. Whether they attempt to rebel or try desperately to conform, their lives are blighted and tarnished. However close the parallels between these women's lives and the life of the *Kim-Van-Kieu's* heroine, none achieve her measure of contentment and serenity. Of all the female protagonists, only the mother in Lefèvre's *Retour à la saison des pluies* makes a conscious self-identification with the fabled figure of Kieu. This self-identification goes further than that of the male creator of Kieu, the poet Nguyen Du, or of Nguyen, the male author-narrator of *Les Chemins de la révolte*. For while the men identify with Kieu as an individual, the mother in *Retour à la saison des pluies*, identifies with her as a woman. The reality, as

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her own life shows, is far more sombre than the situation depicted in the *Tale of Kieu*.

CHAPTER TWO

WOMEN IN THE NOVELS OF LY THU HO

The Nature of Subversion

*Here yes and no are indistinguishable
Like East and West at the Poles
Here truth is a puppet
That doubles in two roles.*

– Cheng Min

Printemps inachevé, which has such close parallels with the *Tale of Kieu*, is the first novel which Mme Ly Thu Ho published. It was followed by *Au milieu du carrefour* in 1969, and *Le Mirage de la paix* in 1986. *Le Mirage de la paix* won the Prix littéraire de l'Asie from the *Association des écrivains de langue française* in 1987. It is the last work in this loose trilogy. The three novels together portray the politics and history of Vietnam from the 1940s to 1975 through the eyes of individuals and families. Characters occasionally reappear in succeeding novels.

Ly Thu Ho is the only Vietnamese woman writer whose published Francophone works span two decades. She is alone among a host of Vietnamese male Francophone writers. Of the two other women writers, the first, Trinh Thuc Oanh, collaborated

with a Frenchwoman, Marguerite Triaire, on the novels *En s'écartant des ancêtres* and *La Réponse de l'Occident*, published in Hanoi in 1939 and 1941; and the second, Kim Lefèvre, of Eurasian background, had two autobiographical *récits*, *Métisse blanche* and *Retour à la saison des pluies*, published in Paris in 1989 and 1990. Ly Thu Ho belonged to the pre-war generation of the 1920s and 1930s. She settled in France in 1956. Her writing career took place after marriage and the raising of six children. She died in 1988. She was the only Vietnamese woman of her generation to write and publish Francophone novels in Paris in the 1960s through to the 1980s. It is surprising therefore, that Yeager fails to refer to her works in his chapter on *Women as Character and Symbol*.¹

Ly Thu Ho voiced her views on the controversial and tangled state of Vietnamese politics through her works. However, the women in *Printemps inachevé*, *Au milieu du carrefour* and in particular in *Le Mirage de la paix*, rarely have a political voice. Their concerns revolve around personal relationships. Their lives and views are often stiflingly bound by tradition. They are presented as largely passive victims of circumstances. It is puzzling therefore to note the disparity between Ly Thu Ho's actions and those of the female characters of her novels.² I wish to

¹He discusses the general social and political aspects of her two earlier novels in his chapter on *Socio-Political Reality and the Weight of Destiny*, but does not analyse the characterization of women in her novels.

²In this respect, Ly Thu Ho reflects the situation of a number of European and American women writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. 'Many women who wrote, themselves lived lives that were extraordinary, yet few created characters who, like themselves, were able successfully to escape or challenge the conventions of society'. Marilyn French, 'Afterword' to Edith Wharton, *The Mother's Recompense* (1925, London, 1986), p. 350.

examine why it is that as a woman with a public voice, she denied a similar voice to her female characters.

There are three questions I wish to explore in this chapter. How are women represented in Ly Thu Ho's novels? How does their condition reflect social reality? Lastly, is there a subversive intent in her novels?

It is also noticeable that while male writers had their name or pseudonym on the cover of a published novel, she had the prefix 'Mme' in front of hers for her two earlier novels. A number of reasons could account for this. One was to distinguish her work from that of male writers, since a Western public would not be able to identify her as a woman writer simply by her name. Another was to give a greater measure of respectability to her name by affixing a title to it. It is possible that she was apologizing for being unique and in some measure radical for her generation in publicly expressing her views. This could explain why her female characters fall into easily discernible and acceptable stereotypes. She may have wanted not to ruffle the sensibilities of the (male) literary establishment. The *Préfaces* of both her later novels were written by respectable figures of this establishment: Dr Nguyen Tran Huan and Dr Thai Van Kiem.

As a South Vietnamese woman from a wealthy middle class background, Ly Thu Ho had the means with which to settle overseas in the 1950s. She made a conscious decision to be an expatriate but made frequent trips back to Vietnam. The main thrust of her novels was to depict the human cost of the civil war, the cost to those who, unlike her, had no choice but to stay in their country and struggle on with their lives. If men were

coerced and constrained in such a situation, women, because of the patriarchal nature of society, were doubly so. It seems that her intent was to describe the fate of the majority rather than that of the few who stood apart.

In an article entitled 'Women writers of South Vietnam (1954-1975)' published in *The Vietnam Forum*, Cong-Huyen Ton-Nu Nha-Trang remarks:

Feminine writing, in its most narrow sense as literature produced by women, should be more precisely taken to refer to the attitudes of the author, as a woman, who approaches a subject matter with a view to portraying its impact on women. Feminist writing, on the other hand, displays a conscious attempt to expose and attack the unreasonableness of a socio-cultural system which hinders women's search for personal happiness and fulfilment. While the first type of writing subtly informs of the reality of woman, the second type suggests or demands changes that could render that reality less oppressive and more equitable.³

She writes that much of women's creative writing in South Vietnam from 1930 to 1945 addressed 'the woman question' but passed unnoticed, due to a failure in experimenting with new stylistic devices.⁴ Women began to gain recognition after 1945 and prose fiction by women writers asserted its presence from 1954. Writers such as Nguyen Thi Vinh and Linh Bao published novels as well as collections of short stories. These two writers portrayed social tensions in a different manner. While:

Nguyen Thi Vinh's works of fiction reinforce the faith that unquestioning tolerance and self-sacrifice on the part of women help restore the normalcy of life, Linh Bao's works hint at a need to reassess the long-term

³Cong-Huyen Ton-Nu Nha-Trang, 'Women writers of South Vietnam (1954-1975)', *The Vietnam Forum*, 9 (1987), 149-221 (p. 177).

⁴Cong-Huyen, 'Women writers', p. 155.

validity of such a resignation which serves to perpetuate women's failure to achieve real happiness.⁵

The 1960s saw a flowering of women's literature. Nguyen Thi Hoang, Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu, Nha Ca, Trung Duong and Tuy Hong 'plunged headlong into both feminine and feminist writings, areas of literary expression that Nguyen Thi Vinh and Linh Bao had only tentatively explored'.⁶ Novels by these writers examined the social consequences of the war, and in particular the plight of women.

Ly Thu Ho, publishing novels written in French in France, was a generation older than the Vietnamese women publishing in South Vietnam in the 1960s. This generation gap could in itself account for the greater reserve in her books. While her portrayal of women may appear suffocatingly conventional at times, this would be to underestimate the impact of the society and values in which she grew up and with which she had to struggle in order to write and publish her novels.⁷ She must have been aware that books by women were banned in Annam in the late 1920s:

The political situation of 1929 and 1930, a period of nationalist agitation and Communist activities, made the French very wary of any type of criticism. Women's groups came under the suspicion as the authorities were alert to their possible spread of subversive ideas. In Annam, about twenty books on women were banned and five books published by the Go Cong women's press were banned in 1929, its woman editor Phan Thi Bach Van was fined, and the publishing house

⁵Cong-Huyen, 'Women writers', p. 168.

⁶Cong-Huyen, 'Women writers', p. 177.

⁷Ly Thu Ho's situation reflects the experience of other women writers: 'In addition to the struggle to write undertaken by any writer, [women] also had to fight a much deeper and usually unacknowledged battle with the predominantly masculine tradition, first to find a permitted place, and second to find a voice that could make itself heard'. Rosalind Miles, 'The Triumph of Form' in *Living by the Pen: Early British Women Writers*, edited by Dale Spender (New York and London, 1992), 227-236 (p. 227).

closed down for 'disrupting peace and security in the region by means of literature and ideas'.⁸

The depiction of constrained lives is in itself an illustration of the oppressiveness of a social system. In this sense her writings can be considered subversive, since while describing traditional female attributes and interests, she succeeds in presenting a picture of stultified talents and deadened potential. The overall impression is one of waste.

There are therefore three main issues to be considered. The first is the apparent disparity between the experience and expression of Ly Thu Ho, novelist, wife and mother on the one hand, and that of the female characters in her novels on the other, whose vocations and interests are subsumed to the duties of wife and mother. The second is the disparity, once again, between the political expression in her novels and the corresponding lack of political voice of her female characters. Politics in the novels is the domain of men. The third is whether this literature can be considered subversive. Is Ly Thu Ho making a strong, if indirect, statement on the condition of women through the surface conventionalities of ordinary women? Do her novels straddle the fine line between feminine and feminist literature, to use Công-Huyền Tôn-Nu Nha-Trang's definitions? Since the subversive intent of the novels is at issue here, I will examine in detail the plot and narratives.

Ly Thu Ho's first novel, *Printemps inachevé*, stretches over a period of twenty years from the 1930s to the 1950s. The two female protagonists are Tran and her sister Tuoi. The main events

⁸Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London and New Jersey, 1986), pp. 204-205.

in the novel take place in 1945. The parallels between the story of Tran in *Printemps inachevé* and that of Kieu, heroine of the Vietnamese classical poem the *Kim-Van-Kieu*, have been discussed in Chapter One. Here, I will examine the mother-daughter relationship and the generation gap between women in this novel and the two later ones. The four categories of women which reappear in slightly altered forms in the novels are the virtuous daughter or wife, the mother-figure prototype (whether mother, grandmother or *nourrice*), the prostitute, and the servant.

Tuoi and Tran conform to the first feminine stereotype. They are models of loveliness and gentleness: '[elles] avaient hérité de leur mère un visage ovale, un teint clair, une profonde douceur du regard'.⁹ The older generation, the grandmother, the mothers, Mme Thai (mother of Tuoi and Tran), Mme Hai, and Vu Gia, the *nourrice* of the Thais, conform to the second. As for the third, it is represented by Tran's friend Nam, daughter of Mme Hai.

Tuoi is aware from a young age of the delimited nature of her parents' marriage. Her father was 'le chef incontesté de la famille ... Attitude étonnante, sa mère ne se plaignait jamais de ce pouvoir absolu. Même dans la rue, elle marchait derrière M. Thai' (p. 19). Tuoi 'souffrait de voir sa mère jouer un rôle si effacé auprès de son mari' (p. 19). She makes the mistake of confiding in Vu Gia and is reprimanded by the older woman. The *nourrice* holds forth on the principles governing woman's position in society: 'Jeune fille, tu dois te soumettre à l'autorité paternelle, mariée, tu subiras celle

⁹Ly Thu Ho, *Printemps inachevé* (Paris, 1962), p. 11. Subsequent references will be given in the main text.

de ton mari, et veuve tu dépendras de ton fils aîné'¹⁰ and finishes with the rejoinder: 'surtout, n'oublie pas que tu ne seras jamais l'égale de l'homme' (pp. 19-20).

In a society based on Confucian principles, women played a subordinate role to men, and girls were groomed for marriage from infancy. As Tuoi's grandmother informs her, her ears are pierced in readiness for the traditional engagement gift from the bridegroom. 'Si on perce les lobes de vos oreilles, vous les filles, dès votre tendre enfance, c'est pour cet usage' (p. 20). The grandmother refers steadily to 'vous les filles' instead of 'nous les femmes', as if she wishes to exclude herself from this tradition. It is as if in advising and admonishing her granddaughter she also wants to distance herself from her part in society's training of women. Yet she has not only undergone this training herself but is also attempting to perpetuate it in her female descendants. The grandmother later reiterates: 'les jeunes filles sont faites pour garder la maison ... pour servir leur mari et lui donner de nombreux enfants qui perpétueront la race' (p. 35). In Confucian society, as in the West:

Women are said to 'marry into' families, and families are said to 'die out' if an all-female generation occurs. The word family, which comes from the Latin *famulus*, meaning servant or slave, is itself a reminder that wives and children, along with servants, were historically part of a man's property.¹¹

As the Vietnamese saying went: 'One boy and you can inscribe a descendant; ten girls and you can write nil'.¹² Tuoi is a constant

¹⁰These are the 'Three Obediences' which a woman was subject to in Confucian society. Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism*, pp. 170-71.

¹¹Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *Words and Women: New Language in New Times* (London, 1977) quoted in Jane Mills, *Womanwords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Patriarchal Society* (London, 1991), p. 146.

¹²David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley, 1981), p. 193.

witness to her mother's dependence on husband and mother-in-law. When her daughter fell ill, her mother had to request permission from her husband to call for a doctor since 'elle avait peur de contrarier sa belle-mère' (p. 31). Mme Thai is the epitome of the traditional wife: housebound, submissive and reliant on higher authority to justify her actions. All three mother-figures: the mother, grandmother and Vu Gia, the *nourrice*, exemplify and seek to transmit the roles and duties of women to the young girl.

Tuoi is privileged in gaining access to an education. Her ambition is to teach, an advanced concept in the 1930s since it meant a career outside the home. (The concept 'housebound' being of course restricted to the *bourgeoisie*, since peasant women and farmers have toiled in rice-fields for generations.) Yet even at school and college, Tuoi cannot quite escape from the restrictions imposed on her sex. Her grandmother forces her to wear a corset - not, as in the West, to emphasize an artificially small waist and throw into relief the bust and hips - but to flatten the young girl's breasts. Society and fashion in Vietnam decreed so: 'à cette époque, une poitrine épanouie attirait la désapprobation de tous' (p. 36). The corset 'était destiné à comprimer la poitrine, jusqu'à l'aplatir complètement, aussi causait-il une oppression terrible' (p. 36). The effect was to desexualize young women by inducing an artificial shapelessness or, conversely, it could have the reverse effect of emphasizing a hidden sexuality since under the assumed flatness were female curves. The message was contradictory. Since women were judged by their appearance, they had to conform to what was considered acceptable. Despite the two older women's endorsement of this

system, Tuoi loves both her 'grandmothers', her mother's mother and Vu Gia, the *nourrice*. Along with passing on tradition, these women also dispensed warmth and nurturing, a familiar theme and one which is repeated in the figure of another *nourrice*, in the last novel of the trilogy *Le Mirage de la paix*. They emphasize the difficulty women face in divorcing themselves from tradition, especially if it is the mother-figure who is both the sufferer and the perpetuator of this mode of life.¹³

Her sister Tran's diary forms Part Two of the book. It opens in February 1945 and ends in July 1947. The diary records a long discussion across the generation gap between Tran, her mother Mme Thai and Mme Hai, mother of her friend Nam. The two older women discuss the condition of women. 'Pour nous autres femmes, notre vie, notre bonheur, dépendent pour une grande part de l'homme que nous épousons' (p. 74). Mme Hai confides that twenty-three years of marriage have meant twenty-three years of misery. Her husband had mistresses from the beginning and when the young wife complained to her own mother and mother-in-law about this, both of these women retorted: 'd'après la tradition ancestrale, une théière peut avoir plusieurs tasses mais que l'on ne voit jamais personne se procurer plusieurs théières et une seule tasse' (p. 74) The metaphor is apt. The teapot, large and bulky, occupies centre stage on the tray while small, delicate and

¹³Susie Orbach has examined the ambivalence of the mother-daughter relationship. She is referring to Western society, but there are points of similarity between the mother-daughter relationship in both Eastern and Western societies: 'The mother-daughter relationship is invariably an ambivalent one, for the mother who herself lives a circumscribed life in patriarchy, has the unenviable task of directing her daughter to take up the very same position that she has occupied. Explicitly as well as unconsciously she psychologically prepares her daughter to accept the strictures that await her in womanhood. She needs to do this so that her daughter is not cast as a misfit'. Susie Orbach, *Hunger Strike: the anorectic's struggle as a metaphor for our age*, revised edition (London, 1993), p. 23.

peripheral teacups surround it: a group of fragile, dependent, delicate vessels waiting to be filled (by a man's seed). Traditional society decreed that a man was entitled to several concubines and the image of teacups fawning around the teapot is of physical, symbolic relevance. Mme Thai goes on:

L'infidélité d'un homme peut se comparer aux gouttes d'eau sur une feuille de nénuphar, elles tombent et glissent. Mais la même faute commise par la femme fait penser à une étoffe souillée de tanin. (p. 75)

Again the imagery is vivid and powerful. The contrast is striking between the lightness of a man's offense, which leaves no traces, and the severity of a woman's, which leaves an indelible stain, a brand of shame and dishonour, something sullied and corrupted. The double standard of sexuality appears in both East and West. Rousseau wrote in *Emile*:

Sans doute il n'est permis à personne de violer sa foi, et tout mari infidèle qui prive sa femme du seul prix des austères devoirs de son sexe est un homme injuste et barbare; mais la femme infidèle fait plus, elle dissout la famille et brise tous les liens de la nature; en donnant à l'homme des enfants qui ne sont pas à lui, elle trahit les uns et les autres, elle joint la perfidie à l'infidélité. J'ai peine à voir quel désordre et quel crime ne tient pas à celui-là.¹⁴

The following extract from a poem in the *Classic of Poetry* (edited by Confucius¹⁵) expresses similar sentiments:

When a man dallies,
He will still be excused;
But when a woman dallies,
No pardon will she have.¹⁶

For a man to endorse this standard of morality is not surprising, since he is the principal beneficiary, but that women are prepared

¹⁴Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile ou De l'Education* 1762 (Paris, 1951), p. 450.

¹⁵Lin Yutang, *The Wisdom of China and India* (New York, 1942), p. 867.

¹⁶Liu Wu-Chi, *An Introduction to Chinese Literature* (Bloomington and London, 1966), p. 21.

to espouse and advocate these self-same views indicates how strongly ingrained patriarchy is. As Eva Figes points out in *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society*:

Sexual taboos (or a code of morality) cannot be effective unless they are accepted by society as a whole, and that means both men and women: one of the reasons that a patriarchal society has been able to work for so long is that women are themselves ready to play the roles assigned to them, never having been made aware of any alternative.¹⁷

This system endorses the safeguarding of a man's property, including his wife and children, and the sanctity of patrilineal descent. Mme Thai is fully aware of this.

Comme disait ton père, la femme infidèle mélange le sang de la famille, car son mari risque d'élever les enfants des autres. Les hommes se font presque un honneur de prendre les femmes d'autrui, par contre, ils ne pardonnent jamais aux épouses qui leur sont infidèles. Tu vas dire que c'est injuste, mais du moment que cette injustice est inhérente à nos principes, pourquoi te révoltes-tu? (p. 76)

Divorce is not an option since 'une femme divorcée est critiquée et exposée à la risée publique, bien qu'elle soit la victime' (p. 75). In addition, the children have to be thought of, and in this, as in all other areas of her life, it is a woman's duty to sacrifice her own interests for the sake of others. The conversation between the two women and Tran highlights three things: first, a social code of morality; second, the older generation's reluctant acceptance of this state of affairs (after initial misgivings, as in the case of Mme Hai); and third, the passive transmission of this code to the daughter.

Both mother-figures, Mme Thai and Mme Hai, are unhappily married. Yet both unerringly convey to Tran the duties and

¹⁷Eva Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society* (London, 1970), pp. 86-87.

responsibilities of married women. There is a dislocation between the ideal and the reality. 'Not recognizing themselves in the reflections of cultural representation, women develop a dual consciousness - the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription'.¹⁸ Both older women are able to recognize the basic injustice of the sexual double standard, but they are incapable of voicing a logical objection to it. They are torn between the perceived suitability of marriage for women and the actual distress and humiliation of their own married state. But both are somehow unable to take the necessary step which would allow them to reject conventional assumptions of women's role.

Mother and daughter embark on a discussion on the relative situation of European women compared to Vietnamese women. Tran believes European women to be emancipated, with access to education, professional life and a public voice in politics. Vietnamese women on the other hand 'vivent cloîtrées et mènent une vie résignée, trop dépendante de leur famille' (p. 100). The mother retorts with the notion that women who are free are also more open to temptation. In her mind, independence and unconventionality are naturally allied with sexual promiscuity.¹⁹ She goes on to explain that while women in traditional society may be outwardly submissive, they could yet wield great power behind the scenes:

¹⁸Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice' in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Shari Benstock (London, 1988), 34-62 (p. 39).

¹⁹African women writers recorded similar perceptions in relation to women in post-colonial Africa: 'Writers stress the woman as scapegoat, called 'backward' when she is traditional, called 'western' or 'immoral' when in an attempt to better her life she is perceived as invading male domains'. Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism* (New York and Oxford, 1985), pp. 147-48.

N'est-il pas vrai, ma chère fille, que le sourire d'une jolie femme peut faire perdre la tête à un homme, et que les pleurs d'une vieille mère peuvent attendrir le plus impitoyable des juges! Pourquoi devenir l'égale de l'homme alors que, sans gagner une bataille, tu peux être Mme la Générale? (p. 101)

She does not appear conscious that her reasoning implicitly condones the status quo. The notion of power behind the scenes serves but to underline the actual powerlessness of women since their actions have neither shape nor validity without the presence of a man. There is a considerable irony in the fact that Mme Thai even alludes to the notion of power behind the scenes, since her own marriage is an example of powerlessness whether within or without the home. Her daughter Tran queries this. For young women to do so, they had to overcome the inhibitions they grew up under and challenge perceptions and judgements that their parents, teachers and society at large generally abided by.

It takes a great deal of courage and independence to decide to design your own image instead of the one society rewards, but it gets easier as you go along. Of course, a woman who decides to go her own way will find that her conditioning is ineradicable, but at least she can recognize its operation and choose to counteract it, whereas a man might find that he was being more subtly deluded.²⁰

Despite her modern views, Tran was to internalize her elders' strictures on women's virtue and honour with punishing results.

In February 1946, the diary records a long conversation between Tran and her friend Nam. Nam had earlier been described as 'avec un corps ... trop bien proportionné même, pour une jeune fille, Mlle Nam appartenait à un type de femme très séduisante' (p. 49). Nam represents the third category of women:

²⁰Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, 21st anniversary edition (London, 1992), p. 165.

the prostitute. She consorts with Japanese officers during the war. Here, she confides to her friend the complex of motivations which led her to become a courtesan. She had witnessed her parents' traditional and disastrous marriage, had heard her father beat and abuse her mother. She gradually came to despise her weak mother and to hate men. Marriage provided neither love nor security. She tells Tran:

Pourquoi imiter ma mère en se donnant un maître semblable à mon père? Je préfère être l'amante à la femme légitime. Amante, je suis aimée ... mon partenaire cherche à me plaire; s'il ne me satisfait plus, je peux le changer. La femme légitime elle, hérite du nom et du titre, c'est-à-dire, de la façade officielle, mais, avec le temps, elle est souvent délaissée, oubliée ou même maltraitée. (p. 134)

She does not, however, absolve herself from responsibility for her present way of life. As she points out wryly to Tran: 'c'est grâce à des filles comme moi, qu'on peut reconnaître la valeur morale des filles comme toi. Mais je ne cherche pas auprès de toi une excuse, ni une justification. La mésentente de mes parents a agi, certes, sur ma vie d'adolescente, mais c'est ma propre nature qui m'a poussée vers cette vie de demi-mondaine qui me plaît' (p. 134). In this passage, Ly Thu Ho explains the motivations which shape the consciousness of this third category of women. She does so in a direct and non-judgemental manner. Nam's actions are a reaction to paternal violence and abuse. Her reasoning does not excuse her life-style, but it explains her decision to lead such a life. Yet Nam is as much a victim of the system by rebelling against it as she would have been in acquiescing to it. For in the end, she is still rebelling through men. She does not stand on her own, but on the strength of her sexual attachments to men and in this way, she is

just as vulnerable, in addition to being frowned upon by conventional society.

Nam's later death through childbirth illustrates this. There is considerable irony even in the manner of her death. Having defied society and tradition in asserting her sexual independence, she was to die through a natural process, and one which, until the advent of modern medicine, often proved fatal.²¹ As the other women comment: 'Nam, qui, de son vivant, dans sa pleine jeunesse de femme désirée et disputée, était entourée d'un cercle d'amis et d'admirateurs, ne trouvait aucun homme, même pas un mari, pour la pleurer à sa mort' (p. 175).

As the war drags on, Tran records events which shock her. When her neighbours' two-year old son dies, she is astounded by his parents' attitude. The boy's father explains to her that the son had failed in his filial duty to bury his parents. When Tran remonstrates that it was hardly the boy's fault, he answers: 'chez nous, la tradition dit ... que la femme meurt avant le mari pour l'assurer de sa fidélité envers lui. Si mon père était vivant, il m'aurait ordonné de donner six coups de rotin sur le cercueil de Bé pour le punir de son ingratitude' (p. 138). The father will not give his son a burial since he does not know that he will get one himself on his death.²² Tran is shaken: 'Encore les traditions, les

²¹Between the ages of twelve and forty, European men outlived women well into the twentieth century. ... maternal mortality remained high: until the 1880s, motherhood was fatal for one woman out of every twenty'. Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsler, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, Volume II (London, 1990), p. 241. These figures, applicable to nineteenth-century Europe, were probably similar in nineteenth-century Vietnam.

²²This is related to the practice of ancestor worship in both China and Vietnam. The Chinese saw individual lives imbedded in a matrix of past and future. The individual existed only by virtue of ancestors, and in turn descendents existed through the current generation. ... Those who died heirless, or whose line became extinct, were destined to wander as "hungry ghosts" and eventually be

principes; ils me révoltent. Mais le pire, c'est que, tout en me révoltant, malgré moi, je subis leur influence' (p. 138). This episode is a critique of the abuses of parental authority, in a society stratified according to hierarchy and rank, with the lower deferring to the higher.

The diary records Tran's unconventional outlook on the society and mores of her time. She questions the advice and admonitions of the mother-figures in her life, whether they are her mother, the *nourrice* or Mme Hai. Tran notes down discussions and arguments on the role of women in traditional society: their role as daughters, wives and mothers. She objects to social prescriptions on these topics and queries her mother's expressed beliefs, fears and prejudices. Her responses are for the most part tempered but occasionally she voices deep distress, as in her reaction to the circumstances surrounding Bé's death. Despite her clear-sightedness and vision, however, the strictures of the mother-figures were, in the end, to scar her irremediably.

Tran's diary ends in July 1947. She includes a last letter to Châu, in which she addresses him as 'Mon grand frère chéri' (p. 165). It should be noted that the traditional way for a couple to address each other in Vietnamese is for the man to be referred to as *anh* (older brother) and the woman as *em* (younger sister). The terminology is descriptive and reflects social hierarchy. The term *anh* connotes seniority, strength and authority. The term *em* connotes youth, deference and immaturity. The woman looks up to the man while he looks after her. The terms are considered

extinguished'. Margot I. Duley, 'Women in China' in *The Cross-Cultural Study of Women: A Comprehensive Guide*, edited by Margot I. Duley and Mary I. Edwards (New York, 1986), 237-70 (p. 240).

affectionate. They effectively serve to infantilize the woman. As a term for lovers or husband and wife to use, they also serve to desexualize the relationship (or conversely, to suggest incest). In the letter, Tran informs Châu about her brutal rape at the hands of a French soldier. In this context, her rape is analogous to the rape of her country by the colonizers. As the Chilean writer Isabel Allende expressed it: 'I think rape represents the worst humiliation and the worst transgression against a person, and this theme has become prevalent in the stories, novels ... that are being [written] nowadays. It is as if in the collective unconscious the rape of a woman has come to symbolize the rape of all of us as a species, continent, and race'.²³ In Tran's letter, the term 'grand frère' takes on its literal meaning. She renounces Châu: 'Adieu, grand frère. ... Je n'ai plus droit à ton amour. J'en suis indigne' (p. 167). When Châu returns eight years later, after the signing of the Geneva Accords, she steadfastly refuses to go back on her self-imposed word. She dies a year afterwards. She had internalized the guilt which a social code of morality imposed on women who had transgressed, even though she was a victim. Her death is poignant, because it was needless. She also symbolizes the cost of invasion and war on a country and a people.

Ly Thu Ho has presented in this novel a heroine who encapsulated all the desired attributes: Tran was of good birth, gentle, loving, beautiful and a dutiful daughter. She also had sufficient intelligence and independence to love where she chose to, but these talents and gifts were of little use to her in the end.

²³Quoted in Marie-Lise Gazarian Gautier, *Interviews with Latin American Writers* (Elmwood Park, 1989), p. 13.

The last years of her life were marked by distress, unhappiness and toil and she died early. The figure of Tran is set against the more unusual one of Nam, who exerts a degree of self-assertion but also dies an early death. Ly Thu Ho depicts the recognizable gaps in perception and understanding between the older and the younger generation of women. The conversations related are predictable: the mothers in the novel are uniformly conformist and unquestioning and the daughters rebellious but not radically so. This has the combined effect of appearing rather simplistic on the one hand and yet also convincing on the other, because the sentiments described are familiar ones. Ly Thu Ho succeeds in conveying, however, behind the facade of conformity and the lives of ordinary women, the overwhelming and sometimes shocking sadness of these women's lives. Both older women, Mme Thai and Mme Hai, had unhappy marriages and while recognizing injustice, were resigned to it. Both daughters, Tran and Nam, died young. Tuoi is the only survivor and her life in turn had suffered earlier reverses. Most vividly, through the close parallels between the figures of Tran and that of Kieu, heroine of the *Kim-Van-Kieu*, Ly Thu Ho has translated into a modern context and criticized, in the harsh terms of Tran's early and needless death, the concepts of virtue and obedience that were inculcated in women.

Au milieu du carrefour, Ly Thu Ho's second novel, is set in the mid-sixties in South Vietnam. The chief female characters are Lang, a woman in her mid-twenties, and her cousin Xinh. War has been a part of Lang's life since 1945. Unlike in *Printemps inachevé*, the character of the mother-figure is hardly given voice here. The emphasis is on the younger generation and on Lang's

courtship with Vân, a surgeon, which forms the central plot of the novel. The longest discussion on women is a seven-page conversation between three women, Lang, Xinh and Thuy on the situation of the notorious bar girls of Saigon.

The novel consists throughout of a third-person narrative. There is a brief reference to Lang's mother: 'Comme elle l'aimait! Malgré les quarante années de différence qui les séparaient, Lang avait toujours en sa mère une amie sûre et une confidente compréhensive'.²⁴ Apart from this brief glimpse of Mme Vinh the only other mother to make any statements is Lang's older sister Tam. She voices her complaints about her children: 'Ils sont déjà assez grands pour se débrouiller tout seuls dans la vie mais ce qui me peine le plus c'est que je n'existe plus pour eux, ni le moindre signe d'affection ni la moindre marque de respect pour leur mère qui ne cesse de trimer pour les élever' (pp. 61-62). The country had been in a state of constant war for twenty years. Tam's daughter Hoa leads a carefree, hectic life and when her aunt (who is hardly older than her) attempts to remonstrate with her, she retorts:

D'ailleurs nous ne faisons rien de mal; nous voulons simplement profiter de la vie au maximum durant notre jeunesse. Avec cette guerre interminable à quoi bon penser à l'avenir. Seuls les gens qui ont la possibilité et les moyens d'aller à l'étranger peuvent prétendre ainsi préparer leur avenir d'une façon concrète et certaine; même nous autres jeunes filles qui restons au pays, nous serons peut-être un jour appelées nous aussi aux drapeaux. Quant à nos camarades garçons, ils ont pleinement raison de s'amuser car la plupart d'entre eux meurent si jeunes. (p. 50)

²⁴Ly Thu Ho, *Au milieu du carrefour* (Paris, 1969), p. 14. Subsequent references will be given in the main text.

Traditional values and family relationships were being slowly eroded. Hoa represents one response to social tensions.

Lang, the archetypal virtuous woman, decides instead to carry on with her studies. Her cousin Xinh is more robust. Independent, 'depuis deux ans Xinh travaillait comme agent de vente dans une compagnie aérienne rue Tu-Do, artère principale de la capitale. Elle y gagnait largement sa vie, car parlant couramment l'anglais et le français, elle était bien rétribuée' (p. 26). Xinh observes with interest Lang's growing love for Vân. Lang had met him while attending English classes in Saigon. The difference in qualifications and age between Vân and Lang is similar to that between Châu and Tran in *Printemps inachevé*. Vân is described as a brilliant thirty-year-old surgeon, accomplished sportsman, keen appreciator of music and an extremely personable catch. The man is older, more mature and the woman's intellectual superior, as things should be.

In a strange parallel with the character of Châu twenty years earlier, who made a similar decision during a different war, Vân informs Lang that he has decided to join the *maquis*, to observe for himself at first hand the reality of the tangled state of politics in Vietnam. They discuss the situation. She is naturally distressed since she does not want to see him killed. However, at the end of their talk, she says in a self-deprecating way: 'Enfin, te voilà décidé, je ne veux nullement aller à l'encontre de ta volonté en raisonnant davantage, car je risque de paraître à tes yeux comme une amoureuse craintive et sans cervelle, une femme aimante mais égoïste' (p. 43). The vocabulary stresses the inherent stupidity or foolishness of the female stereotype. Vân plans to be away for a few

months or a year and does not wish them to be married beforehand. He tells her: 'Je t'aime, Lang, et c'est toi que j'ai choisie entre toutes' (p. 44). Man here is the active principle, woman the passive.²⁵ Vân goes on: 'Moi-même j'ai peur de te perdre, mais, vois-tu, s'il m'arrive malheur, tu deviendras une jeune veuve, une veuve de vingt-cinq ans. Une jeune fille se marie plus facilement qu'une veuve; et que dira-t-on de toi?' (p. 44). Like Tran, Lang resigns herself to an anxiety-ridden period of separation, knowing that Vân would be working with the enemy, even though he did so not out of political conviction but in order to observe the human reality behind the propaganda.

Upon knowing and loving Vân, Lang had already decided to give up her English studies and take a course in nursing instead. 'Elle pouvait ainsi aider Vân dans sa profession et surtout rester constamment auprès de lui' (p. 34). She was prepared to drop her studies and interests so as to follow him and assist him. The stress is of course on her being a willing assistant and helpmate. He would remain more highly qualified and she would be his inferior in a professional capacity. In his absence now, and fired by his ideas (in this as in every other area, she is led by him), she decides to inform herself about the politics of her country. 'Les idées de Vân la réveillèrent. Au lieu de se terrer à la maison comme autrefois, de vivre à l'écart de cette guerre, elle se décida à y participer à sa façon et selon ses propres méthodes' (p. 56). She frequents the Bibliothèque Nationale, the national information centres, reads books, documents, pamphlets, newspapers, listens

²⁵As Mary Ellman expressed it: 'By sexual correlation, all energy and enterprise is customarily assigned to male thought, and simple, accretive expectation to female thought'. Mary Ellman, *Thinking About Women* (London, 1968), p. 13.

to news bulletins, observes propaganda methods. Xinh later congratulates her: 'En tous cas je fais mes compliments à Vân qui n'a pas perdu de temps à te dresser comme une future femme de médecin' (p. 67). Well-trained indeed, like a wife, or a poodle. Lang, despite her firm grasp of current affairs, becomes strangely shy in the company of men. She listens without contributing to a long discussion between men on the political and military situation. 'Ne connaissant rien à la politique, Lang n'avait pour arme contre cette guerre que son amour pour sa patrie déchirée' (p. 115). Hours of diligent research and assessment on her part pass unrecognized. She is encroaching on an area which is not traditionally acknowledged as a woman's and therefore feels that she is unqualified to express her views. The sentence neatly encompasses both Lang's supposed ignorance of the political realities of the time and also her 'feminine', emotive and, it is implied, powerless response to the situation: her love for her country. Lang decides to become an ambulance driver and joins a charity organisation made up of the wives of the military and of public servants.

There exists a curious demarcation between the world of men and that of women. The men discourse openly on the politics and economics of the country and on the progress of the war. They are instrumental in the running of the country. Most are either mobilized, in the public service or professionals. The women's world is ancillary to and yet in a way divorced from this. Their discussions and assessments of the situation are related in privacy, indulged in with one or two close women friends. Xinh reports to her cousin about a society wedding in Saigon:

Et dans le groupe des dames quels papotages! Les mamans prévoyantes étaient à la recherche de gendres brillants et haut placés. La fortune et les diplômes d'université ne leur suffisaient plus. Elles exigent aussi une certaine honorabilité de leur famille. Et à défaut de titres honorifiques des propres parents elles tiennent compte de la proche parenté, un oncle ministre ou une cousine épouse de générale (p. 59)

Women expended immense energy on plottings, schemings, advantageous social and political alliances to enhance the family name, most likely to better the husband's political career, or a son's rise to prominent position, always for and through the men.²⁶ If a daughter was of marriageable age, then a suitable groom was to be provided. Xinh remarks: 'le baromètre politique de Saigon est tellement variable, les coups d'état si fréquents que des retournements de situation deviennent choses courantes' (p. 59). Xinh is well-informed on current affairs. The two young women together discuss corruption and the black market. Xinh relates to Lang the sad fate of Liêu, a bar girl she knew, who was killed in a grenade explosion in the city, one of the many civilian victims of casual violence. Like the character of Nam in *Printemps inachevé*, Liêu represents the category of whore and leaves behind a young daughter. Xinh informs Lang: 'Liêu avait suivi les traces de sa mère mais elle fut emportée en pleine jeunesse sans avoir eu le temps de connaître, et tant mieux pour elle, cette vieillesse prématurée dans la misère et les privations' (p. 71).

²⁶If [Vietnamese women] wished to exercise power, it had to be via their men. This was reflected, for example in the many folk sayings about wives slaving so that their husbands might become mandarins. If her husband were successful, a wife reaped some reflected glory. ... Perhaps the entire relationship was summed up in the adage, 'A man's property is his wife's work'. The same principle applied to mothers and sons. Vietnamese tradition abounded with mothers who made endless sacrifices for their sons'. Marr, *Tradition*, pp. 197-98.

The third female character of note in the novel is Thuy. Thuy is described as an enterprising woman in her thirties, who tried various ways of earning a living before eventually opening a bar. She provides an example of a woman of courage, a woman of minimal education, with neither family connections nor a husband, who made it on her own, and moreover, made it successfully: 'elle reste très simple et brave fille ... elle n'hésite pas à se lancer dans des entreprises audacieuses' (p. 77). Lang, a sheltered *bourgeoise*, is being purposefully educated about the realities of life in war-affected Saigon. The figure of Lang, the virtuous woman, is therefore set against that of Xinh, of more robust temperament, that of Thuy, a woman of considerable independence and enterprise, and the fleeting figure of Liêu, the bar girl and victim of the casual violence of the war. Each of these different categories of women interrelate and share their views and perceptions.

The three women, Lang, Xinh, and Thuy discuss the situation of the bar girls. Thuy asserts: 'quoi qu'on en dise sur nos filles de bar ce sont de braves petites, certaines mêmes sont très honnêtes. Souvent elles refusent de sortir ou de passer la nuit avec des étrangers' (p. 80). Lang immediately points to the notorious reputation of the bar girls, of the city centre being reputedly a giant brothel: 'Il s'agit là d'une question de dignité de la femme et d'amour-propre national' (p. 80). This leads Thuy to embark on a spirited defence of the bar girls, pointing out that virtue and chastity, essentials of the feminine ideal, were middle-class luxuries.

Quand on a faim et qu'on est sans le sou on doit lutter par tous les moyens pour survivre ...les filles qui sont ici ne sont pas toutes des filles perdues. Certaines d'entre elles sont des femmes mariées qui travaillent pour aider leur maris mobilisés comme soldats de deuxième classe et dont la solde de misère ne suffit même pas pour payer le loyer. D'autres appartiennent à des familles autrefois aisées mais aujourd'hui appauvries ou ruinées par la révolution et la guerre. La plupart d'entre elles viennent des campagnes lointaines où la vie dans la brousse n'est plus possible. (p. 81)

Thuy comments bitterly that although the bars are reviled by both conservatives and revolutionaries, everyone makes use of them and the bars are heavily taxed: 'les gens du maquis nous considèrent comme des traîtres, ceux de Saigon nous cataloguent de filles de joie; tout le monde nous jette la pierre mais on n'a pas pour autant oublié de soumettre notre chiffre d'affaires à des taxes fort lourdes' (p. 85). Lang leaves the encounter in a sobered and reflective mood. She sees Thuy and women like her as an entire class bred by continuous war and poverty and believes that once the situation which gave rise to them disappears, so would they.²⁷

As well as discussing the subject of prostitution and the concomitant themes of poverty, the sexual double standard, the war, and political corruption, Xinh and Lang also debate the issue of cross-cultural relationships: in particular Xinh's relationship with John, an American marine. If Xinh and John decide to marry, Xinh sees it as inevitable that she would have to leave her country and attempt to settle in his. Lang agrees. She believes that a

²⁷The same point is made by Tran-Thi-Tuyet: 'Nous pourrions citer de très nombreux exemples, comme ces femmes chargées d'enfants, incapable de prendre la place de leur mari mobilisés et forcées de devenir serveuses de bar, prostituées. ... on aurait tort de croire que ces mœurs sont généralisées comme toute une partie de la presse occidentale a voulu le faire croire. Ce n'est finalement qu'un phénomène passager, commun à bien d'autres pays en guerre'. Tran-Thi-Tuyet, 'La Femme vietnamienne à travers la littérature populaire' (unpublished dissertation, University of Brussels, 1974), p. 205.

Vietnamese woman marrying an American would have fewer difficulties than an American woman married to a Vietnamese. A Western woman would find it very difficult to settle into the constraints of Vietnamese society while 'une Vietnamiennne instruite et évoluée s'adaptera plus aisément dans la société américaine qui est très libérale par ses conceptions de la vie sociale où les femmes sont traitées à égalité avec les hommes' (p. 120). In the eyes of a Vietnamese woman in the 1960s, American women enjoyed 'equal' rights with men.²⁸ Lang is making two assumptions here, the first being that the woman is automatically expected to follow her husband and settle in his country and the second that a woman in Western society would not be subject to sexual discrimination. A woman living in the West might respond that such discrimination exists but operates in different forms.

Xinh and John's attraction towards each other is an attraction of opposites. They are physically very different. Xinh is an attractive, slender Vietnamese girl, and John a tall, blond American: 'C'est la loi du contraste, l'attrait de la nouveauté, mon ami, répondit Xinh, en lui jetant un regard tendre. L'Occident est attiré par l'Orient et inversement' (p. 139). This image of opposite attractions features in other Francophone novels, for example Truong Dinh Tri and Albert de Teneuille's *Bà-Dâm* (1930) and Ousmane Socé's *Mirages de Paris* (1937). Both emphasize the contrast between darkness on one side and fairness on the other, except that in both, it is the man who is dark and foreign, while

²⁸Asian women ... were influenced by the myth that all Western women were 'free'. To give one example, around 1900, Kartini, the pioneer of female education in Indonesia, was to envy the 'free, independent European woman'. Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism*, p. 11.

the woman is European and fair. In *Au milieu du carrefour*, it is the woman who is dark-haired, and the man, the foreigner, who is fair. *Au milieu du carrefour* ends on a more positive note than *Printemps inachevé*. Both sets of young people marry in the end. John adopts a war orphan, a baby picked up on patrol, and is badly wounded in an engagement. Perhaps because of his helplessness, Xinh takes the initiative and proposes to him this time: 'Si vos sentiments pour moi n'ont pas changé, cette fois-ci c'est moi qui vous demande de m'épouser' (p. 187). Lang is reunited with Vân, who relates his experiences as a doctor in the *maquis* as a long series of human tragedies. He decides to return to work in Saigon. The novel ends on a note of hope that the war will end and simply become a memory.

In *Au milieu du carrefour* as in the earlier *Printemps inachevé*, Ly Thu Ho has, as a female protagonist, a woman who embodies the traditional attributes of femininity. Although there are many surface parallels between the two couples, Lang's fate is a happier one than Tran's. There is a similar difference in age, rank and ability between the man and the woman and Vân, like his predecessor Châu, decides to go to the *maquis*, leaving Lang behind. What gradually emerges in this novel is that despite Lang's many attributes, her personality fades as the narrative moves along. She is obviously an intelligent woman. She was studying English when she met Vân. Yet instead of pursuing her studies, she makes the conscious decision to give them up and to accommodate her life to his. Since he was a doctor, she would train to become a nurse. She is capable of informing herself on the politics of her country, but feels unqualified to express her

opinions in the company of men. She acquiesces to his decision to join the *maquis* and becomes a sounding board for the views which he expresses through his letters. Her conventionality serves to offset the minor but more vivid female characters in the novel: her cousin Xinh, who has a more robust, independent personality and Thuy, the enterprising self-made woman. In *Au milieu du carrefour*, the conventional heroines can discuss and interrelate with the unconventional ones, as Lang and Xinh discussed prostitution with Thuy. This allows Ly Thu Ho to relate another view point (that of a woman bar owner) and embark on a sympathetic examination of the much-reviled bar girls of Saigon. In this same novel, she also treats the issue of interracial relationship and marriage. Both this and the subject of prostitution, which she treats at some length, are radical for her generation and culture. Ly Thu Ho has incorporated both within an orderly account of a young couple's love and eventual marriage at a time of civil war.

Ly Thu Ho's last novel, *Le Mirage de la paix*, encompasses the widest characterization of women. In addition to the divisions of virtuous woman, good-hearted whore and traditional mother-figure, it contains that of sturdy peasant girl. This latest novel covers the years 1970 to 1975. It consists of a third-person narrative.

The first of the central female characters of the novel makes her appearance in Part Two, Chapter One. Her name is Thu-Thuy, a refugee from the North, daughter of a journalist. Like Tuoi and Tran in *Printemps inachevé* and Lang and Xinh in *Au milieu du carrefour*, she is described as beautiful. Her life has been a

succession of tragedies. When her father dies she decides to leave Saigon and move to the country where she seeks work on the plantation owned by M. Huu-Phuoc. The gently-bred and frail Thu-Thuy is contrasted with the figure of Manh, 'paysanne gaillarde à la démarche pesante' (p. 65). Thu-Thuy represents the ideal of Vietnamese womanhood as endorsed by patriarchal society: lovely, gentle and biddable. So much so that the middle-aged wife of the mechanic exclaims: 'Elle a l'air d'une brave fille et si douce. Dommage que je n'aie pas de fils à marier, sans quoi je l'aurais volontiers choisie comme bru' (p. 72).

At this stage the other female characters also make their appearance: Ba-Sau, the *nourrice*, the upright, stalwart mother-figure of indeterminate age and Ngoc-Suong, daughter of the proprietor, whose looks and character echo Thu-Thuy's. A student at the *Couvent des Oiseaux*, a well-known girls' college in Dalat, where 'en plus de l'enseignement primaire et secondaire qui y étaient dispensés, on préparait également les jeunes filles à leur futur rôle de parfaites maîtresses de maison' (p. 77), Ngoc-Suong is described as: '[elle] possédait tous les atouts de la beauté vietnamienne, avec l'admirable carnation ivoire de sa peau, son petit nez et sa petite bouche au lèvres d'un rose naturel. Sa physionomie délicate et douce dégageait une impression de réserve' (p. 78). Her education and upbringing have tamed her natural impulses and desires: 'avaient fait d'elle un modèle de vertu et de piété et lui avaient appris à contrôler son langage et à contenir ses désirs' (p. 79). She is aware that she is repressed and inhibited, but the weight of her upbringing is so ingrained in her that she has to struggle quite considerably in order to show her

love and passion for Duy-Cau. After their first embrace, she swears eternal loyalty to him: 'qu'importe le nombre de mois et d'années que durera l'attente, je te promets que je serai ta femme pour le reste de mes jours et je prends le ciel à témoin de n'aimer que toi' (p. 83).

Both she and Thu-Thuy fall into the category of virtuous, chaste women, later to be faithful and devoted wives. The terms used to describe their physique and general demeanour suggest frail, somehow childlike figures and they are aptly set against their lovers and then husbands, both of whom are soldiers: Huu-Lôc, the proprietor's son, a Captain, and Duy-Sau, son of the estate manager and under Huu-Lôc's orders. The men are in contrast strong and decisive. The other woman who falls under this category is Lang, Dr Vân's wife, from *Au milieu du carrefour*, who makes a brief appearance in the following terms: 'Quel caractère simple et tolérant, elle était toujours d'humeur égale et souriante. Elle n'ouvrait la bouche que pour s'enquérir de la santé de son mari et l'encourager dans sa mission' (p. 96). Lang, as a character, has faded into near anonymity as the perfect accessory and helpmate of her husband Vân. The case of Lang echoes that of the heroines of classical fairy tales: These stories focus upon courtship, which is magnified into the most important and exciting part of a girl's life, brief though courtship is, because it is the part of her life in which she most counts as a person herself. After marriage she ceases to be wooed, her consent is no longer sought, she derives

her status from her husband, and her personal identity is thus snuffed out'.²⁹ Marriage is 'literally the end of the story'³⁰ for Lang.

The fourth category of women, that of good-hearted whore, is represented by Kieu-Lien, a bar girl, and the recognized mistress of Huu-Lôc (before the latter met and loved Thu-Thuy). The sensuality of the bar girls is illustrated in a scene of striptease. Kieu-Lien tells Huu-Lôc: 'N'empêche qu'une fille de joie comme moi ne ressent pas les mêmes sentiments que les autres filles. Mais j'ai moi aussi une âme, un cœur, des sentiments nobles et purs' (p. 114). She also longs for security and happiness as a wife and mother, 'de n'appartenir qu'à un seul homme que j'aimerais pour toute ma vie' (p. 114). She is just as keen to conform to a socially acceptable role as Thu-Thuy and Ngoc-Suong but recognizes that her profession is a means of livelihood which also allows her a measure of independence. Huu-Lôc charitably offers his mistress the use of his studio in Saigon. Kieu-Lien holds an unrequited love for him. Unlike the characters of Nam in *Printemps inachevé* and Liêu in *Au milieu du carrefour*, the fate of Kieu-Lien remains a question mark. She is not automatically or visibly punished for rebelling so openly against the feminine ideal.

On M. Huu-Phuoc's plantation, Ba-Sau, the archetypal mother-figure, holds forth on the traditional purpose of women: childbearing. She comes out with an ancient saying to prove her point:

²⁹Marcia K. Lieberman, ' "Some Day My Prince Will Come": Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale', in *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England*, edited by Jack Zipes (Aldershot, 1986), 186-200 (pp. 199-200).

³⁰Lieberman, 'Prince', p. 200.

Quand on a une fille à marier chez soi, c'est comme si l'on avait à surveiller un bocal de poissons fermentés dont le couvercle risque de sauter un jour à l'autre, laissant échapper la mauvaise odeur qui déshonore toute la famille (p. 119).

Ba-Sau stresses that a woman's unattached and therefore untamed sexuality is dangerous and potentially explosive. She is to be promptly married and should quickly bear children. Her sexuality will then be justified and her energies suitably devoted to the raising of children. She has it in her, otherwise, to dishonour her entire family.

Ba-Sau echoes the words of generations of women. The message from the mother-figure has not changed in forty years. It is the same one that another *nourrice*, Vu Gia, preached in the 1930s. That women in many cases simply exchanged one form of dependency for another, with the added burden of responsibility for childcare, were uncomfortable realities sublimated in notions of self-sacrifice and mother-love. Women consciously helped to perpetuate these ideals. Ba-Sau presents the characteristic voice of generations of mothers before her when she comes forth with such maxims as: 'Le bois sec brûle mieux, le mari laid sert mieux' (p. 120), 'j'aurais aimé avoir un gendre d'un âge mûr, un homme qui a déjà une certaine expérience de la vie avant de fonder un foyer, un homme avisé et solide sur lequel un femme peut s'appuyer avec confiance pour parcourir le long et difficile chemin de la vie' (p. 120). As Carolyn Heilbrun wrote: 'There will be narratives of female lives only when women no longer live their lives isolated in the houses and the stories of men'.³¹

³¹Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing A Woman's Life* (London, 1989), p. 47.

The momentous meeting of Thu-Thuy and Huu-Lôc is indicative of the traditional mode of thinking. She notices that he is '[d'un] caractère décidé et sûr de lui' (p. 134), he notices that she is 'd'une grande beauté et dont le regard exprimait une douceur rêveuse' (p. 132). The man's character is noted, while it is the woman's physical looks which are observed. An old Vietnamese proverb runs: 'L'homme possède le talent, la femme la beauté'.³² Their speedy courtship proceeds with his dawning respect for her. He tells her quite frankly that she is not to expect a man past thirty to be chaste and virginal. With this display of frankness, 'il l'avait conquise'. They become lovers, at her instigation. She says to him: 'Je t'ai dit que je suis prête à tout donner à l'être que j'aime, sans attendre d'être payée en retour' (p. 142), and later reiterates this sublimely womanly bent for utter sacrifice: 'Aimer vraiment, pensa-t-elle, c'est se donner, se sacrifier totalement et ne rien attendre de l'être aimé!' (p. 145).

It should be noted that both Thu-Thuy and Ngoc-Suong are the ones to allow or engineer sexual relations with the men. What was not possible for Tran in 1945 is now possible for these two young women in 1971. The consequences are predictable. Thu-Thuy and Ngoc-Suong are able to express their sexuality while still remaining virtuous women. They are given greater self-affirmation than the figure of Tran in *Printemps inachevé* and Lang in *Au milieu du carrefour*. Their actions, unsurprisingly, entail consequences, but they were at least instrumental in instigating these events.

³²Tran-Thi-Tuyet, 'La Femme vietnamienne', p. 7.

As a result of her encounter with HUU-LÔC, THU-THUY discovers herself to be pregnant. Her shocked reaction points to: first, the importance of external appearance and reputation (for a woman); second, that it was all right to have had a lover if no one knew about it and if no embarrassing pregnancy occurred; third, that the shame was somehow the woman's (although it manifestly took two to tango); fourth, that the hypocrisy is also hers because she was supposedly such a well-brought up girl; and last, that this state of affairs was acceptable for a robust peasant girl like Manh, who had never made a secret of her attachments, but not for a respectable if impoverished *bourgeoise* like her.

The issues here are those of gender and class. Thu-Thuy's reasoning expresses the double standard which applies both to women on one level and to menials, servants and peasants, on a further level. As a *bourgeoise*, however impoverished, Thu-Thuy has a standard to uphold. Added to this is the insecurity of her position since she is an employee on the property. She has no family to call on, and does not have a male protector. She is vulnerable because she is a woman alone. Like Tran in *Printemps inachevé* and Lang in *Au milieu du carrefour*, Thu-Thuy is vividly conscious of the difference between herself and her lover in rank and family background. She is a penniless refugee from the North with no surviving family, while he is the son of the proprietor, who is also her current employer. She respects M. HUU-PHUOC and is afraid he will judge her to be loose and wanton. She loves HUU-LÔC but does not wish to force his hand. She asserts that plenty of single mothers bring up a child better than a mismatched and split couple. She confides in Ba-Sau, who answers comfortingly

that lovers are fated and recounts an ancient and classic tale of star-crossed lovers.

There are no mothers in *Le Mirage de la paix*. The mother-daughter relationships which had been so fraught with tension in *Printemps inachevé* and *Au milieu du carrefour* disappear utterly in *Le Mirage de la paix*. Both Thu-Thuy and Ngoc-Suong lost their mothers at a tender age. It is up to Ba-Sau, the *nourrice*, to provide nurturing and a semblance of mother-care. Her beliefs on women's role in society are just as oppressive but because she is not the actual mother, the young women can observe her strictures from a greater distance and therefore take them less to heart.

The bar girl and Thu -Thuy meet each other. Kieu-Lien gives way gracefully and is open with Thu-Thuy on the nature of her relationship with and love for Huu-Lôc. In response, Thu-Thuy tells the other woman:

Moi non plus, je ne suis pas d'une conduite irréprochable, comme vous le supposez. Je me suis donnée à Huu-Lôc sans espérer qu'il m'épouserait un jour. Il n'est pas certain qu'il me sera toujours fidèle. Et si un jour il me délaisse, qui sait si les orages de la vie et les vagues du destin ne me jetteront pas sur le rivage où vous vous trouvez en ce moment. (pp. 176-177)

Thu-Thuy reiterates the condition of woman as a victim of circumstances. Her existence revolves around her love for Huu-Lôc. She lacks autonomy. She 'gave herself' to him, as if she were a piece of property or a commodity, food for consumption.

Both Thu-Thuy and Ngoc-Suong were married to their lovers in 1972 and both were to bear sons. Manh looks after the babies devotedly and refuses to burden herself with a husband. History, in

the meantime, inevitably takes its course. M. Huu-Phuoc, the patriarch, dies at the beginning of 1975 and is spared the death of his son Huu-Lôc in combat, the communist takeover of South Vietnam and the change in Duy-Cau his son-in-law as a result of guilt and depression.

Only the women are left, to eke out what living they can on the property. Thu-Thuy turns from a glowing, fulfilled wife and mother into a haggard and prostrate widow, Ngoc-Suong feels herself to be 'la veuve d'un vivant'. Only Manh has lost none of her resourcefulness and holds the household together, using her native wit and cunning. She realises how vulnerable Thu-Thuy is as a young widow. Male military personnel and cadres are already expressing an interest in her. She tells Thu-Thuy that she spread around a rumour that the young widow suffered from a mysterious woman's illness for which she was receiving treatment. Thu-Thuy is grateful for this and the incident stirs her out of her lethargy: 'De tous les temps, nous les jeunes veuves, femmes seules, sommes exposées au marché de la vie comme des bijoux sans écrins, des fleurs sans maîtres, piégées sans défense aux quatre coins des rues ' (p. 308). She feels her husband's presence hovering protectively around her. She slowly pieces her health together and sets down to hard physical work in the new conditions. She visits her husband's grave regularly, reports all the latest happenings to him and swears the following:

Je fais le serment pour le reste de ma vie, et dans l'attente des jours meilleurs, de garder mon cœur intact et pur pour vénérer ta mémoire, de ne pas passer dans une autre barque aussi enchantée soit-elle, de tenir ma promesse d'une fidélité éternelle envers toi, et de ne jamais quitter cette terre du Sud où reposent désormais tes cendres, bien que cette terre

soit enveloppée d'un voile de souffrances et de désespoir. (p. 309)

Of her own volition, she undertakes to remain eternally faithful to his memory, never to remarry and never to leave the country. She conforms to the Confucian ideal of the perfect wife, obedient and loyal.³³

More than in the two earlier novels, the women in *Le Mirage de la paix* can stand as a symbol of their country, a country at war. They have borne the cost of the war, experienced loss and despair, were partly destroyed and yet they survived. Beyond the immediate politics of the Vietnam war and the defeat of the South, the women, like the country at large, embody the abused yet still present state of their land. Vietnam underwent centuries of turmoil, invasion, occupation, rebellion and lengthy years of war. The women in *Le Mirage de la paix*, despite the reverses in their lives, endure. In the end, they, and their country, still remain.

On the surface, the description and judgement of women in *Le Mirage de la paix* are restricting and stifling. They are figures which echo ideals espoused by mother and grandmother and are illustrations in themselves of the subservient role of women in patriarchy. A woman has neither voice nor presence unless she is attached to a man, and unless she is catering to the needs of other individuals. Even a robust, capable peasant like Manh, although she chooses not to marry, devotes her energy instead towards looking after her mistresses and the latter's children.

³³'La morale confucéenne exigeait que la femme reste fidèle à son mari défunt pour se consacrer à ses enfants. Le terme qui signifie la veuve (*chung phu*) signifie "fidèle jusqu'à la fin". ... Un autre terme plus communément employé pour désigner la veuve est "tiet phu", dont le sens est "femme vertueuse".' Tran-Thi-Tuyet, 'La Femme vietnamienne', p. 65.

Ly Thu Ho's last novel, even more so than the earlier ones, depicts female stereotypes - stereotypes which conform to the roles assigned to them by society: the roles of virtuous and loving helpmate, and self-sacrificing mother. There are few indications of women's independence, assertion of free spirit, or outside interests. A woman asserts her will by getting herself a man. Every path in the end returns to the catering of a husband and child. Her role and her duty are perceived as such, not only by men, but by other women, operating under similar constraints. The cycle seems neverending.

Ly Thu Ho was a pioneering woman writer for her generation. She wrote on the current politics of Vietnam. Perhaps her way of apologizing for the presumption of holding forth such views publicly was to ensure that her female characters conformed to the sphere of domesticity and privacy. 'The public and private lives cannot be linked, as in male narratives'.³⁴ It is the men in the novels who discuss the political and military situation. It is they who are mobile, active and instrumental in the events of the country. The women watch and suffer. They do not articulate in public their perspective on the civil war. The only one who comes close to doing so in *Le Mirage de la paix* is the bar girl Kieu-Lien, a woman who has to live on her wits. She tells Thu-Thuy:

Car je n'ai confiance ni en cette paix prochaine qu'on nous annonce à travers le monde tout en faisant traîner dans des négociations interminables pour mieux l'étouffer, ni dans des promesses pleines d'espoir formulées par les deux camps dans leur propagande politique. Je ne pense qu'à moi seulement parce que je suis d'une nature égoïste, mais parce que je trouve absurde le fait de se sacrifier pendant que

³⁴Heilbrun, *Writing*, p. 25.

d'autres exploitent vos cadavres. Je me fais une idée particulière du mot 'patriotique'. Lorsque je me trouve en contact avec un militaire, qu'il soit étranger ou vietnamien, j'emploie tous les moyens pour le décourager de la guerre, lui enlever le goût de se battre. Car je pense que seuls les combattants pourraient faire cesser cette guerre. (p. 175)

Thu-Thuy and Ngoc-Suong, after marriage and motherhood, are confined to the plantation. Neither appears to question the concept of self-sacrifice in a woman. It is too deeply inculcated in them for them to perceive this. Thu-Thuy underwent a long series of family tragedies before finding fulfilment in her husband and children. She had devoted herself to her father and brother. A brilliant student, she gave up her studies and worked to support her father and ensure that her brother - the son and heir - would receive a good education. This was to no avail. Her brother disappeared in combat. Her father died after five years of poverty and she was left penniless and in addition, without any educational qualifications. She then invested her entire being in the man she loved, only to have him killed in combat. Her personality, her individuality, and her intrinsic worth become submerged by the events surrounding her. Her life revolves around the men she loved and on whose behalf she expanded her energies. She stands as the long-suffering symbol of thousands of war widows.

As the daughter of a wealthy plantation owner, Ngoc-Suong received a good education and was given the chance to go to Europe to widen her horizons. She chose to assert herself against her father's wishes and to stay in Vietnam to marry the man she loved. She stayed to share with him the hardship and loss of war. It was commonplace among the upper echelons of society to send their children to be educated in Europe, particularly in France.

Sons were naturally given priority but an increasing number of daughters were also sent, if the family could afford to do so. To Ngoc-Suong, it seems of little concern that she turned away the chance of a lifetime, and one, moreover, only given to the privileged few. She was content to focus her life and future on the person of Duy-Cau and to share whatever difficulties lay ahead with him. Both she and Thu-Thuy bear out woman's inner ideal of subsuming the self for the sake of others.

In her earlier novels, Ly Thu Ho, while investing her female characters with traditionally feminine attributes, provided at the same time an analysis of the hidden tragedies within such socially acceptable exteriors. 'Women writers ... have articulated their pain. But they cannot, or for the most part have not, imagined characters moving, as the authors themselves have moved, beyond that pain'.³⁵ *Le Mirage de la paix* is the most pessimistic of Ly Thu Ho's novels. Constant, unremitting war had eroded society. Women in such a society were even more victims of circumstances. The implication is that it would be selfish of them to think of their own fulfilment when so many were suffering and dying. Where else would women's intelligence and energy expand themselves? What other avenues were there? Was it not best to conform to traditional notions of womanhood, to give some semblance of sanity and stability to society, to marry and bear children to make up for the losses? The prospect is horrifying.

In this last novel, the mother-figure, represented by Ba-Sau, is the upholder of culture and tradition: 'It was claimed that the women of the East were more spiritual; that they were heirs to

³⁵Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Reinventing Womanhood* (London, 1979), p. 72.

the wisdom of centuries; that they ... were still the custodians and transmitters of national culture'.³⁶ Ba-Sau's strictures have the most effect on the two characters who conform most closely to this ideal, both of them of bourgeois background: Thu-Thuy and Ngoc-Suong. Both, predictably, undergo loss and tragedy. Despite a greater measure of assertion (in the sexual sphere) than their earlier counterparts Tran in *Printemps inachevé*, and Lang in *Au milieu du carrefour*, both female protagonists embody the traditional feminine attributes which characterized their predecessors. Their personalities stand in marked contrast to the figures of Kieu-Lien, the bar girl and Manh, the peasant. As in *Au milieu du carrefour*, it is these two women who stand on the periphery of society, who possess the more colourful and arresting personalities. The passivity and sweetness of the two principal female characters serve to underline their eventual apathy and powerlessness in the face of great loss.

Ly Thu Ho's novels are written clearly and simply. The novels proceed in chronological order. She did not experiment with circular time, splintered perceptions or characterization. She was not interested, as some of her male contemporary writers were, in using innovative novelistic techniques. The break up of personalities and societies is not reflected in the structure or style of her novels. Progression is orderly and linear. Her novels are conventional on the surface and are deceptively easy to read. Her main characters also conform to convention: the women are vulnerable, the men are strong. Yet the surface calmness of her novels allowed her to express unusual and unconventional views. A

³⁶Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism*, p. 257.

considerable irony underlines her works. Virtue and obedience in her female protagonists result in wasted, stifled lives, in anonymity, or, as in *Printemps inachevé*, death. Her protagonists serve to set off the minor and more unusual female characters: Xinh and Thuy in *Au milieu du carrefour*, Manh and Kieu-Lien in *Le Mirage de la paix*. The interaction between these female characters in turn allows for discussions on prostitution, single motherhood and interracial relationships. It is possible that the presence of totally unobjectionable female characters at these discussions renders these views more acceptable and serves not to alienate a potential audience.

In all three novels, the classical female virtues of filial and wifely obedience, beauty and gentleness are rewarded with nullity. The women who conform to these ideals experience brief happiness, followed by tragedy, or disappear in anonymity. Lang in *Au milieu du carrefour* is swallowed by the more impressive and socially prominent figure of her husband. Her ambitions, political acumen and interests are subsumed by her duties as supporter and shadow of her husband. In general, these women are to be pitied for their vulnerability. They are at the mercy of events beyond their power. The figures which do stand out are the unconventional ones: the woman entrepreneur, the servant, the bar girl. These are in the end more attractive characters because they are in some ways more fallible and human.

There exists a marked disparity between Ly Thu Ho's experience and that of the women in her novels. Her expression as a novelist contrasts with the lack of expression of her main female protagonists. In this way, she shares similar traits with

some of her Western counterparts at the end of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth.

It is remarkable that ... women writers should have set aside their own experience in writing about women. Male writers have not done this, and such a difference must have import. Women writers, on the whole, have tried to write about women on the whole - that is, about the experience of the female sex, rather than that of an extraordinary member of that sex. And the experience of women in general, even those of the middle or upper classes, is one of constriction.³⁷

In Ly Thu Ho's novels, it is noticeable that the female protagonists who belong to her social class and background are correspondingly the least articulate on the political and military realities of the times, subjects upon which she, as the author, discourses at length and with confidence through the letters of her male protagonists. These same well-brought up women are also the most vulnerable to the feminine ideal and suffer correspondingly. It is the women who stand on the fringe of respectable society and possess a stronger sense of identity who are able to articulate strongly-held views on a number of topics.

The subversive aspect of Ly Thu Ho's writing appears in the resulting fate of the female characters. The figure of the prostitute is punished in the first and second but not in the third novel. Instead, it is the virtuous female protagonists who are punished, whether by fate and circumstance, in all three novels: the years of torment and an early death for Tran in *Printemps inachevé*; the gradual anonymity of Lang in *Au milieu du carrefour*; and the sadness, bereavement and breakdown of Thu-Thuy and Ngoc-Suong in *Le Mirage de la paix*. The author portrays, through the

³⁷French, 'Afterword', p. 352.

apparent surface conventions in style, content and characterization, the restricted boundaries and silenced identities of the truly feminine characters. These intelligent, attractive and sensitive female protagonists lose their personality or, as is the case in *Printemps inachevé*, their lives. At the time, Ly Thu Ho presents a sympathetic examination of the bar girls and prostitutes of Saigon, and of women who, through adverse circumstances or otherwise, were forced to be self-reliant.

Her treatment of women's lives is subtle and unaggressive. The point is made not by the anger or the outward rebellion of robust female characters but by the bounded and bonded lives of those (the greater mass of women) who conformed and lived the lives they did. As the writer Isabel Allende stated:

As women, we were kept silent in public, but we had a private voice. ... I write about the lives of my people. It is the voice, not of the winners, but of the little people, us, my mother, my grandmother, not my grandfather who wrote history with big capital letters ... I want to tell a secret story, that of silent voices who cannot speak.³⁸

The Black writer Audre Lorde expressed similar sentiments: 'Primarily, I write for those women who do not speak; who do not have verbalization because they, we, are so terrified, because we are taught to respect fear more than ourselves'.³⁹ Ly Thu Ho wrote of the lives of Vietnamese women within a context of war and change. Her approach differs from that of contemporary male Francophone writers such as Pham Van Ky, whose denunciations of an oppressive familial and social system are dramatic and much more violent. Destruction, death or escape are the only solution. In

³⁸Quoted in Gazarian Gautier, *Interviews*, pp. 14-16.

³⁹Audre Lorde, 'My Words Will Be There' in *Black Women Writers: Arguments and Interviews*, edited by Mari Evans (London, 1985), 261-268 (p. 262).

Ly Thu Ho's novels, escape is not usually an option, neither is death (apart from the figure of Tran in *Printemps inachevé*). Instead, the reality consists of the slow destruction of the self for the women who struggle on, bear their children, and endure the ravages of war.

The subdued quality of Ly Thu Ho's approach could be due to a number of reasons. One is her age. She began writing after raising six children. She belonged to an older generation, one which paid more attention to surface courtesies and reserve. Like Vietnamese women writers and poets of preceding centuries, she prefers to express her views indirectly. Earlier predecessors, such as the eighteenth-century poet Ho Xuan Huong, criticized political, social and sexual hypocrisy through the double-entendres of their verses. Ly Thu Ho expressed herself instead through the non-threatening protagonists of her novels. She did not belong to the angry generation of women, as did the young women writers of the 1960s in South Vietnam. Women of her generation were not supposed to express anger:

Assertiveness is often seen as lack of respect. Traditional education advised women to 'ngam dang nuot cay' which can be translated as 'keeping the bitter in one's mouth and swallow the spicy'. In other words, repressing one's negative emotions and feelings was considered better than giving vent to them.⁴⁰

Ly Thu Ho had not reached the stage, because of her circumstances and cultural background, of being able to express anger outwardly and openly or - for that matter - to have her

⁴⁰Cam Nguyen, 'Barriers to Communication between Vietnamese and Non-Vietnamese' (Paper given at the Fifth National Conference of the Network for International Communication, La Trobe University, September 4th, 1990), 2-7 (p. 5).

female characters express it. She had few precedents for it. Such confidence among women writers appeared later on when women felt freer and were able to express themselves with fewer restrictions. Ly Thu Ho portrayed the reality as it was for many women rather than activate for change. But that there is a store of residual anger is evident in her work, in the self-defeating constraint in the lives of these women and in the fate she apportions her most conventional characters. A woman is brought up to believe that she will achieve happiness and fulfilment in conforming to the role society decrees for her, that she will achieve her just reward in behaving in a proper manner. This lesson is stressed repeatedly by the mother-figure in all three novels. But the reality for the daughters, as described in these novels, is precisely the reverse. A woman loses whatever individuality she possesses and whatever true chance of happiness a strong sense of self-respect would allow her by conforming or attempting to conform to this ideal. This is conveyed most powerfully in *Printemps inachevé*.

Ly Thu Ho's most expressive novel is her first. She criticizes the traditional concepts of virtue and filial obedience through her depiction of the tragic and unnecessary waste of a woman's life, and provides, indirectly, a reappraisal of the classic tale of Kieu. In *Printemps inachevé*, she succeeds in expressing, transmuted to a modern context, a woman's response to the moral dilemma of Kieu.

Ly Thu Ho's background can perhaps be aligned with the generation of women writers who wrote and published in the West at the end of the nineteenth century. Although she comes from a

different social and cultural background, some of the conditions she experienced as a Vietnamese woman would be akin to those which women experienced in the late nineteenth century in both Europe and America. Duty, obedience and passivity were ideals for women in both societies. The transition from traditional mores to more modern ones took place more rapidly and in the twentieth century for Vietnamese women. In this light, the following, written with regard to the American writer Edith Wharton, seems particularly appropriate:

Four things are necessary for felicity: the resources to maintain life; intimate, mutual love; a community of loving equals; and work which allows the realisation of one's capacities. Most female characters written in works written before our own age - even those created by women - possess none of these, or only one, a fact that suggests that women writers, whatever their subject matter, are almost invariably also writing about the dominant fact of women's lives: constriction, caused by both the external world - laws, conventions, and institutions - and the internal world - inhibitions, guilts, and fears. ...

For those of us who are more fortunate, the work of serious women writers of the past serves as illumination and warning.⁴¹

⁴¹French, 'Afterword', p. 353.

CHAPTER THREE

WOMEN IN TWO NOVELS BY PHAM VAN KY

The Nature of the Outsider

Let form and formless go their round of change.
– Vien Chieu

In contrast to Ly Thu Ho, Pham Van Ky has a rather different approach towards the portrayal of women in his novels, in particular *Frères de sang* (1947) and *Des Femmes assises çà et là* (1964). Ly Thu Ho's handling of the matter is subdued and characterized by an underlying irony. Her novels are indirect criticisms of the social constraints imposed on women. Pham Van Ky's two novels, on the other hand, are direct and open criticisms of these same constraints. It is the earlier work, *Frères de sang*, which contains the most rounded female characters. In the later *Des Femmes assises çà et là*, the women appear as flat and two-dimensional characters with abstract personalities, rather than as flesh-and-blood individuals. The first novel is set in a Vietnamese village, and contains a clear critique of the patriarchal nature of traditional society. The second novel is set in France. Of the four major female characters, only the narrator's mother is

Vietnamese. The three others, Eliane, Solange and Orla, are European. *Des Femmes assises çà et là* is a record of the narrator's experiences and views and his introspective musings. As Yeager wrote: 'The narration can best be described as an interior monologue, recalling at times stream-of-consciousness style and Sarraute's *sous-conversation* technique'.¹

There are four main questions which I wish to examine in this chapter. How are the women in these novels portrayed? What do they represent? What is the resulting effect of these representations? What about the use of irony? I will argue that Pham Van Ky's narrator in both novels (and Pham Van Ky himself) is an outsider, an alien, an onlooker. This applies to him not only as the prodigal son in *Frères de sang* but also as the foreigner and, more to the point, the male observer of the women around him in *Des Femmes assises çà et là*.

Frères de sang chronicles the return of the son to his native village after years of study in France. After these long years overseas, the narrator watches and observes with a particularly sensitive eye the interlocking relationships and social currents surrounding his family and the village as a whole. He feels a stranger in his own land. It is the narrator's father, a tradition-bound patriarch and also head of the village who gives his son, the unnamed narrator of *Frères de sang*, the update on his siblings. Among them he mentions his daughter, Dinh, and we are introduced to a first category of women: the rebellious sister,

au sujet de qui un entremetteur est venu, il y une semaine. Un parti inespéré: le fils du Préfet de la

¹Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 150.

circonscription. (Même jeu: "Une excentrique! que la vie conjugale se chargera de calmer.").²

Her father labels her an 'eccentric' character whom married life would 'tame'. The old patriarch also expresses the value he places on his children: 'ici, on élève des enfants pour se protéger contre la vieillesse improductive, comme on emmagasine le riz contre la famine' (p. 27). Dinh represents the figure of the young radical and rebel. The narrator says of her later on:

Pauvre sœur! Cette 'excentrique' couvait un rêve immense: émanciper la femme annamite, lui assurer une condition au moins égale à celle de l'homme. Père avait interrompu ses études primaires supérieures, dans un collège mixte, n'ayant pu trouver un établissement pour filles seules. (p. 32)

Her brother is therefore surprised and understandably wary when Dinh later acquiesces to the matchmaking and asks for an early marriage. Her brother taxes her with this. He had hoped that she would confide in him:

Je représentais, pour cette championne de l'émancipation, 'celui-qui-est-sorti-de-la-Tradition' ... Pourtant ... elle se retranchait encore derrière une indifférence ostensible. Et comme je m'étonnais de ce qu'elle allât à épouser quelqu'un qu'elle n'avait jamais vu:
- Grand'mère a-t-elle agi autrement? Et Mère non plus! Et sœur Co non plus, me répondit-elle.
Et elle parodia la formule chère à Lê Tâm:
- Dans ce pays où le soleil se lève et depuis qu'il se lève, la femme a-t-elle changé?
Habilement, elle se déroba à mon interrogatoire. J'étais impuissant à en déceler le vrai motif. (pp. 124-125)

The actual wedding day sees her married to '[un homme] fluet, maladif, le visage grêlé de variole. ... Dinh eut un instant de flottement, mais se ressaisit vite' (pp. 158-159). As her brother

²Pham Van Ky, *Frères de Sang* (Paris, 1947), p. 27. Subsequent references will be given in the main text.

had surmised, Dinh's acquiescence was deceptive. The entire charade was to allow herself and her brother Hô (also a rebel against village law and tradition) to escape. The following day the abandoned bridegroom presented to his father-in-law the following message from his absent bride:

'Il faudrait me gagner, mon bon ami. Et pas avec des bijoux. Je vau mieux qu'un précepte de Confucius. Les "trois obéissances", je les fourre dans mon sac. Les "quatre vertus" je les chique. ... Soyez d'abord homme et je serai effectivement votre femme. Je n'ai accepté de "convoler en justes noces" que dans l'intention de créer une diversion pour l'évasion de mon frère Hô - sinon de la provoquer - et de pouvoir moi-même m' évader. Ne désespérez pas. L'éternel féminin, en Annam, a changé de peau. ... Adieu. J'attends votre demande en divorce. A mes torts, bien entendu' (pp. 175-176).

This message, while ostensibly directed towards her bridegroom, was as much a gesture of defiance aimed at the constricting nature of village life and in particular the man who headed the village and represented authority: her father. She rejects the traditional concepts of the Three Submissions and the Four Virtues.³ Thuong Vuong-Riddick sets Dinh's representation within its historical and social context:

D'une manière plus inattendue, la révolte revêt le visage de Dinh, la jeune sœur touchée par les idées de l'émancipation de la femme. Certes, comme la plupart des femmes du monde entier, les Vietnamiennes sont restées soumises à l'homme, mais son statut, assez complexe, dépasse de beaucoup l'image simpliste de la femme orientale-esclave. La société vietnamienne garde les traces du système matriarcal primitif sur lequel s'est greffé, par la suite, le système patriarcal importé de la Chine. ... L'existence des deux pôles laissent aux femmes une marge de manœuvre et leur permet de jouer un rôle économique important. Mais

³The Four Virtues '(*tu duc*): labour (*cong*), physical appearance (*dung*), appropriate speech (*ngon*), and proper behaviour (*hanh*)'. David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley, 1981), p. 192.

dans ce roman, Pham Van Ky s'est attaché à décrire la famille régie par l'ordre confucéen.⁴

The narrator's family is an example of the ultimately conformist family within traditional Vietnam. Roles and each individual's position in the hierarchy are rigidly delineated and adhered to.⁵ Escape was the only recourse for the rebel in this situation. Historically:

The emperor made demands, and it was for the villagers to carry them out. But his guarantee that they would do so rested more on their sense of obligation than on an authoritarian system of coercion. Conversely, when the villagers, who looked to the imperial officials as men who would guarantee their protection and good exactions, found that a local mandarin was corrupt or made unfair exactions, they could not appeal against him to the law: their only defence was either open revolt, or to leave the village and return when the official had gone.⁶

Since their father was the head of the village, Dinh and Hô were left with no other option but to flee.

Dinh is sharply contrasted against another sister, Co, whose husband was in prison at the time of the narrator's return to his native village. Co is a model of conformity. The reader is introduced to a second category of women: the virtuous wife. Co appears to spend her days writing long letters to her husband. Upon observing her, Dinh says to her sister: 'Avec toi, mourra la dernière femme-esclave' (p. 82). Co's letters reveal traditional images of female virtue (diligence, thrift) as well as her despair at

⁴Thuong Vuong-Riddick, 'Le drame de l'occidentalisation dans quelques romans de Pham Van Ky', *Présence francophone*, 16 (printemps 1970), 141-152 (p. 146).

⁵Dans le code de Gia-Long, c'est le chef de la famille qui est le seul régulateur de la famille. Il a le droit de marier ses enfants, de corriger l'épouse et les concubines (art. 284) et les enfants (art. 283, 284, 288 Gia-Long), sans pouvoir cependant, disposer de la vie de ces derniers'. Tran-Thi-Tuyet, 'La Femme vietnamienne à travers la littérature populaire' (unpublished dissertation, University of Brussels, 1974), p. 176.

⁶Ralph Smith, *Vietnam and the West* (London, 1968), p. 60.

the absence of her husband. She makes numerous allusions to both classical literature and folksong. Her sentences abound with classical metaphors. The effect, in this modern context, is *précieux*: mannered, artificial and foreign. The sentences do not translate well into French. They illustrate the mode of writing of another culture. They form a contrast to the unadorned prose of the novel itself. The excerpts of Vietnamese folksong and poetry in *Frères de sang* mostly relate to women and in general to the subordination of women in society.

While the narrator notes his sister's style of writing, he omits to say anything of his father's. The latter was brought up in the mandarinal system of education (what was left of it) and would presumably have adopted an equally difficult and ornate style of writing. Yet this style of writing is somehow allied with women, with mannerisms, with femininity, perhaps to underline that women are still bound by these traditions and are more restricted than men. They sing (through folklore) and write (in letters) of their own submission and dependence upon men. Their subject condition is paralleled by that of the narrator, subject as he is to parental authority and cultural norms, in a country colonized by a foreign power, and forced into expressing himself and his experience, like the women, through the only language available to him, the language of the other, French. The narrator reveals his sister Co's first letter to her husband:

'J'ai les entrailles déchirées de nous voir séparés, à des centaines de li, par le vent et la neige. Mes larmes tombent comme des perles désenfilées et humectent mon habit. ... Au ciel, avec vous, je voudrais être deux loriots qui volent ensemble. Sur la terre, deux racines qui s'entre-croisent' (p. 31).

Her position as a woman, daughter, sister, and wife is linked with traditional literature, not only in its imagery but also in its mood and tone. She adopts a poetic, lyrical style of writing with numerous references to nature, both flora and fauna. In her mournful yearning for an absent husband, she echoes and brings to mind female characterization in much of Vietnamese poetry. Classical literature contains numerous titles illustrating the plight of abandoned women, whether wife or mistress, lamenting men gone to war or elsewhere: *Lament of a Soldier's Wife*, *Lament of a Royal Concubine*, *New Plaint of a Broken Heart*. Vietnamese literature echoes with the suffering of bereft women and Co appears to conform to this long line of female characters in literature.

The narrator's portrayal of Co also exemplifies a passive female figure. She is represented as sitting down, leaning on the table and writing to her husband, in contrast to the dynamic and spirited figure of her younger sister Dinh, whose diction is correspondingly robust and direct, as evidenced by her letter to her bridegroom. Co's personality, in conforming to a traditional mould of femininity, is by the same token associated with traditional literary imagery. She continues writing to her husband:

'Les aigles-pêcheurs émigrent vers l'Est - une fois accouplés, ils ne se quittent plus, ni se trahissent. ... Je n'essuie plus mes miroirs. Comme l'eau, mes rêves coulent vers vous. Si les champs de mûriers se transforment en mers, selon la légende, mon cœur demeure intact. Sur les sept cordes de ma guitare, ma peine vibre. Les cordes "militaires" gémissent. Les cordes "lettrées" pleurent. Et moi, je cogne mon front contre la porte de votre prison qui ne cède pas' (pp. 61-62).

Her life is held in waiting for the return of her husband. She is powerless. She does not have recourse to law or petition. Instead she waits and weeps. Her one spurt of activity is her writing:

'Aujourd'hui, je suis pareille à une pièce de soie rouge qui flotte au marché et ne sait dans quelles mains elle tombera... La douleur rapproche mes sourcils... Tocsins et tambours divisaient la nuit. J'ai versé dix mille torrents de larmes... Dès votre retour, je suivrai votre voiture ou précéderai votre cheval pour vous frayer le chemin'. (p. 82)

Co indulges in all this elaborate mourning for a husband whom her sister Dinh dismisses as:

- Ton commis des Résidences ne vaut pas tant d'humilité de ta part: un bureaucrate moisi qui a des allures de valet!
- Je te défends,... gronda doucement Co. S'il avait été aussi servile que tu prétends, on ne l'aurait pas jeté en prison.
- Beaucoup y sont pour médiocrité, répliqua Dinh. (p. 83)

When Co's husband finally reappears on the scene, his arrival is also described in classical terms, which manage to render the entire scene mildly ridiculous. Co had just finished writing another letter in which 'je m'attelle comme un dragon à votre char de jade et d'ivoire. ... un coup de vent suffit à donner la vie à un lumignon.' (pp. 111-112), when 'Cung, son mari, surgit en "coup de vent qui donne la vie à un lumignon" '(p. 112). The repetition of the expression serves to stress the melodramatic effect of her husband's unexpected reappearance in her life. He had been freed from the prison by the Viet-Minh and hastened home to his wife: 'De Quinho au village, il avait accompli le voyage à pied et mendié en cours de route. Au bout d'une attente infinie, il retrouva enfin "sa petite sœur", son "corps" (*minh*)!' (p. 112). In this passage, the narrator alludes to the element of condescension

in the traditional terms of address between husband and wife. He refers rather mockingly to his brother-in-law's haste and Cung's appraisal of his wife as 'little sister' - and property. Co, after such passionate letters of longing, is restrained and demure in her greeting of this so-longed-for husband. It was unseemly for a woman to display such emotions in public. She must be well and decorously behaved as befitting a respectable wife. It is in her nature to be so. Her response is also particularly Vietnamese, evincing a traditional reserve:

Elle n'était pas expansive, comme l'eût souhaité un époux d'Europe. Mais ses paupières baissées se fermèrent, un moment, sur l'éclat humide des yeux. A peine l'eut-il touchée qu'elle se dégagea doucement de lui. Cette pudeur ne lui fut pas dictée par la présence des siens. Elle lui était naturelle. (p. 112)

Cung, despite his record as a prisoner of the French, is not the heroic and far-seeing individual which Co's other and idealistic younger brother Hô had longed to emulate: 'il eut tôt fait de constater sa grossière méprise: Cung n'était qu'une loque, une cible vivante - pour combien de tireurs?' (p. 113). Co eventually leaves the village in order to follow her husband.

The figure of the narrator's mother is one of the most discordant ones in the novel. Her image and personality illustrate a medley of compromises and adjustments to misfortune. She represents a third category of women: the hysterical mother. This is how the narrator first sees his mother upon returning to the family home:

Mère pleurait par saccades, le visage enfouie dans une serviette cinabre - afin qu'elle ne fût pas salie par les chiques de bétel. Ses plus grandes joies étaient trempées de larmes. Ses plus grandes douleurs

provoquaient un rire de sel chauffé à blanc qui crépite.
Une nerveuse, malgré sa placidité apparente. (p. 27)

Her image is full of contradictions. She is a woman whose life is perhaps one of unexpressed and unacknowledged frustrations and limitations. The narrator relates that her strange laughter dated from the time his father took on a concubine.⁷ Her only outlets are hysterical laughter when she is sad and overwrought tears when she is happy (as at the return of her son from overseas). She is torn inwardly. She seems to be paying the toll for outwardly conforming to her role as a woman just as her son is now paying the toll for bending to society's directives regarding the eldest son's duty in the family. The dual image of the mother parallels the dual image of the son.

The mother later tells her son that the concubine had been sent away for misbehaviour by his father not long before his return and that his younger brother Hô had threatened to kill himself if his father took on a second concubine. It seems that the mother has much to be unhappy about. Her 'rire de sel qui crépite' appears periodically throughout the novel. She weeps and then laughs on the return of her son-in-law, laughter and tears mingling: 'Son rire de sel s'égrena lentement, les gros grains mouillés par les larmes qui tombaient de ses joues lasses' (p. 115). She laughs hysterically during the preparations for her daughter Dinh's marriage - whether it be sorrow at the fate of her daughter, or sorrow because her daughter was not confiding in her, or sorrow at her helplessness in the affairs and happiness of her

⁷'La polygamie était une institution acceptée de fait ... Elle était en tout cas reconnue par la coutume. ... Cette coutume a duré plusieurs siècles; elle fut officiellement abrogée le 2 janvier 1959 par la loi numéro 1-59'. Tran-Thi-Tuyet, 'La Femme vietnamienne', p. 55.

children, or simply sorrow because she was going to lose her daughter in marriage. Her despair is later evident when her other daughter Co also leaves, to follow her husband Cung.

Mère courut pour les rattraper. Ses lamentations furent noyées dans son rire de sel qui crépite. On eût dit les premiers grésillements d'un début d'incendie. (p. 147)

The laughter has a dry, harsh, grating, barren sound, the sensation of a glittering and wounding field of salt. The image and sound are painful. They also indicate the beginning of a general conflagration, not only in a woman's life and emotions and in particular, the loss to her, one by one, of her children, but in the general disintegration of village life. Towards the end of the novel, with the loss of three of her children, the mother is left empty:

Son rire nerveux avait disparu. Mais son regard s'était décoloré et quand je me courbai pour la relever, je pensai à Grand'mère. (p. 173)

Her son's last sight of his mother is one which reminds him of his grandmother, another figure of fate in the family. His grandmother was slowly dying when he returned to the village. The narrator's images of her are of immateriality, impotence and helplessness. She had lost her memory. She could not remember her grandchildren, even though she had devoted her entire life to her family. She asks the narrator: 'Qui es-tu?' (p. 63).

Grand'mère somnolait dans une tiédeur de nirvâna. Clouée à un fauteuil nacré, à la suite d'une paralysie des jambes, elle se regardait mourir lentement. Les événements la traversait telle une transparence. Elle n'avait de consistant qu'une toux fibreuse qui, à chaque crise, semblait la vider du peu de sa conscience. Un autre témoin. Un autre modèle de pérennité! (pp. 27-28)

Her image, also, is contradictory. She represents 'la pérennité' and yet she is dying. She has neither voice nor opinion, yet her very presence is a symbol of tradition, of family life. She embodies a fourth category of women: the grandmother as a symbol of continuity and yet simultaneously one of (in this context) death and unawareness. Her passing may indicate the end of the society which she knew. Her grandson's arrival coincided with the winds of change hitting the village. The narrator's inner conflicts and uncertainties are given public voice in the maelstrom of events which were soon to shake the village with such violence and shattering results.

Unrelated to the family, the female figure to whom the narrator gives the most space and attention is the figure of Tu, the cook, daughter of the old family servant Ong Chin. She represents a fifth category: the seductive maidservant. But rather than being abused by her masters and the other men and notables of the village, all of whom lust after her, she succeeds in both uncovering their lust while at the same time depriving them of its gratification. She is depicted as attractive and flirtatious, 'belle et célibataire', available therefore on several fronts and disadvantaged by her youth, sex and low rank. Yet somehow, she retains her autonomy and self-respect and makes clever use of her father's proprietary attitude towards her to fend off unwanted suitors. The narrator is immediately aware of the effect she has on his own father:

La cuisinière Tu rangea son éventail et se dirigea vers le réduit de Grand'mère pour lui donner à boire. Son corps félin ondula avec un déhanchement lascif. Sous sa tunique noire dégrafée, à cause de la chaleur, se gonflait un cache-seins vert. Le regard de Père s'y fixa,

brûlant de concupiscence, puis s'éteignit avec la lampe à acétylène. (p. 33)

The narrator later realizes that Tu is able to express her sexuality independently, while still managing to be at the beck and call of her doting father. The narrator focuses a great deal on Tu's physical attributes - a seductive body, a curvaceous shape. In his short encounters with her, the narrator finds himself perturbed by this: 'Elle me lança une œillade, son corps frôlant le mien, contre la mienne son haleine fraîche comme une tranche de pastèque. Troublé malgré moi...' (p. 63).

An entire chapter (XII) is devoted to an episode in which Tu outwits her male admirers. The narrator, along with the other men watches her, mesmerized, while she bathes:

Tu lavait, dans l'étang, des cheveux qui lui tombaient jusqu'aux chevilles. ... Un dos lisse et des bras tendres comme de jeunes pousses de bambous. Tous les désirs des hommes semblaient converger vers cette créature lubrique sur la tête de laquelle restaient suspendues la menace du couteau paternel et la malédiction qui accompagnait de nouveau sa mère. ... Il suffisait qu'elle fût là pour que de tous les points du village arrivassent des pubères, des libidineux, des cacochymes, des canoniques... (p. 76)

The Mayor and village notables all find themselves in the same place. Tu's father Ong Chin also makes his appearance, armed with the usual knife in his belt. Tu's erstwhile suitors gradually melt away. The Mayor stays longest in an attempt to hold on to his dignity and finally leaves after a fit of irrepressible laughter on the part of Tu. Hidden behind a tree, the narrator watches the proceedings. He realizes that Tu had planned the entire scene quite deliberately, ridiculing and uncovering the hypocrisy of all these worthy and respectable men:

Quel mauvais tour avait-elle joué à ses amoureux empressés? Elle leur avait donné rendez-vous à la même heure, au même endroit en chargeant Ba, entre temps, de prévenir le cerbère pour qu'il l'en délivrât. (p. 79)

In doing so, she not only revealed these men to each other but she did so through the means of a traditional woman's virtue: she ostensibly relied on the protection of her father, jealous guardian of his daughter's chastity and honour. She successfully made the point that she was out of bounds to these men. She may have been young, poor, attractive and single, but this did not mean that they had a right to avail themselves of her body. She refuses to be a pure commodity. Tu makes clever use of the weapons of traditional society in order to make her point.

Tu, triomphante, suivit son père comme une chienne battue.
Longtemps encore, on l'entendit chanter:

*Dix hommes valent trois sapèques.
Je les enferme dans une cage et les promène comme
des oiseaux.
Une femme vaut trois cents sapèques.
Il faut l'installer chez soi sur une natte fleurie...* (p. 80)

There is a juxtaposition of apposite images: Tu 'trionphante' who follows her father 'comme une chienne battue'. At the same time, she sings that a woman is worth a thousand men. 'It would be wrong to assume ... that Confucian moralists had succeeded entirely in propagandizing pre-modern Vietnamese women into submission. Among the plain people in particular there remained a frankness of expression and diversity of life experience that defied regimentation. Each Confucian platitude, for example, could be turned on its head at the right opportunity. Thus, the saying about

a hundred girls not being worth a single testicle was countered by "A hundred boys are not worth a girl's earlobe" '.⁸

Ba, Tu's brother, is caught in adultery with the wife of the *trùm*. The reader is introduced to the fate of a sixth category of women: the woman accused of adultery. The *trùm*'s wife first appears as a peasant working on the irrigation of the fields with Ba. 'Quel tableau harmonieux entre ces deux paysans qui dansaient presque, se cambrant, s'arc-boutant, balançant les bras, inclinant le buste. Ils semblaient s'être habitués l'un à l'autre depuis longtemps, s'étant accordés dès leur premier geste' (p. 136). The image is one of bucolic joy. The *trùm*'s wife and Ba do not know each other. Ba notes her physical attractiveness. 'Il la détailla avec effronterie' (p. 136). She is aware of this. 'Elle chanta: *Le monde est un spectacle bien réjouissant! / Pour un poisson qui nage, que de gens pour lui jeter l'hameçon!*' (p. 137). The next scene is violent: 'Grosse émotion au village: le *trùm* avait surpris, vers la première veille, sa femme avec Ba en flagrant délit d'adultère' (p. 138). 'Un attroupement s'était déjà formé autour du couple garrotté jusqu'au sang' (p. 138).

The narrator observes his father's arbitrary judgement and condemnation of these two people. Ba is the son of the family's lifelong servant Ong Chin. Both he and the *trùm*'s wife are condemned to a slow death by exposure, tied to a raft which is then set to drift down the river.⁹ The woman immediately receives

⁸Marr, *Tradition*, p. 196.

⁹'Le code [Gia-Long] prononçait la peine de mort pour la femme adultère prise en flagrant délit. ... L'époux bafoué, s'il était rancunier, pouvait même lier ensemble les deux complices surpris en flagrant délit, sur un radeau qui était ensuite abandonné à la dérive sur un cours d'eau'. Tran-Thi-Tuyet, 'La Femme vietnamienne', p. 56 and p. 58. This was an extreme example. Tran-Thi-Tuyet goes on to write: 'Mais en général, on se bornait à chaussonner l'épouse adultère, ou bien

the larger share of the blame: 'la culpabilité étant surtout du côté de la femme - du moins c'était la conception du côté de l'homme -' (p. 139). 'Ce qui condamne l'homme condamne d'abord la femme' (p. 156). The narrator watches the crowd: 'Ils étaient tous là, ceux qui n'avaient jamais commis ce péché mortel, et ceux qui s'y livraient en cachette' (p. 139). Even then, the Mayor cannot hide his lust in observing the accused woman. She had been beaten more severely than the man, since, as a woman, she was naturally the more guilty:

Le Maire, tout en exposant les faits à Père, jeta des coups d'œil furtifs vers la délinquante qui se croisait les bras sur les seins. Des seins mordorés et durs qu'on eût dits gonflés encore de désir. Ce qui lui restait de vêtement: un pantalon déchiré, à l'endroit... défendu, par la vindicte publique, dissimulait en vain des formes troublantes. (p. 139)

The ill-concealed 'convoitise' of the Mayor in this context is particularly abhorrent. He judges the woman while at the same time lusting after her, and in so doing punishes her for his feelings. The villagers are carried away by a feeling of collective hysteria: 'Une sorte de délire sacré les secouait, où il entrait un peu d'amour inné pour la justice, un peu de mépris et beaucoup d'excitation physique' (p. 139).

The only one to raise any objections is Tu, the servant girl. She throws out: 'Qui jugera les juges?' (p. 141). She continues courageously, driven by a desperate wish to save her brother:

- Et si le juge, marié lui-même et père de famille, avait séduit une servante livrée sans défense à son bon plaisir, serait-il lui aussi accusé d'adultère et traduit devant ce Conseil? (p. 142)

encore, l'affaire se soldait par le paiement d'une amende, par le mari ou la famille de la femme infidèle'. Tran-Thi-Tuyet, 'La Femme vietnamienne', p. 58.

Tu exposes the hypocrisy of the male judges (all village dignitaries). It is Ba's impeachment of another man's property which is at issue here, and the fact that he was caught doing so by the woman's husband. The novel focuses not on the act itself but on the consequences. Ba and the *trùm's* wife are both peasants. Neither had any forms of redress against those in power. 'The Notables made the laws and executed them'.¹⁰

Ba's father, Ong Chin, prepares the raft on which the condemned man and woman would be tied. He knew that crude village justice was inevitable. He does not speak up for his son or remind the head of the village, his Master, that he and his children had been lifelong and faithful servants of the family. After an initial stunned moment following Tu's question, order is restored, and the narrator's father decrees the death penalty. The sentence is immediately carried out.

There are three deaths in the end, since the mother of Ba joins her son on the raft. Hô, the narrator's younger brother, screams from his prison cell: 'Vous êtes des monstres! Vous vous entre-dévorez comme des monstres! ... Evacuez le village pour qu'on y mette le feu!' (p. 147). From the covered bodies of the rich to the near-naked bodies of the poor, the fate of these villagers, as Thuong Vuong-Riddick points out, reflects the social hierarchy of the village:

A travers le seul traitement du corps, il nous a été possible de retracer la structure sociale vietnamienne de l'époque, avec les corps vides mais sublimés de ses gouvernants, les corps présents mais torturés des paysans, les corps soignés de ses morts. Une telle

¹⁰Virginia Thompson, *French Indo-China* (London, 1937), p. 34.

répartition parle d'elle-même et explique la revendication d'une nouvelle structure sociale.¹¹

The narrator neither remonstrates with his father nor argues against the savagery and arbitrariness of the sentence and execution. He merely observes. Ong Chin followed the raft containing his son and wife's dying bodies for three days. Everyone in the neighbouring villages came to observe the drifting raft: 'Personne n'eut pitié d'eux' ... Et Ba, jusqu'à son dernier souffle, gémit: "Mère, Mère, pourquoi vous agrippez-vous à moi? Et tout le monde dit: "C'est la loi." ' (pp. 144-145). The crows begin to gather and peck, in a macabre dance 'Un, deux, trois':

Ils étaient une douzaine de ces oiseaux voraces à s'acharner contre les cadavres, sautillant du crâne au ventre, du ventre aux cuisses... Ils aimaient les parties charnues. Ils aimaient les chairs jeunes! Ils vous piquaient dans les seins, vous crevaient les yeux, vous farfouillaient dans les entrailles, toujours rassasiés, toujours insatiables! Un, deux, trois, quatre...(p. 145)

Ong Chin finally pities his wife and son, buys two coffins and buries them decently, but even then his compassion and horror do not encompass the fate of the condemned wife of the *trùm*. There is no one to care for her remains. She is damaged goods. Throughout the entire proceedings, she is given no voice at all. She is beaten, judged, condemned and executed without a hearing. In the classic bind of the powerless, she is silenced by the men around her. 'When you are powerless, you don't just speak differently. A lot, you don't speak. Your speech is not just differently articulated, it is silenced. Eliminated, gone'.¹² Ba's distress is recorded, but not hers. It is significant that she is left nameless. She is simply 'the

¹¹Thuong Vuong-Riddick, 'Corps et acculturation selon Pham Van Ky', *Présence francophone*, 18 (printemps 1979), 165-176 (p. 169).

¹²Catharine A. Mackinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge and London, 1987), p. 39.

trùm's wife'. She is not a person, but a body, and in the end she is dismissed as a body. Ong Chin does not mention her at all. He was not concerned about her spirit wandering without rest. Ong Chin, unlike his daughter Tu, remains servile to the end, acquiescing to society's judgements, society's bias, and his Master's authority. He tells the narrator's father:

- Mon fils Ba méritait son châtement, comme l'eût mérité le ravisseur de ma femme. Quant à ma fille Tu, sa... déposition s'est retournée contre elle. Vérité ou fausse accusation, que m'importe! Ce qui condamne l'homme condamne d'abord la femme. Votre Excellence l'a chassée de cette maison et c'est justice. Votre Excellence disposera à son gré des jours qui me restent à vivre! (p. 156)

He is old, bereft and heartbroken. He has nothing left but his lifelong work of serving his Master. He has lost wife and son, and now daughter. He is too tired to start anew, to change his views and the way he lives. It is generally the young - some of the young - in this context who rebel and they are those with the least power and standing. Dinh and Tu are two young women, who, since they cannot change things, leave. The other young rebel is the narrator's brother Hô, already imprisoned at the time of Ba's execution.

The female characters in the novel illustrate the common plight of women in traditional society. Their lives are constrained and inhibited, with understandable emotional and psychological consequences. Dinh and Tu, who question the status quo, find themselves unable to alter the course of events. They cannot shift the weight of centuries of conformity. They can only defy the authority represented by the patriarch and the village notables. In the end, their only recourse is to leave. Staying in the village

would have resulted in their lives being stifled, in the mould of Dinh's mother and grandmother. Although it seems the village will be changing, they cannot wait for it to do so, and have no assurance either that anything fundamental will truly change. So long as the old mandarin lives and the village notables rally behind him, village society and laws will not alter.

In *Frères de sang*, the man who notes and records all this is both a part of and separate from the fabric of village and family life. The narrator observes women who bowed to, lived and died under the system and those who questioned traditional mores and had to remove themselves from the surroundings. He expresses anger at the constraints imposed on these female characters. As a man in many ways alienated from his roots and the traditions with which he grew up, he feels akin to these women. (This sense of alienation will be treated at greater depth in a later chapter). 'Anger at French colonial exploitation of Vietnamese often opened male eyes to other forms of exploitation, including that of women by men'.¹³ Pham Van Ky does not allude to the colonial situation, except indirectly, through the fact that the novel is situated in Vietnam during the period of French colonization. He is, however, in a position to observe the abuse of power by those who uphold authority and the law. The village, in this sense, becomes a metaphor for the country at large. The particular history of the village in Vietnam, on the other hand, adds a further level of complexity. The village has historically prided itself on its autonomy from central bureaucratic authority. 'Excessively jealous of its independence, the village has always tried to escape official

¹³Marr, *Tradition*, p. 200.

notice'.¹⁴ The narrator in *Frères de sang* therefore relates the workings of a traditional system of power. As a member of the younger generation and his father's son, he, like the women, is subject to the authority of the patriarch. The anger and helplessness of these female characters are reflections of similar vulnerabilities in the narrator, but he can only observe. He finds himself unable to act decisively or constructively in the unfolding events. However touched he is by pathos or injustice he remains on the margin of those events and records them in the manner of a disinterested onlooker. His lack of effective power echoes that of the women. 'Not being heard is not just a function of lack of recognition, not just that no one knows how to listen to you, although it is that; it is also silence of the deep kind, the silence of being prevented from having anything to say. Sometimes it is permanent'.¹⁵ These aspects increase the sense of alienation projected by the narrator, because while his presence touches these women's lives - mother, sisters, grandmother - he can neither offer them relief, nor aid and abet them.

This is where the irony in the novel lies. He stands as a foreigner not only to his compatriots in his native village, but as a foreigner to the lives and fates of these women. So how truly and comprehensively can he perceive them and record the events surrounding their personalities and lives? He narrates that the only means of going beyond these events is either to die (as do his grandmother, the *trùm's* wife, and the mother of Ba) or to leave (as do his sisters and Tu, the servant girl). For many women, the

¹⁴Thompson, *Indo-China*, p. 31.

¹⁵Mackinnon, *Feminism*, p. 39.

confines of their lives are reflected in the confines of the village itself.

There are therefore six categories of women represented in *Frères de sang*. The first is the hysterical mother; the second the rebellious sister, Dinh, set against that of the conformist one, Co, the third; the fourth is the grandmother, an emblem of tradition and continuity, yet dying and unaware; the fifth is the wily maidservant, Tu, and the last the woman accused of adultery, the nameless wife of the *trùm*. Pham Van Ky portrays them clearly and categorically, in quick and vivid colours. There is little scope for fluidity or depth among the characters. Each woman is rigidly confined to a particular grouping and does not deviate from its label. Each serves to highlight the destructive effects of traditional social and family configurations. Pham Van Ky concentrates on illustrating events and actions which serve to confirm the category in which his female characters fit. The radical therefore is consistently radical, the conformist excessively conventional, and the traditional sad and slowly disappearing. The actions of the servant girl Tu serve to underline the hypocrisy among village elders. The fate of the woman accused of adultery highlights the injustice of village 'justice'. Co, the conformist sister, symbolizes subjugation and duty. The hysterical mother symbolizes despair and love, and the grandmother blind tradition. The result is a harsh critique of the abuse of power by village elders; the constricting bands of such a mentality having the most noxious effect on women and on the younger generation. The element of irony resides in the emotional involvement but actual non-involvement of the narrator. In this novel, Pham Van Ky expresses

his indignation at these abuses but is not able to offer a solution. There are only three resulting effects which he records: escape, death, and destruction - of the village and of the narrator himself.

Des Femmes assises çà et là, published almost twenty years later, has a markedly different context from that of *Frères de sang*. The narrator lives in France and makes a conscious decision to stay there. Both Yeager and Nguyen Hong Nhiem refer to the philosophical elements in *Des Femmes assises çà et là*: Yeager briefly, and Nguyen Hong Nhiem at great length.

[The following] are subtly explained to the reader unfamiliar with the culture - Yin and Yang, the "rose octagone", the Pa Koua. The trigrams - eight different sets of three broken and solid lines that form the basis of the *I Ching* - introduce each chapter; their influence augments and intensifies, imposing upon the narrator's thoughts, precipitating lengthy reflection to the point of hallucination.¹⁶

Nguyen Hong Nhiem writes that the novel is autobiographical.¹⁷ *Des Femmes assises çà et là* draws on the philosophy of the Far East and is, in some senses, a return to the sources.

The mother sends her son a stark telegram from Vietnam stating: '*Tattends pour mourir. 26 mai.*'¹⁸ This brief, bare statement evokes the first line of Camus' *L'Etranger*: '*Aujourd'hui, maman est morte.*'¹⁹ *Des Femmes çà et là* contains a number of allusions to works of Western literature, another feature which differentiates it from the earlier *Frères de sang*. The literary references are indirect. Pham Van Ky does not mention any writer

¹⁶Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 152.

¹⁷Nguyen Hong Nhiem, 'L'Echiquier et l'antinomie je/moi comme signe et substance du conflit Occident/Extrême-Orient dans les œuvres de Pham Van Ky' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1982), p. 284.

¹⁸Pham Van Ky, *Des Femmes assises çà et là* (Paris, 1964), p. 9. Subsequent references will be given in the main text.

¹⁹Albert Camus, *L'Etranger* (Paris, 1942), p. 9.

or literary work by name. In this respect, he transposes into a French context a feature which characterized classical literature in Vietnam. The writer assumed that his audience was well-versed in the Classics (both Chinese and Vietnamese), and in a position to recognize references to earlier texts. These allusions are not numerous in *Des Femmes çà et là*, but there are a number. This is the first.

In Camus' novel, the news comes in the form of a telegram: 'J'ai reçu un télégramme de l'asile: "Mère décédée. Enterrement demain. Sentiments distingués" '.²⁰ In *Des Femmes assises çà et là*, the mother is not yet dead, and she is the one to instigate the contact. The narrator goes on to say:

Les télégrammes n'expliquent jamais rien, disent à côté et trompent par leur couleur. Celui-ci ne me proposait aucun choix.

Que Mère eût inscrit la date du 26 mai, Journée de la Mère en France, alors que nous étions au début de décembre, il y aurait eu de sa part, non pas cruauté, mais colère du sang, désir de m'atteindre dans les correspondances mêmes où je vis loin d'elle. (p. 9)

Nguyen Hong Nhiem puts forward the following interpretation for this cryptic call on the part of the mother. The telegram is a notice not of death but of life:

Ce que l'Occident tiendrait pour la mort, c'est la vie pour l'Extrême-Orient. ... 'T'attends pour mourir' signifie donc tout le contraire dans le contexte du chapitre Terre/nadir/inertie: l'Extrême-Orient attend le retour du fils prodigue pour lui ré-enseigner la vraie vie.²¹

Both interpretations are valid. The message can be understood in the literal sense as a mother's call for her son to return home before she dies. The other interpretation, however, a symbolic call

²⁰Camus, *L'Étranger*, p. 9.

²¹Nguyen Hong Nhiem, 'L'Échiquier', p. 291.

for the son to return to his country and discover his roots anew, is also pertinent, and is significant in the light of the narrator's exile from his homeland. The mother's telegram encapsulates both Eastern and Western meanings.

The mother is one of the four central female figures in *Des Femmes assises çà et là*. She is the first to be mentioned by the narrator. The weight of her presence and of her influence is acknowledged at the beginning of the novel: 'Mère. Mot laché, mot aux contours précis, qui m'écrase mais ne me recouvre pas en entier'. (p. 8) There exists a gulf of mutual incomprehension between mother and son. She is deeply wary of the West and anything Western. The mother had said to her son: 'Tu as cédé à une coquetterie de science plus qu'au besoin de ton salut, l'Ouest étant un lieu de maladie, pas un lieu de guérison' (p. 11). Like many Vietnamese intellectuals, the narrator had turned towards the West to discover or clarify the reality of a civilisation which manifested itself as the colonizer in his own country. The son's response is :

Qu'aurais-je à lui alléguer contre cette erreur? Que l'Orient ne nous est pas toujours à suivre, ni l'Occident à fuir, qu'aucun des deux n'est notre bien qu'il ne soit en même temps notre mal? (p. 11)

He wishes to break free of bonds of inertia, the bonds of an older society and civilisation, the bonds of early upbringing, which can be enriching but also narrow and limiting. The mother represents all these early bonds. She is associated with an older world, and one which, moreover, attempted to mould and imprison him within its values and beliefs:

Ah! dès sa délivrance, si Mère m'avait empêché de croître en m'enfermant dans un bleu de Chine, que je

remplirais peu à peu de ma chair et de mes os, ma tête émergeant du vase, mes oreilles-anses épanouies à ses paroles de sagesse ou de consolation, elle m'aurait gardé à jamais sur le bahut incrusté de nacre, près d'un pin nain de la même mutilation dans son pot de faïence vernissée au lieu que maintenant elle me condamnerait à la compagnie des solanées vénéneuses, des fleurs vives, des pommes épineuses, des baies fades à odeur cireuse et répulsive. (pp. 9-10)

The mother did not bind her son enough. She left him enough space to leave and to study overseas and now it is too late to lure him back to the faded and dull things of the past. If he had truly grown like a body within a vase, twisted, mutilated and coerced like a dwarf tree, he would not have had a chance to think of another alternative. He is aware that he could be painting an exaggeratedly black picture of the East, just as the Mother paints an exaggeratedly black picture of the West:

En m'occidentalissant, je regardais à justifier l'Asie, je regarde à la dénigrer pour n'avoir pas à y retourner. Ne laissez pas au jugement du romancier l'exercice de la piété filiale: il se forgerait des paradoxes, des stratagèmes jusqu'à l'exiger de qui l'exige. (p. 10)

In the same way that the distant and disturbing figure of the Mother represents a civilisation and way of life, the narrator thinks of Paris as a woman: a woman whom he has to adjust to and learn to know:

Je l'appelle *la Paris*: la plus femme d'entre toutes, me disais-je dans un éclair d'intuition ...
De mon pays, elle me semblait d'un accès difficile. Elle passait alors à mes yeux pour une insurmontable antithèse à toutes les innocences et à toutes les retenues asiatiques. Or, elle est la synthèse de tous les opposés, et donc, sauf son respect, un lieu taoïste. (pp. 13-14)

The woman or the feminine becomes a symbol for a mode of existence and encapsulates the complexities, the bonds, the contradictions and conflicting loyalties of such choices.

The narrator's mother is present in his mind and emotions but she is physically absent. On the other hand, the other three female characters central to the novel are emotionally as well as physically present for the narrator. All three are European, and live as he does in Paris. If the mother symbolized the past, all three of these figures symbolize different aspects of the present. The first two to be introduced by the narrator are Orla, a woman suffering from neurosis, and Eliane, thirteen years old and dying of leukaemia, daughter of friends of the narrator. Throughout the novel they are constantly offset one against the other. Whenever the phone rings, the narrator wonders: 'Orla ou Eliane?' (p. 20), and his reluctance to pick up the phone stems from the fact that he wishes to hear from Eliane, but not from Orla. He will not know, however, who it is unless he picks up the phone. Since Eliane is severely ill, it is urgent that he speak to her whenever she does call. With Orla on the other hand, it is a constant chore, since her condition is not likely to alter. As he writes of Orla:

Régulièrement Orla m'appelait, délirait, divaguait - ce qui se traduisait par un tambourinement fébrile à la base de l'appareil -, répétait qu'elle était enceinte, qu'elle avait failli se jeter dans la Seine, au paroxysme d'une crise de (consciencieuse) neurasthénie. (p. 20)

Even in the midst of conjecturing whether to respond to either Orla or Eliane, the figure of the Mother surfaces once again. Even as he speaks to either Orla or Eliane, he remembers that he is denying his own mother a similar contact: 'Leur prêterais-je l'assistance même quand je refusais à Mère?' (p. 22). Both Orla

and Eliane are ill. His mother is also ill, but she is in another country. Orla and Eliane, French, foreign and young, represent the future, or rather the present which he has actively chosen and invested in, so he wishes to do the utmost to keep them alive and to ease their pain:

Deux malades au chevet desquelles, sans mauvaise conscience, le temps d'une conversation téléphonique, je m'ingéniais à leur insuffler le goût de se survivre, le mensonge d'une survie impossible, pour leur enlever l'horrible fardeau d'un sursis, l'horrible cangue de l'incertitude, l'horrible bandeau qui les enserrait, Orla au cerveau, Eliane à son innocence capitale, tout cela n'ayant d'absolu et de nécessaire que sur un point: la mort frappe où elle veut, quand elle veut, qui elle veut.
(p. 22)

The contrast between the two (or three) generations of women is apparent: '*T'attends pour mourir. 26 mai. Et Orla-Eliane? T'attendons pour ne pas mourir*' (p. 23). But all three, representing the old and the new, past and present and future, are dying.

Perhaps death and illness, 'l'horrible bandeau' which afflicts Orla and Eliane, also symbolize the 'bandeau' which the narrator's past loyalties inflict upon him. Even with all the will in the world, and his determination to step beyond the confines of his upbringing, he is still in some measure bound by them. To him, 'l'horrible bandeau' of Orla and Eliane's illnesses are also an inescapable weight stifling their lives, their visions and their hopes. Perhaps the narrator identifies with their plight not only because he considers both the woman and the girl as friends but because, coming from a different culture as he does and struggling against many bonds himself, he can see himself in their sick heads and sick bodies. He can see glimpses of life and potential

attempting to escape beyond these heads and bodies, just as he is attempting to escape from his own self and the painful image of his mother. As Nguyen Hong Nhiem writes: 'La Mère, bien entendu, incarne, par ordre dépressif, l'Extrême-Orient, le Moi collectif de l'Extrême-Orient, et le Moi dérivé du narrateur/auteur.'²² He does feel that he will escape, or at least that a part of him has already escaped and will continue to do so:

Ah! sauter hors de soi, dans l'indéterminé! Tu 'gèlerais', Mère. Loin de l'espace et du temps: je t'échapperais, Mère! Dans une région où tout serait possible: donc impossible pour toi, Mère! Où l'imagination n'éprouverait plus la contrainte ni de coordonner quoi que ce soit, où la mythologie nouvelle orienterait mes actes dans un sens inconnu, et solliciterait ma croyance d'une façon radicalement différente! (p. 34)

Writing in French is one way of expressing these flights of the imagination, and one which is inaccessible to the Mother. As the son admits: 'Opération difficile, ce transfert des figures de l'idéogramme aux sons de l'alphabet' (p. 34). He has been exposed to a mentality which is foreign to his mother, still enveloped as she is in visions of classical ideograms. The sounds, the images, and the language of which the son can avail himself are out of bounds for her.

The dilemma continues for the narrator when the phone rings. Who will it be? Orla or Eliane? Yeager writes that 'because of her stay in China and her understanding of and love for Asian culture, [Orla] can be considered to be a partial counterpart of the narrator'.²³ She may reflect his obsessions and display this in her condition, but she also represents an aspect of the past which he

²²Nguyen Hong Nhiem, 'L'Echiquier', p. 291.

²³Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 156.

wishes to distance himself from. Just as he is hostile to or incapable of assisting his mother, aged and a symbol of the past, he is more hostile to the older woman, Orla, whose illness is in some ways unalterable, and who also represents the past to him:

La raison la plus simple de mon échec, c'est que j'avais réticence à assister à Orla dans le même temps que je refusais d'assister Mère. Orla à qui ne me liait rien d'autre qu'une amitié très ancienne, datant de nos années buissonnières à la Sorbonne. (p. 50)

Many of the expressions associated with Orla, the older woman, are images of sterility. Orla's ravings and recriminations have a negative aspect set against the innocence and freshness of the young adolescent girl, Eliane. Orla's 'récriminations' are contrasted with Eliane's 'merveilleuses paroles' (p. 22), 'le désert d'Orla' with 'l'oasis d'Eliane' (p. 50).

It seems that anything hurt and aged is a reminder of the figure of the Mother, with all the guilt and sombre reflections associated with it. Eliane, in her youth and innocence is untouched (by a man or any men) and perfect. (Would he change his mind about her once she grew older, became a woman and lost her 'purity'?). The narrator is uneasy with the image of older suffering. Perhaps his idolization of Eliane persists because part of him knows that she will effectively die untouched. In *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag writes that leukaemia has taken up the role in fiction 'once monopolized by TB, as the romantic disease that cuts off a young life ... Like all really successful metaphors, the metaphor of TB was rich enough to provide for two contradictory applications. It described the death of someone (like a child) thought to be too 'good' to be sexual: the assertion of angelic psychology. It was also a way of describing sexual feelings - while

lifting the responsibility on libertinism, which is blamed on a state of objective, physiological decadence or delinquescence'.²⁴ The narrator of *Des Femmes assises çà et là* needs to draw on this youth, a sign of hope and change for the future. If women embody the past, the present and the future to him, it is inevitable that he would constantly turn his eyes and hopes towards the youngest since little of the past was associated with her.

Pourtant, après le désert d'Orla, l'oasis d'Eliane m'apporterait fraîcheur, repos et nourriture partagée. Adorable Eliane. Mon idole dans les yeux et pour l'esprit. Elle trônait sur mes louanges, sur mon perpétuel hommage rendu à ces facéties et à ses trouvailles d'enfant-femme, sous lesquelles elle m'ensevelissait. (p. 50)

Eliane represents the complete opposite of his mother. She embodies all the hopes that have died in his mother. She embodies a potential and a future which were never given fruition in his mother - a woman who was bound and constrained within her society, her culture, and her civilisation. Perhaps the narrator's intolerance of his mother's pain is an obscure realization that however asphyxiating he found his duties within traditional culture were, hers were far worse. Unlike him, she had no opportunity to break away, or to see that there could be any alternatives to the life which she led and the values which she held. The narrator turns with relief to the figure of Eliane, young, French, still a child and yet also a woman:

Mais dans le souci que me causait Mère, il semble que j'aspirais à quelque contrepoids, à quelque diversion salutaire, que je cherchais en Eliane l'image d'une enfant que j'aurais aimé avoir... De qui? Pourquoi pas de la femme sans nombril que venait de me souhaiter Orla? Eliane-fœtus qui se fût formée d'une autre

²⁴Susan Sontag, *Illness As Metaphor* (London, 1979), p. 22 and p. 30.

manière, sans passer par la nuit de la matrice. Eliane-Antigone que j'entourais à présent de moi, enroulée elle-même autour de moi, adoucissant par le baume de ses vrilles lisses, à mon sommet et à mes branches, la douleur cuisante que je ressentais dans mes racines. (p. 51)

The images are painful and unrealizable. Eliane is not his daughter and he cannot divorce her from her mortality. The brief reference to Antigone conjures the image of a young woman dying a slow and cruel death for the sake of her principles. Perhaps the early entombment and its association with asphyxiation and entrapment (in fate, in death) is one that expresses the hopelessness of Eliane's condition. Although his mother's message '*Tattends pour mourir*' echoes in him, he rejects it:

Si Eliane me marmonnait au téléphone la même phrase, avançant sa langue desséchée sur ses lèvres avec un son creux de râpe, j'accourrais promptement à son chevet d'agonie, alors que j'y rechignais à celui de Mère. (p. 53)

Eliane calls him 'Toittoi', 'at once one word and two, a repetition of the same term and thus the same - a denial of distance spatially and linguistically'.²⁵ It is as if the repetition of 'Toittoi' is an added stress of his importance to her, the affection she bears him, the word 'Toittoi' encapsulating both a child's repetitive nickname for a favourite uncle and the part-woman aspect of her calling him 'Toi'.

Eliane is the focus of his attention. Of all the female characters, she is given the most voice and physical presence, since the narrator describes her and allows her to speak at length. The young girl's imagination is presented in a long and hectic series of images which she communicates to her parents and to the narrator. She is almost hysterical in her haste to convey the

²⁵Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 158.

plethora of images which assail her. She realizes that she may not be able to do so for much longer. She speaks of shadows:

- Une ombre prend une autre au lasso. Badigeonnée de sang, de mauvais sang, de sang pourri, une ombre verse chasse au faucon. Un moine rompt une ombre-pain, et l'avale en deux bouchées nigrescentes. Jamais Eliane n'avait été plus belle.(p. 57)

Among her fantasies appear images of women, of different women, of a cure to her disease, of pregnancy, childbirth, different stages in women's lives which she will never live to experience:

- Elles jouent à satiété à la vierge, à la fiancée, à l'épouse, à la veuve, à la remariée, elles jouent! ... Attention à l'inceste, répète l'autre. Elles redeviennent foetus, je les enfante, elles se présentent bien, elles se et me délivrent, je les nourris de mon ombre de lait, je les soulève au-dessus du lit, je défends leur berceau, je leur apprend à se tenir debout, à marcher, à rire, à rire, à rire. Mais ces imbéciles ne savent que pleurer, pleurer et pleurer encore. (pp. 58-59)

Eliane repeats 'des ombres, des ombres'. She knows that all these images and fantasies are insubstantial. However vividly she sees them, they are just shadows, they have no substance because they will never become realities for her. She is an adolescent, between child and woman. She can briefly glimpse the myriad varieties of women's experiences, but they are out of bounds to her: 'Des ombres, toutes des ombres: signe que quelque chose brille ailleurs' (p. 60).

After this insight, the narrator turns towards the fourth female figure, Solange. Solange is his lover. She represents sensuality, bodily warmth, and as an artist, she also symbolizes creativity. Yet his relationship with her only caters to the sensual part of the narrator:

C'était toujours lent et précipité, violent et lucide, triste et gai, mélange qui la brisait. Mais quand tout

retombait et qu'il n'y avait plus rien entre nous, je payais ces instants trop brefs, me remplissant, m'étant vidé, de misérables petites pensées, si loin oh! si loin, des prodiges d'Eliane, bien en deçà des nuages ronds, ouatés, tout neufs - entraînés par quel vent? - dans l'impalpable incertitude du lendemain. (p. 63)

Solange is given some voice in the novel. She is a widely-read woman, with views on different subjects, yet while he acknowledges this, he cannot appreciate her as a whole person, as an individual with interests and desires and imagination of her own. It is their physical relationship which looms largest in his mind. Much as his knowledge of the West is new, fragmented and incomplete since the narrator, after all, is a foreigner, so the French female characters which surround him are fragmented into distinct categories: neurosis, innocence, and sensuality. While escaping from the past, the Far East and the figure of the mother, he is also desperately looking for her, and the three Frenchwomen will never be able to embody her.

Farouche, lucide et admirable Solange! Pourtant dans les rues, me retournant sur les femmes, je ne les jugeais pas en fonction d'elle. De qui alors? De personne. Autant dire d'une seule. Je n'en estimais aucune à Sa valeur. Rassemblées toutes, La recomposant pièce par pièce à qui Lui céderait un trait de leur physique, elles ne réussissaient pas à La reconstituer complètement: quelque chose manque toujours à l'ensemble, quelque chose en quoi réside la fidélité d'un homme, qui s'adresse à cette Absence. Mais où est réellement, essentiellement ma fidélité envers l'autre absence qu'est l'Extrême-Orient? (p. 74)

It seems that the further he attempts to flee from the figure of the mother, the more he realizes that many roads, in the end, lead back to her. However attracted he is by the West, and however Westernized he may have become, he cannot divorce himself fully from his past and therefore from the woman who symbolizes it,

his mother. Perhaps this acknowledgement will lead to greater acceptance both on his part and hers:

Qui me dit alors que l'occidentalisation de soi n'aboutit pas en définitive à une inversion de deux termes fondamentaux? ... Orla, Solange, Eliane.

Ainsi de Mère et de moi. A première vue, nos roues d'horlogerie semblent écartées les unes des autres, continuant à tourner pour son compte et pour le mien. Réengrenées, elles acquerront certainement une solidarité nouvelle, mais joyeuse ou triste? La question est là. (p. 75)

Will it be possible for him to find his mother again? He continues:

Maintenant que je suis près de la perdre à jamais, elle menace de se restituer à moi entièrement et sans contrepartie, car j'ai sur elle le lamentable avantage de pouvoir la réfléchir en miroir toujours plus petit que ce qu'il reflète, et gardant mon sang-froid, alors qu'elle n'est plus qu'anxiété et attente. (p. 75)

In the inverse of Virginia Woolf's celebrated image of women reflecting men at twice their natural size, the narrator has the ability to reflect his mother in smaller and smaller images. He has, in addition, the leisure to think and ponder on this, while she waits anxiously. Although he thinks that he will find her again, he realizes that he has reached a point when it will no longer be possible. His work, his career, 'Le Roman' as he terms it, takes precedence: 'Le Roman: l'épée nue entre Mère et moi' (p. 83). It is only through 'Le Roman' that he will be able to express both his past and his present: 'Tout y est, tout y sera ou serait: des emblèmes vécus de mon enfance aux pompes et aux œuvres de mon occidentalisation' (p. 83). It is through 'Le Roman' that he will be able to illustrate the whole of himself, his dreams, his imagination, and the reality of the choices he has made for himself.

The narrator watches, helpless, the worsening of Eliane's health. He watches her young life consuming itself: 'Ne traversant plus au soleil, elle avait pleuré son ombre d'enfant-femme. Elle aspirait, femme-enfant, à une orchidée qui croît sans soleil. Elle avait brûlé dans l'intervalle bien des étapes, se dédommageant de la courte vie à elle allouée' (p. 94). This is the tragedy of Eliane in her dealings with the narrator whom she calls 'Toitot': 'Jeu de femme et corps d'enfant' (p. 96). The narrator conjectures on the significance of what he terms the 'trigramme' of Orla, Solange and Eliane around him. He writes:

En réalité, aucune d'elles ne m'a été donnée ni consentie. Je les ai obtenues au terme d'une constance inébranlable, après les avoir longtemps poursuivies, en romancier qui cherche des personnages. (p. 99)

This statement reinforces the two-dimensional figures of these female characters. They are not flesh-and-blood individuals in the way the female characters of the earlier novel *Frères de Sang* were. Yeager notes:

The 'real' women, characters on one level, are absorbed and become characters within the interior novel of the narrator. Going beyond the fictionalized "real" world, they metamorphose into representations of abstracts - symbols and metaphors, aspects of his personality.²⁶

Although the narrator accords them some say, their representation is largely symbolic. It is as if they were paraded in front of a wall, with the narrator indulging in long monologues detailing his musings, his views, his sorrows, his perceptions of them. Even when he lets them speak for themselves, the effect is of him jerking them into life and speaking their set piece before

²⁶Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 151.

he silences them again and soliloquizes on the meaning of existence, and the many threads which contribute to or make up his life.

He refers four times to the title of the book, which forms part of a quotation from 'Mersebourg'. Nguyen Hong Nhiem wrote the following on the origins of this saying:

C'est une formule magique, puisée dans les tout premiers textes manuscrits de la littérature allemande, et datant du cinquième siècle. Certaines sorcières la récitaient alors, et dans un double dessein: 1, distraire les sentinelles en faction devant les prisons, et 2, faciliter ainsi l'évasion du ou des détenus, en faveur duquel ou desquels elles agissaient.²⁷

The title of the book is actually taken from the first of the *Merseburger Zaubersprüche* (Merseburg Charms), one of the most famous of all Old High German texts, being the only remains from pagan antiquity to have survived in textual form in central continental Europe. They were copied in the tenth century into a Latin manuscript now in the cathedral library at Merseburg.²⁸ The first Charm runs:

Eiris sazun idisi, sazun her a duoder,
Suma hapt heptidum, suma heri lezidun,
suma clubodum umbi cuoniouuidi.
insprine haptbandun, inuar uigandum. H.

The exact meaning of the words has been much disputed, but they may be roughly translated:

Once (the) women were seated on the ground, here and there, one company fastened bonds, one company hindered the host, one company picked at fetters: 'Leap from the fetters, escape from the foes'.²⁹

²⁷Nguyen Hong Nhiem, 'L'Echiquier', pp. 271-272.

²⁸I am indebted to Professor Nigel Palmer for this information.

²⁹J. Knight Bostock, *A Handbook on Old High German Literature*, second edition, revised by K. C. King and D. R. McLintock (Oxford, 1976), pp. 27-28.

The Charm is an item of pagan oral tradition which has survived in a single transcription. Professor Palmer notes that the 'idisi' are strange valkyrie-like women, very suggestive for feminine or feminist ideology. It is significant that Pham Van Ky chose this particular Charm. The lines refer to imprisonment, rebellion and escape. He relates them to the condition of the women around him. The first and second: '*Des femmes assises çà et là... ai-je lu dans une sentence de Mersebourg. Des femmes, assises çà et là, nouaient des chaînes...*' (p. 140) are said in the presence of Orla and Solange. He does not complete the quotation and does not attempt it while they are there. The quotation is finally expressed fully when he is with Eliane. Again, he has to repeat himself and then finally says:

- Dans une sentence de Mersebourg: *Des femmes, assises çà et là, nouaient des chaînes, d'autres en démêlaient. Sors des chaînes, échappe!* (p. 154)

The irony of *Des Femmes assises çà et là* is that none of the female characters in the novel, to whom this impassioned sentence is addressed, actually hear this. Neither his mother, nor Orla nor Solange nor, finally, Eliane for whom he had meant it most since she was the youngest. As he says it to Eliane, a truck rolls past outside the window and Eliane's parents return, so that the sentence and the sentiments which it expressed remain unheard by the girl. The chains and links are part of the fabric of society, and women are bound to doing and undoing these neverending chains, imprisoned by their condition as women within patriarchy. The Charm is also of antique origin and harks back to an oral tradition. In choosing this particular saying, Pham Van Ky draws attention to a commonality of experience between

Between East and West

European and Asian women. As a Vietnamese, he is cognizant of the bonds enclosing the lives of the women around him.

It takes courage and energy to undo these chains and break free and very few have the opportunity to do so. He may have wished Eliane to break free of the disease killing her and to achieve her potential as an individual and human being. He wants her to escape. She does escape in the end, by dying. If she had lived, she would have been bound by the same chains which the narrator saw around women - around his mother, Orla, and Solange. He is desperate for Eliane to escape: a last-minute reprieve, a last-minute miracle, or the end of pain, of illness, of anxiety?

Dehors, je courus pour m'étourdir, pour ne pas hurler à la nuit: Sors des chaînes, échappe! Sors des chaînes, Eliane, échappe! ... Sors de ton destin, Eliane, de cette statue de fer, car voici Noël proche, amande amère brisant sa noix dure, guérison sereine émergeant annuellement de sa coquille. (p. 154)

Eliane dies on Christmas Eve. 'Eliane était morte. Morte à minuit, à minuit chrétien. O Noël noir, Noël à piétiner de rage!' (p. 173).

The latter part of the narrative is addressed to Eliane. He carries on an interior monologue with her, asking her where she is, whether she is well looked after, whether she has anything to communicate to him. In the end, the other three women also leave him. His mother dies. She had sent him two further *câbogrammes* after the first. Hearing no response from her son, her second asked '*Dois-je t'envoyer l'argent du retour?*' (p. 125) But the narrator is preoccupied by the condition of Eliane. He dreams of imaginary dialogues with his mother, of her possible response to him, but he does not do anything tangible to make the

dream a reality. His mother's third and last *câblogramme*, a cryptic '*Tape sur l'écuelle en chantant*' (p. 179) leads to similar digressions before he is brought back to reflect on the meaning of this message. It refers to a Taoist text on the inevitability of the cycle of life and death.³⁰ The narrator does not discuss this. He feels it is a test of his early education, a reminder of the classical texts he studied in his youth. He does not respond to this either, lost as he is in imaginary conversations and journeyings with Eliane. Anyway, it is too late. Eliane is dead. His mother is already dead. Even then she has to die twice over:

Mère coupable? Eliane capitalement innocente. ... Si vivante, Eliane, qu'elle découvrait une carie à la dent d'une poupée, Mère si morte qu'elle m'envoyait la chercher dans la *Y King*, grimoire presque antédiluvien! Mère coupable? Mais alors même qu'elle l'eût été, toute punition, quelle qu'elle fût, eût encore excédé les bornes, puisqu'il ne s'agissait que d'une faute d'amour. (p. 184)

Whether the one represented the past, the already dead past, and the other the present, or rather the future, innocent, youthful, and alive with possibilities, the reality is that both are dead. The narrator was unable to bring any relief to his dying mother, nor was he able to prevent the death of Eliane. Their deaths symbolize the death of his illusions about the East and the West.

Eliane-Mère. Mère-Eliane. Quoi d'autre pour me déséquilibrer? Je n'étais pas d'humeur à pousser plus loin ce parallèle et cette dissymétrie. Beaucoup de blanc derrière eux, et le coup de ciseau du schizophrène s'impose: pointiller le fond des tableaux et en meubler le vide. (p. 184)

³⁰ "When we come into the world," wrote [the philosopher] Chouang Chou, "it is because we have the occasion to be born; when we go, we simply follow what is natural". So death is no occasion for sorrow as life is no cause for joy. Bearing this principle in mind, Chuang Chou refrained from wailing at his wife's death; instead, he sat on the ground, singing and beating time on a bowl'. Liu Wu-Chi, *A Short History of Confucian Philosophy* (Harmondsworth, 1955), p. 52.

His mother and Eliane are dead, and Solange and Orla leave him.

He is left alone:

Mère et Eliane mortes, Solange et Orla ôtées de mon soleil pour un temps ou à jamais, je me retrouvais seul. (p. 298)

At the last stage of the novel, the narrator begins to receive a series of letters from Eliane. The novel ends with letter after letter from Eliane, which, in their content and form, allude to a number of other works of literature. She had asked that they not be sent to him until after her death. These letters, which express the love of a thirteen-year-old girl for an older man, are shattering to the narrator:

En cette nouvelle Eliane - la plus secrète probablement, échappée des chaînes - qui allait me consoler d'Eliane, comment la situer: avant ou après sa mort? Mais, seigneur Ciel, où l'avant et où l'après d'une même histoire? (p. 311)

Her letters disturb his categorization of her, his oft-reiterated insistence on her innocence. Her death of leukaemia is symbolic. As was the case with tuberculosis, the metaphor was 'both a way of describing sensuality and promoting the claims of passion and a way of describing repression and advertising the claims of sublimation, the disease inducing both a "numbness of spirit" ... and a suffusion of higher feelings. Above all, it was a way of affirming the value of being more conscious, more complex psychologically'.³¹ Eliane's letters are passionate, alive and angry. '*J'embrasse la petite veine au bord de la tempe droite*' (p. 314), '*Mon Dieu, que j'ai soif! Vous revoir vite. Vite! Vite!!!*' (p. 319). She knows that she will lose him and is angry that he does not see her

³¹Sontag, *Illness*, p. 30.

as a woman, that he has reduced her to just words, that he lives by writing words outside of her, when she herself feels so alive, and knows what it is to be so:

*Je suis femme.
Je suis femme physiquement!
Je suis remplie de semence et d'espoir.
Tant de lumière dans l'espace d'un feu de douleur et
d'un feu de joie tout ensemble!
Et ce bout de mon être qui s'éloignait toujours, je l'ai
atteint.
Enfin la terrible et délicieuse déchirure! ...
Le sens de la vie? Un surcroît dont je n'ai plus besoin.
Plus besoin, plus besoin.
Il chantait, ô ma folle fleur qui est que j'aime! il
chantait un immense assouvissement.
Il chantait un immense assouvissement! (pp. 321-322)*

Van, the young and rebellious protagonist of Tran Van Tung's *Bach-Yên ou la fille au cœur fidèle*, published in Paris in 1946, expresses himself with a similar impetus and violence. The Epilogue of *Bach-Yên* consists of a long and haunted letter from Van to his mother, recording his disillusionment with the West. They express a similar yearning and desperation:

*Voici que se lève le vent de la Jeunesse!
Voici que se lève le soleil de l'Esprit! L'espoir, comme
ta nature, fleurit dans toutes les âmes et dans tous les
cœurs!
Voici que s'allume l'aurore des rêves impossibles!
Regarde, Regarde, maman, ce soleil!
C'est la flamme de l'Amour! C'est le soleil d'Amour!
Regarde! Regarde, maman, ce soleil!
Regarde! Regarde cette flamme!
Regarde! Regarde cette lumière!³²*

The repetition of words and expressions emphasizes the urgency of the sentiments. In both cases also, a sense of despair pervades the letter writer, since it is felt that the recipient does not hear and does not heed (or it will be too late once they do so).

³²Tran Van Tung, *Bach-Yên ou la Fille au Cœur Fidèle* (Paris, 1946), p. 229.

The narrator of *Des Femmes assises çà et là* does not have a voice at the end of the novel. It is Eliane who speaks, who expresses her feelings and emotions, and she gives free vent to her imagination. These revelations after Eliane's death are reminiscent of those of Ellénore in Constant's *Adolphe*. It is Ellénore who speaks with a similar impetus at the end of the novel, after her death:

'Adolphe, me disait-elle, pourquoi vous acharnez vous sur moi? Quel est mon crime? De vous aimer, de ne pouvoir exister sans vous? ... Faut-il que je meure, Adolphe? Eh bien, vous serez content; elle mourra, cette importune Ellénore ... et peut-être un jour, froissé par ces cœurs arides, vous regretterez ce cœur dont vous disposiez, qui vivait de votre affection, qui eût bravé mille périls pour votre défense, et que vous ne daignez plus récompenser d'un regard'.³³

In *Des Femmes assises çà et là*, the revelations of Eliane's feelings are far lengthier than the one last paragraph of Chapter X in *Adolphe*. They follow one upon another and the letters are reproduced in full over many pages. Eliane knew that the narrator would only receive the letters after her death. She had also asked that her journal be sent on to him after her last letter. The novel ends with this letter, cut off as she is, in mid-sentence, mid-word asking him: 'sois ma demeure ... la Fleur qui arri...' (p. 326). She is cut off in the middle of a word, much like Louis in Mauriac's *Le Nœud de vipères*:

Ce qui m'étouffe, ce soir, en même temps que j'écris ces lignes, ce qui fait mal à mon cœur comme s'il allait se rompre cet amour dont je connais enfin le nom ador...³⁴

³³Benjamin Constant, *Adolphe* (1816, Paris, 1950), pp. 94-95.

³⁴François Mauriac, *Œuvres romanesques et théâtrales complètes*, t. II (Paris, 1979), p. 526.

Louis was found face down over the open page of his *cahier*, as his son informs his sister. In *Des Femmes assises çà et là*, the cut-off word is actually the last in the novel. Eliane will then live on in the narrator's memory. With this exposure of the woman behind the child, he has to accept that she was sexual as well as innocent and imaginative. Perhaps she was afraid of revealing all this to him while she was alive, afraid of exposing this side of her, afraid that society, her parents, and the narrator himself, would disapprove of her. She can only let him be aware of this aspect of herself after her death, when he would have to take it without her physical presence there. He is forced to absorb this revelation after the loss of all four women whom he had been close to and he is left literally speechless at the end. The allusions to other novels and novelistic personae within the last fifteen pages of the novel also increase the sensation of the complexity and hidden meanings within the figure of this adolescent girl. It is through the letters of Eliane that are revealed the greatest concentration of literary references.

In this novel, Pham Van Ky provides a psychological examination of women. These four female characters, the mother, Eliane, Orla, and Solange, represent different stages of women's experience, or different aspects of a woman's personality. The mother is representative of age, resignation, duty, sorrow, attachment, and the past. She embodies the East. The European female characters represent the West: escape, the present, and the future. Eliane is an embodiment of adolescence, innocence, youth and purity, dying 'unblemished' an early death. Orla embodies neurosis - perturbing, problematic and painful. Solange

represents the sensual, sexual aspect of woman. She is also intelligent and creative, but the narrator cannot absorb these other facets of her being. Each woman reflects a separate aspect of personality. Even more so than in *Frères de sang* in which the divisions are generational and social, Pham Van Ky chooses to concentrate on these divisions within the character of a woman as a whole.

He examines the inner as opposed to the outer constraints on these women's lives. The impassioned 'Sors des chaînes. Echappe!', which is repeated and which none of these women ever hear, is directed towards all four. He wants his mother to escape from unremitting duty; Eliane, from her fatal disease; Orla, from mental illness; and Solange, from the purely sensual object he perceives her to be. This imperative to escape is perhaps directed, ultimately, at himself. It is an acknowledgement of his own imprisoning condition as a man caught between two worlds, a stranger in exile.

Des Femmes assises çà et là is a much denser novel than the earlier *Frères de sang*. Both novels are first-person narratives, with an unnamed male narrator. In both cases, the narrator in question is a Vietnamese who has carried out further studies in France. One returns to his native village after many years overseas, the other chooses to remain in metropolitan France. The earlier novel contains a greater number of female characters. It also has a straightforward linear progression of events, which the narrator's inner musings do not interrupt to too great a degree. The female characters, both in the narrator's family and within the immediate village environment, are painted in vivid strokes. The narrator

cannot remain unaware of the realities and conflicts within these women's lives. Their personalities affect everyone around them, whether spouse, sibling, parent, or fellow villager. Their actions bear directly on the fabric of their family, village and society. Their plight serves to highlight the deadening effect that an old and patriarchal system of authority exercises on the people who live within it. The narrator, just returned from study overseas, is particularly aware of this. The patriarch expects his eldest son, newly returned, to marry and fulfil his filial duties. The narrator, however, is already engaged to a Frenchwoman in France. He refuses to conform to the restrictive limits set by his father. The physical limits of the village seem to echo the limits imposed by tradition, age and inertia on the villagers themselves. It is particularly distressing to the narrator that one of the harshest exponents of village and family authority is his own father, a living embodiment of the past. The father is a true patriarch, intent on keeping village and sexual hierarchy in the same place, and power in the same hands (his own and that of the village notables). He is blind to the wife's distress, and rejects the children who dare rebel openly against him. He will stay and perpetuate the life and values he is familiar with, no matter what the consequences. His eldest son, the narrator, is largely ineffectual in *Frères de sang*. He watches, while others act.

The narration of *Des Femmes assises çà et là* is also ostensibly a linear progression of events. The book begins with all four female characters alive and present and ends with the death of two (the mother and Eliane) and the departure of the other two. However, the narrative is constantly interrupted by long,

digressive passages on the narrator's interior world, his imaginary conversations, memories of conversations, encounters, discussions (whether real or imaginary) and within this lengthy and complex novel, the four women do not emerge as rounded characters. Even the figure of Eliane, who reveals such a different aspect of herself to the narrator does not emerge as rounded, since this other part of her only appears after her death. The women in this later novel appear largely as symbols of different cultures, stages of life and facets of humanity. As symbols, they cannot be fully realized, and it is not surprising that they all fade at the end of the novel. None of them can tolerate the narrator's single-minded assessment of them as set categories and symbols. If he does not consider them as individuals in their own right, it seems fitting that they then desert him and fade back into a flat tapestry. If this is the way he sees them, this is the way they will remain: distant, untouchable and uncomprehended.

The first novel begins with the narrator's arrival after many years away and ends with disintegration (the narrator, the family, the village). The second novel begins with the threat of death (of the narrator's mother) and ends with the actual death of the mother and of Eliane. The women in these novels either die - the grandmother, the mother of Tu, and the *trùm's* wife in *Frères de sang*, the mother and Eliane in *Des Femmes assises çà et là* -, or leave - the sisters and the servant-girl Tu in *Frères de sang*, and Orla and Solange in *Des Femmes assises çà et là*. Whatever actually happens to them, they end up eluding the narrator (and the author). The narrator is an outsider, a foreigner, an onlooker: in the first novel because of his feelings of strangeness upon

returning to his homeland after years of living and studying overseas, in the second novel because he is a foreigner living in Paris, and lastly and overlapping both, because he is alien by virtue of his sex, a stranger in both cases while he observes female characters. Whether the women in these novels are portraits of women in society, of women as personalities, as symbols of oppression, particular victims of patriarchal authority (as in *Frères de sang*), of the East, the West, the past, the future, of intellect, sensuality, tradition or rebellion, they remain, in the end, an enigma. Pham Van Ky realizes that as a male author and narrator, he can only perceive and represent a partial picture of them. This is particularly poignant in the ending to the second novel, with Eliane's thoughts ending in mid-sentence, mid-thought, mid-life, mid-perception.

The progression between the first and second novel is from a relatively uncomplicated characterization in the first to a more abstract and also more complex characterization in the second. Pham Van Ky moves from an examination of the female characters as easily labelled stock types in the first novel to a deeper symbolism and underlay of meanings and motivations in the second. From a portrayal of women as recognizable social typecasts: rebellious versus conformist sister, hysterical mother, traditional grandmother, wily servant-girl and 'adulterous' woman, he proceeded to a portrayal of women as symbols of separate human conditions: age, innocence, neurosis and sensuality. In both instances however, an element of malaise and disorientation remains. He is in unknown territory and steers clear of direct interference. The anonymous narrator in both novels watches and

observes. He is helpless to intervene. This non-involvement on his part increases the effect of alienation and distancing. He attempts, but does not succeed, in getting into the heart of things, much as he fails to see into the hearts of these women.

It may be that the women in *Des Femmes assises çà et là* represent different facets of the narrator's self, as Yeager has suggested; however it should be noted that the narrator chose to let female characters embody these elements of age, innocence, neurosis and sensuality. The use of female characters to express aspects of the narrator's personality is a useful distancing device and reinforces the gap in perception and understanding between the narrator and the characters (or his self). The narrator is divided between two cultures. His process of identification is an ambiguous and difficult one. He hears his mother's call on the one hand, and experiences the pull of the European women on the other. The plight of women serves to underline the pain and conflicts of his own condition. In this respect, Pham Van Ky is repeating, albeit in a muted version, a form used by Vietnamese poets and scholars of preceding centuries, many of whom chose to let women voice life's vicissitudes in such classics as *Lament of a Soldier's Wife*, *Lament of a Royal Concubine* and the *Kim-Van-Kieu*. He does not actually place the women in the centre of his narratives. In both novels, the male narrator remains the centre figure in this respect. However, the female characters are positioned in such a way as to underline the element of alienation.

Thuong Vuong-Riddick points to the symbolic representation of the bodies in *Frères de sang*. Nguyen Hong Nhiem refers to the philosophical import and pattern evident in

the novels. Yeager observes the 'sous-conversation' technique of *Des Femmes assises çà et là* and the significance of the female characters in the novel. In this chapter, I have taken the analysis further, and examined in detail the way in which women are observed and portrayed in these two novels by Pham Van Ky. *Des Femmes assises çà et là* contains a number of motifs derived from French fiction. Pham Van Ky's use of these motifs, on the other hand, is inspired by classical Vietnamese scholarship. He does not acknowledge the sources openly, but the references serve to give added depth and significance to the text when they are detected. Beyond this, the portrayal of women in the novels serves to highlight the underlying notion of alienation in the person of the narrator.

The point of view in both novels is that of the perpetual outsider: a stranger to the village, culture and nation, and also a stranger as a man writing about women's lives. As a writer who is receptive to both East and West, and one who remains an outsider wherever he resides, Pham Van Ky illustrates in his novels the difficulty of portraying the Other, whether women or the stranger. Robert Young has written on the problems relating to the notion of the Other:

The difficulties which arise from this structure are familiar from the debates in feminism, where 'woman' seems to be offered an alternative of either being the 'other' as constituted by man, that is, conforming to the stereotypes of patriarchy, or, if she is to avoid this, of being an absolute 'other' outside knowledge, necessarily confined to inarticulate expressions of mysticism or *jouissance*. The only way to side-step these alternatives seems to be to reject the other altogether and become the same, that is, equal to men - but then with no difference from them. Exactly the

same double bind that is encountered in any theorization of racial difference.³⁵

This argument seems rather circular. The European is still assumed to be the centre of gravity. Does the Other have to be the same to be equal? Pham Van Ky is both Other and looking on the Other. The narrator-protagonist of his novels is looking on the Other (women) and is an Other in relation to the European. However, the novels also make clear that the narrator-protagonist is the Other in relation to the women, and that the European is the Other in relation to him. 'The center itself is marginal'.³⁶ Pham Van Ky is both inside and outside. In presenting the ambiguities surrounding the female protagonists of *Frères de sang*, and particularly *Des Femmes assises çà et là*, he gives an added dimension to the notions of self and Other, and undermines their simple opposition.

³⁵Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London and New York, 1990), p. 6.

³⁶Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York and London, 1991), p. 17.

CHAPTER FOUR

INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS

The Nature of the Foreigner

*All alone with my shadow
I whisper and murmur to it...
There is no one here I can speak to
Who can understand me.*
- Ch'iu Chin

The relationships which illustrate most vividly conflicts of identity and understanding are those between a man and a woman of different race. Two novels: *Bà-Dâm* by Truong Dinh Tri and Albert de Teneuille, and *Nam et Sylvie* by Pham Duy Khiem, relate the relationship between a Vietnamese man and a Frenchwoman. The novels are separated by a gap of nearly thirty years. Both were published in Paris: *Bà-Dâm* in 1930, during the period of French colonization, and *Nam et Sylvie* in 1957, in the years immediately following Independence. These two works stand out in the corpus of Vietnamese Francophone novels in that they deal explicitly with the relationship between a Vietnamese man and a Frenchwoman. The possibility of a relationship between Frenchmen and Vietnamese women is not touched on - perhaps because

Vietnamese women were still largely confined to the home and seldom had the opportunity to study or to travel.¹ The protagonists in both novels are educated and from the middle-class. This necessitated a degree of mobility, which, in the 1920s and 1930s, was easier for Vietnamese men than for Vietnamese women. Wealthy families sent sons, rather than daughters, to study overseas in France. The illustration of a relationship between a Vietnamese man and a Frenchwoman differentiates these two novels from early French colonial fiction, as exemplified by the works of Pierre Loti, which generally focus on relations between Frenchmen and foreign women. There are also certain similarities as well as differences between these and the work of Ousmane Socé, who wrote of the relationship between a Senegalese and a Frenchwoman in his *Mirages de Paris* (1937).

Truong Dinh Tri and Albert de Teneuille wrote and published their novel *Bà-Dâm* during the period of French colonial authority over Indochina. Pham Duy Khiem wrote his in a rather different atmosphere. *Nam et Sylvie* appeared after France lost Indochina and three years after Vietnam was partitioned into two politically opposed halves following the 1954 Geneva Agreement. Yet both novels ultimately depict the failure of interracial relationships - at least between a Vietnamese man and a Frenchwoman. Both novels are set during the time of the French colonization of Indochina. While the bulk of events in *Bà-Dâm* take

¹The examination of such a relationship only appeared in a much later work, Kim Lefèvre's *Retour à la saison des pluies* (see Chapter One). Even then, the relationship between the Vietnamese mother and the Frenchmen is only observed from a great distance. The *récit* does not portray the progression of the relationship or describe the Frenchmen involved. The incidents are episodes from the past. The other account of a relationship between a Vietnamese woman and a Westerner, this time an American, is the one between Xinh and John in Ly Thu Ho, *Au milieu du carrefour* (see Chapter Two).

place in Cochinchina in the 1920s, *Nam et Sylvie* is largely set in metropolitan Paris in the 1930s. Both novels deal with an East-West love affair and, in both, the main characters are students and meet through University or an academic connection. The characters, despite racial and cultural differences, are therefore well-educated and are, evidently, from a middle-class background. In this chapter, I will examine the similarities as well as the differences between *Bà-Dâm* and *Nam et Sylvie*, both of which concentrate on the theme of mixed relationships, in particular the relationship between a member of the colonized with one of the colonizer.

There are therefore four main questions I wish to deal with in this chapter. What is the relationship portrayed in these novels? How is this relationship portrayed? Has it evolved in thirty years? Lastly, how is this change reflected in the style and structure of the novels themselves?

Bà-Dâm was a collaborative effort between a Frenchman, Albert de Teneuille and a Vietnamese, Truong Dinh Tri. The novel begins with a quotation from the Japanese writer Okakura Kakuzo:

L'incompréhension mutuelle de l'Occident et de l'Orient a déjà fait tant de mal qu'il n'y a pas à s'excuser de vouloir collaborer si peu que ce soit au progrès d'une compréhension meilleure.²

Okakura Kakuzo (1862-1913) was an art critic, philosopher, and writer. In 1904, he 'initiated a series of trips to the United States and Europe ... to educate the West about Asian culture. He arranged exhibits, lectured, and published a number of works in English. ... Okakura's works were widely read and his ideas

²Albert de Teneuille et Truong-Dinh-Tri, *Bà-Dâm: Roman Franco-annamite* (Paris, 1930), p. 5. Subsequent references will be given in the main text.

strongly influenced Western perceptions of Japanese culture'.³ The epigraph in *Bà-Dâm* is from *The Book of Tea*, first published in New York in 1906.⁴ The quotation from a Japanese source is significant. 'Japan ... had recognized the significance of modernization and had been rapidly importing scientific, military, and technological experts from the west. By the end of the century, she had successfully embarked on a road toward geographic expansion through military aggression and conquest. The victories of this small island nation against the large continental nations of China in 1895 ... and Russia in 1905 gained her much respect and admiration throughout the world'.⁵ Japan was therefore a model for other East Asian countries to emulate. In *Bà-Dâm*, the epigraph alludes both to Japan's success and to the importance of following the example she set as a country able to combine elements from both East and West. Truong Dinh Tri and Albert de Teneuille present their novel as an attempt to bridge the gap in comprehension between East and West.

The subject of understanding was a difficult one within the context of colonization. This problem was of particular concern in

³M. William Steele, 'Okakura Kakuzo', *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*, Volume 6 (Tokyo, 1983), p. 79.

⁴The original passage in English is: 'So much harm has been done already by the mutual misunderstanding of the New World and the Old, that one need not apologize for contributing his tithes to the furtherance of a better understanding', Okakura Kakuzo, *The Book of Tea*, second edition (Sydney, 1935), p. 5.

⁵Amy Ling, *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (New York, 1990), p. 24. Ling describes the interesting case of a Eurasian writer in the United States, Winnifred Eaton (1875-1954), born of a Chinese mother and an English father. Her sister, Edith Maud Eaton (1865-1914), wrote under the Chinese pseudonym Sui Sin Far, but 'Winnifred ... decided to be the admired kind of "Oriental." Inventing a Japanese-sounding name, Otono Watanna, she also created an appropriate history, claiming Nagasaki as her birthplace and a Japanese noblewoman for her mother. ... We do not know whose idea it was to go to such lengths to authenticate a Japanese identity, but apparently the plan worked. Many readers assumed that Otona Watanna possessed an insider's knowledge of her subject and were charmed by her novels'. Ling, *Between Worlds*, p. 25.

French Indochina in the 1920s. Walter Langlois writes: 'Les années 1924 et 1925 furent des années d'intense activité politique en Indochine, dirigée en grande partie contre l'administration coloniale réactionnaire'.⁶ In 1925, André Malraux began and co-edited the journal *L'Indochine*, later continued as *L'Indochine enchaînée*. He aligned himself with the Annamite nationalist movement.⁷ As Malraux wrote on July 4, 1925:

De Chaudoc à Baclieu, de toutes les provinces, du Sud-Annam même, une même interrogation passionnée est posée par ces jeunes intelligences ardentes que la culture française a formées, et qui, mécontentes de leur état actuel, souffrent, plus que de cet état même, de l'impossibilité de donner à leur énergie une direction et un but. ...

La première nécessité, pour parvenir à une entente réelle entre Français et Annamites, c'est pour nous, Français, de supprimer absolument ce que j'appellerai 'La propagande par le bluff'. Les Français ne sont pas venus ici pour civiliser, mais pour gagner de l'argent *par leur travail*.⁸

Malraux's ideals, as summarized by Langlois, were the following:

Il souhaitait que les Français et Annamites vivent ensemble, non comme maîtres et esclaves, exploiters et exploités, conquérants et conquis, mais en égaux, parce qu'en tant qu'hommes ils étaient égaux. Les Annamites avaient droit à la même éducation et au même travail, à la même justice et aux mêmes libertés individuelles que les Français. Les leur refuser, les traiter en inférieurs, c'était trahir certains des principes les plus fondamentaux de la tradition libérale française, représentée par des contemporains de grande valeur tels que Paul Painlevé, Marius Moutet, Henri Simon et Ferdinand Buisson. Cet aspect du problème colonial semble avoir particulièrement préoccupé Malraux.⁹

⁶Walter F. Langlois, *André Malraux: L'aventure indochinoise*, traduit par Jean-René Major (Paris, 1967), p. 63.

⁷Langlois, *Malraux*, pp. ix-x.

⁸Annexe no. 16 in Langlois, *Malraux*, pp. 307-308.

⁹Langlois, *Malraux*, p. 151.

Malraux appealed to the tradition of French liberalism. He wanted the Vietnamese to be treated as the equals of the French and the two races to work side by side. To treat the Vietnamese as inferiors was to betray fundamental liberal principles. Malraux, however, did not question colonization as such: 'neither in the novel [*La Voie royale*] nor in life did Malraux express the view that French colonial rule in Indo-China should be ended'.¹⁰ Langlois writes that Annamite intellectuals were not so much opposed to French civilization, as to the French colonial government.¹¹

La plupart des leaders indigènes désiraient la naturalisation française pour leurs enfants, une représentation à l'Assemblée française et un système politique et juridique indochinois calqué sur celui de la France.¹²

Bà-Dâm is set within this general context of 'rapprochement franco-annamite'.

The novel deals with the marriage between Sao, a brilliant young Vietnamese lawyer, and Janine, the daughter of his University professor in Paris. After their marriage, they immediately move to Cochinchina. *Bà-Dâm* charts the gradual corrosion of this relationship, and the breakdown of the young couple's love and hopeful illusions. Janine does not adjust well to life in Cochinchina and Sao suffers from cultural malaise in his own country. His family manifest more and more openly their hostility towards the 'madame': 'Bà-Dâm'. Janine's seeming lack of reserve and her indecorous behaviour serve to confirm the family's negative assessment of her. A later illness proves an ideal opportunity for Sao's parents to accuse him of having 'sinned'

¹⁰Elizabeth Fallaize, *Malraux: La Voie royale* (London, 1982), p. 18.

¹¹Langlois, *Malraux*, p. 65.

¹²Langlois, *Malraux*, p. 145.

against his family by marrying a foreigner. The hostility of the surrounding community serves to underline the negative response to the couple. Sao's parents had arranged a match for him with a daughter of a mandarin, and the mandarin now bore a vindictive grudge against the family for this slight towards his daughter and the blow to his own pride and standing. The failure of this marriage, for Sao and for Janine, is perhaps a reflection of the failure of political illusions and ideals within the colony. As Milton Osborne writes:

Reality in contrast to illusion was an awareness of the failure of most French cultural justifications for their colonial presence in Viet-Nam and a cynical, even desperate effort to gain economic advantage from a life that if nothing else seemed to offer a better reward, in status as well as in terms of money, than life in France. But the costs were there, in health or rather the lack of it, in personal dissatisfaction, and for some in national disappointment.¹³

The cultural gap between Janine and Sao becomes marked in Cochinchina. He had appeared a perfectly well assimilated young man in Paris, and a bright and successful student:

Son esprit ouvert, exceptionnellement fin, sa faculté prodigieuse d'adaptation et d'assimilation, le firent rapidement distinguer par le professeur.(p. 11)

He graduated in law and had a promising future ahead of him. His 'foreignness' was apparent in the rather flowery missives he wrote to his fiancée and his charming reserve, which she interpreted as romantic and exotic. Once in Cochinchina, however, his studies appeared to have been for nought. There were few opportunities for a member of the colonized in his own country. His reserve

¹³Milton Osborne, 'From Conviction to Anxiety: Reassessing the French Self-Image in Viet-Nam', *Flinders University Asian Studies Lecture*, 7 (1976), 1-27, F1-F6 (pp. 24-25).

towards Janine became proof of the incompatibility of the two races, a wall of incomprehension, a symbol of the chasm which lay between husband and wife. Her doubts are given voice by the French *colons* who tell her that she will never know how Sao really feels about her: 'Parce qu'avec un Annamite vous ne saurez jamais - et c'est la pire torture pour une femme - vous ne saurez jamais s'il vous aime!'(p. 184). On his part, he views with dismay her physical impulsiveness, her lack of suitable wifely decorum, and watches with little apparent reaction her growing attraction towards a young French administrator and the increasing time she spends with the latter. Both gradually lose their illusions.

Sao appears far more constrained once back on his native soil than he did as a foreigner living in Paris. All his ambitions and plans gradually evaporate. Those who hold power in his country are the French *colons*. Despite his eminent French qualifications he is still but a member of the colonized. A Frenchman with a simple *licence* wields power while he is left powerless. He appears to fritter his time away apathetically on the family property while his parents endure the snubs and disapproval of prominent members of the Annamite community for having a son married to a Frenchwoman. His scheme for a *Société Agricole* results in failure: 'Du brillant Annamite, orgueilleux et pétri d'ambition, il ne restait plus qu'un pauvre homme très las, qui pleurait en secret son bel amour détruit'(p. 236). *Bà-Dâm* reflects current Western perceptions of Indo-China. In *French Indo-China*, published in 1937, Virginia Thompson writes: 'Many [Annamites] whose brilliant promise is revealed by their diplomas dissipate their energies in a thousand wild schemes that never come to

fruition'.¹⁴ Thompson's examination of mixed relationships echoes the plot of *Bà-Dâm*:

In France, the success of Annamite students with Frenchwomen is notable. The exotic tradition, as well as Oriental courtesy, has made a vast impression on the hurried West. The poorest Annamite can write a poem or present a flower with aristocratic grace.¹⁵

She continues:

Of this type of mixed marriage the couples who remain in France are faced with no exceptional problems. ... But quite the contrary applies to the Frenchwomen taken back to the colony by their Annamite husbands. ... The physical adjustment to a totally different way of living, in addition to the psychological adaptation to an anti-individualistic social unit dominated by ritual, would be enough to shatter a more than ordinarily united couple. The Asiatic husband tends to be increasingly absorbed into his milieu, and his French wife isolated in a strange and often hostile environment, which eventually defeats them both.¹⁶

Although Janine begins by standing loyally by him, his increasing distance, his family's hostility, the disapproval of the French community and the flattering attentions of a French administrator finally lead her to leave her husband. She runs away from him and all the lost dreams and illusions he had embodied.

Elle renonçait à pénétrer l'âme de ce dernier. Un abattement douloureux, une sorte de torpeur morale, l'engourdissement de tous ses rêves et de toutes ses aspirations la poussaient à s'abandonner au fil des événements. (pp. 190-191)

In the end she cannot bear to remain in French Indochina and leaves even though it means the loss of the Frenchman she loves.

There is no mention of any *métissage* of French and Vietnamese culture and customs. Although Sao studied in France,

¹⁴Virginia Thompson, *French Indo-China* (London, 1937), p. 300.

¹⁵Thompson, *Indo-China*, p. 444.

¹⁶Thompson, *Indo-China*, p. 445.

there is no question as to his nationality and his allegiances. He is a Vietnamese and took it as a matter of course that he would return to his country and build his life there upon completing his studies. Although attached to his wife, he saw her largely as his property and the means to provide him with sons to carry on the family name and traditions. He felt no passion for her. Her increasing distance and eventual loss were a blow to his pride and self-esteem. Both approached marriage from very different standpoints:

D'ailleurs, s'il aimait vraiment son épouse, c'était surtout par orgueil, par l'esprit bien plus que par la chair. ... Il avait réalisé l'idéal de tout homme de sa race: contracter une union flatteuse dans l'espoir d'avoir des fils. ... Au fond, ce qui séparait profondément les deux époux, c'étaient leurs conceptions différentes de l'hymen. La Française avait cru y trouver une communion totale et vibrante de deux êtres; l'Annamite n'y concevait que la perpétuation traditionnelle de la famille. (p. 208)

It is Janine's French acquaintances who bring up the notion of the status of children if she and Sao were to have any - the notion of *métis* is here brought up in the sense that the children will be of mixed blood: 'Vous savez comme moi ... que les métis ont tous les défauts des deux races et aucune de leurs qualités. Cela est aussi vrai pour les bêtes que pour les hommes'. (p. 18). The response of the wife of a French colon in Cochinchina is even more virulent:

Mais épouser un Annamite, un de ces magots jaunes ... Et puis, il y a les enfants ... Ni Annamite, ni tout à fait Français, ils sont plus que l'un et moins que l'autre. Et bien davantage qu'un véritable Blanc, ils méprisent leurs ancêtres jaunes, dont ils ont du sang et qui appartiennent à une race inférieure. (pp. 179-180)

In the end, Sao's death by drowning (suicide or accident?) is an admission of failure. He had failed in his ambitions, failed his wife,

failed his family. It was perhaps inevitable considering the nature of colonized society: the mixture of envy, jealousy, superiority and inferiority complexes, prejudice, bigotry, suspicion of the 'opposite' side and the gross imbalance of power. As Yeager comments:

The 'exile' of Sao's *dépaysement* is his punishment for having crossed the line dividing Vietnamese and French cultures. The message is clear: challenging socially and culturally prescribed roles and places can have fatal consequences. Sao, for reasons only too obvious, is unable to become French but has assimilated French culture to the point that he can no longer be Vietnamese in a traditional sense. He knows too much; caught in an impasse, he cannot survive.¹⁷

Sao is caught in a difficult bind from which the only escape is death. His death provides an ending to the unresolved question of identity.

The novel illustrates the pitfalls of a cross-cultural marriage in colonial circumstances, even with the best will on both sides. In the *Préface*, the authors wrote that they left history and politics to those more qualified: 'Seul le domaine de la psychologie a retenu notre attention' (p. 7). Just as the novel itself was a collaborative effort, they felt that this way was the only way ahead for Indochina - mutual respect and a more liberal approach on both sides. Indochina has yet to reach this state of affairs - as evidenced by the attitude and assumptions of the French colonial community towards the colonized, and the latter's predictable mixture of suspicion and envy. However, colonialism itself is neither challenged nor questioned by the authors. They evince an idealistic desire to see everyone getting along better without

¹⁷Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 78.

questioning the current order or status quo. The tone of the *Préface* itself is rather patronizing. It concedes that:

Certains indigènes, naturalisés, élevés dans les écoles de la métropole, imprégnés de civilisation occidentale, valent beaucoup d'Européens au point de vue intellectuel et moral. (p. 7)

The implication is that only those few who had experienced Western education could aspire to moral and intellectual equality with Europeans. European standards, in other words, are perceived to be the cultural and intellectual norm which natives should aspire to. Due credit should therefore be given to those few natives who had reached this norm. The *Préface* reads like a justification addressed to a presumably largely ignorant and prejudiced French audience. The novel is, admittedly, informative on the language, literature, customs and attitudes of the Annamites. It bears similarities with prefaces to African Francophone novels. Robert Delavignette's preface to Ousmane Socé's *Karim*, for example, emphasizes the worthiness of African culture and the importance of the novel itself, part of 'une floraison d'œuvres africaines'.¹⁸ He quotes Théodore Monod:

Le Noir n'est pas un homme sans passé, il n'est pas tombé d'un arbre avant-hier. ... Il est bon aussi de savoir admirer chez le Noir ... ses dons artistiques, l'inspiration de ses poètes, les facultés supra-normales de ses devins, l'expression, dans certains cas, d'une pensée philosophique, symbolique, religieuse ou mystique.¹⁹

The preface of *Bà-Dâm* is also a critique of the bigotry manifested by the French *colons* in Indochina as well as the ignorance of people in France itself. It was also important to stress the worth of

¹⁸Robert Delavignette, 'Préface' to Ousmane Socé, *Karim*, deuxième édition (Paris, 1948), p 14.

¹⁹Delavignette, 'Préface' , pp. 8-9.

the natives since the novel portrayed the marriage of a young Frenchwoman with a native. In concession to French womanhood, the native in question had to be well-educated and eminently civilized. The portrait of a cross-cultural marriage, even one which eventually failed, is radical enough and it had to be pointed out that natives are not only human but in this case even equalled many Europeans. On the other hand, we are reminded that the French are a conquering people and the Annamites a vanquished one. Any good-will or tolerance are in the end concessions granted by those who hold power, in this case the French.

Writers such as Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi have written on the role of assimilation in relation to interracial relationships. In linking himself with a white woman, the native absorbs some of the white, dominant culture:

Je ne veux pas être reconnu comme *Noir*, mais comme *Blanc*.

Or ... qui peut le faire, sinon la Blanche? En m'aimant, elle me prouve que je suis digne d'un amour blanc. On m'aime comme un Blanc.

Je suis un Blanc. ...

J'épouse la culture blanche, la beauté blanche, la blancheur blanche.

Dans ces seins blancs que mes mains ubiquitaires caressent, c'est la civilisation et la dignité blanches que je fais miennes.²⁰

Memmi perceived the desire for the other as a reflection of hatred of the self:

Le refus de soi et l'amour de l'autre sont communs à tout candidat de l'assimilation. Et les deux composantes de cette tentative de libération sont étroitement liées: l'amour du colonisateur est sous-tendu d'un complexe de sentiments qui vont de la honte à la haine de soi. ...

²⁰Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris, 1952), p. 71.

Le mariage mixte est le terme extrême de cet élan chez les plus audacieux.²¹

There may be a certain element of this in *Bà-Dâm*, since Sao is disoriented and unsure of his identity, but it does not reflect the actual experience of interracial marriage for Sao and for Janine. If Sao had any illusions of allying himself with European power by marrying Janine (and this is not something that is made explicit at the beginning of the novel), he was soon to realize how futile this gesture was. He and his wife found themselves rejected by both the Annamite community and the French expatriate community in Indochina. Grasping the other as a means of absorbing another culture proves illusory, not only for Sao, but also for Janine.

Bà-Dâm is a straightforward third-person narrative. Events follow each other in chronological order. The action begins in Paris with the announcement of Sao and Janine's marriage and ends in Cochinchina. The novel is largely directed at a French audience. It was published in Paris and all Vietnamese words and expressions are either followed by French translations or have explanatory footnotes. There is a detailed physical description of the main characters: their height, build, colouring and facial features. Each is a stereotypical portrait of their race: Janine is a blue-eyed blonde; Sao is slender, with a Far Easterner's slight, small stature and dark hair and eyes.

M. Nguyễn-Van-Sao est un garçon charmant, courtois, bien élevé, plein de délicatesse, instruit et de famille fort riche. (p. 10)

Plutôt petit, mince, gracile même, avec une sorte de fragilité nerveuse qui n'excluait pas l'élégance, Nguyễn-Van-Sao présentait tous les types de sa race,

²¹Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé précédé de Portrait du colonisateur* (1957, Paris, 1985), p. 138.

mais comme tempérés et réduits à un attrait inaccoutumé. (p. 22)

Sao is also described as '[d]'une courtoisie parfaite' with '[une] voix légèrement chantante'(p. 20), an apt remainder of the tonality of spoken Vietnamese. Janine, on the other hand is:

Souple, de taille moyenne, éprise des sports autant que des travaux de l'esprit, elle révélait une grâce naturelle incomparable. Son visage délicat, aux traits réguliers, s'illuminait de deux grands yeux bleus très doux et s'auréolait d'une chevelure d'un blond cendré qui paraissait mousseuse.(p. 19)

The stress on colour and, by extension, racial difference is underlined by this vivid contrast between light and dark. A similar striking contrast of colour is portrayed in Ousmane Socé's *Mirages de Paris*²² published seven years later. The contrast in looks between Fara, the Senegalese and Jacqueline is equally marked. The African's death by drowning also echoes the manner of Sao's death, although, unlike *Bà-Dâm*, the bulk of events in *Mirages de Paris* take place in Paris itself and Fara's suicide is deliberate. 'Relationships between white women and black men ... are all but unheard of during the colonial era. When they do appear they are often set in a European context. Even then, they give rise to considerable difficulties due to the disapproval of outsiders. ... The most striking aspect of these affairs is that they invariably end in tragedy, through the death or suicide of one of the partners'.²³ In the Senegalese novel, the tragedy occurs after Jacqueline's death following childbirth, the final straw after the accumulated stresses of the young man's bitter disillusion with France. *Mirages de Paris*

²²Ousmane Socé, *Mirages de Paris*, deuxième édition (Paris, 1948).

²³Mineke Schipper, 'Women and Literature in Africa' in *Unheard Words: Woman and Literature in Africa, the Arab World, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America*, edited by Mineke Schipper, translated by Barbara Potter Fasting (London and New York, 1985), 22-59 (p. 31).

concentrates on the person of Fara rather than on the development of his relationship with Jacqueline. *Bà-Dâm's* focus on the other hand is the nature of the interracial relationship between Sao and Janine.

Images of exotica abound. Janine dreams of exotic surroundings before her departure from France:

Elle évoqua l'ombre chaude des palétuviers sous lesquels bientôt elle se promènerait au bras d'un époux. Elle se vit, toute vêtue de blanc, songeant au clair de lune auprès du toit pointu d'une pagode. La masse noire de la forêt surgissait à ses yeux. Les rizières stagnaient sous la lumière cendrée de l'astre nocturne. Toute une vie frémissante de bêtes inconnues fourmillait à ses côtés. Des fleurs aux exhalaisons capiteuses relevaient dans la moiteur des ténèbres leurs corolles lasses. Au loin, un buffle beuglait, un fauve grondait. Mille caresses imprévues glissaient sur le front de la jeune femme. (p. 34)

Images redolent of mystery and the seduction of the unknown and the unfamiliar - and of darkness. Janine's marriage to Sao was, in a concrete sense, *un cri de défi* to the unknown. Although her parents approved of the match, society did not: 'les mariages avec des gens de couleur sont encore fort rares et d'ailleurs bien dénigrés'(p. 12). Strong reservations were voiced by her mother's lifelong friends. Yet this only proved an added spur to Janine. She had made her decision and was going to live in a foreign country. She also feels a quixotic sense of mission. She is holding her hand out to a member of the colonized, a member of a subject and in many senses, despised race:

Elle découvrait, dans son mariage avec Sao, une sorte d'apostolat, de réparation envers une race souvent méprisée et qui ne le méritait guère. Elle percevait une suprême justice à tendre sa main de Française, descendante des conquérants, vers ce fils de vaincus dont la soumission n'avait pu entamer l'aristocratie mentale. (p. 33)

This provides a reversal of the traditional image of subject woman attached to man the conqueror. In this instance it is she who represents the might of a ruling race and he who represents the underdog, the marginalized, a subject race.

Early French colonial fiction on interracial sexual liaisons had a rather different emphasis: 'French colonial writers followed the flag to all corners of the globe and gave frank and detailed accounts of the lives of French soldiers and administrators with their consorts: the *moresques* of Algeria, the *moussos* of the Sudan, the *congais* of Indo-China'.²⁴ The fascination with the exotic and the strange, from the French male point of view is illustrated in the works of Pierre Loti: *Aziyadé* (1879), *Le Roman d'un Spahi* (1881), *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887), *L'Exilée* (1893), and *La Troisième Jeunesse de Madame Prune* (1905). Alec Hargreaves writes that 'Loti felt a particular antipathy for the Far East':²⁵

[Loti] also found the natural and cultural features of the Far East so different from anything he had known during his childhood that he found it difficult to establish any real rapport with the region and its inhabitants. 'La race jaune et la nôtre sont les deux pôles de l'espèce humaine', he declared. 'Il y a des divergences extrêmes jusque dans nos façons de percevoir les objets extérieurs, et nos notions sur les choses essentielles sont souvent inverses'.²⁶

Milton Osborne notes that 'it is during the so-called heroic period [1880s to the early 1900s], that one comes upon the first extended descriptions of the prolonged French literary fascination

²⁴Hugh Ridley, *Images of Imperial Rule* (London and Canberra, 1983), p. 80.

²⁵Alec G. Hargreaves, *The Colonial Experience in French Fiction: A Study of Pierre Loti, Ernest Psichari and Pierre Mille* (London and Basingstoke), p. 29.

²⁶Hargreaves, *Colonial Experience*, p. 29.

with the *con-gai*, the Vietnamese concubine'.²⁷ He writes further on: 'Not only was the practice of concubinage common, so too were the accounts of it - accounts that were without romanticism but which, instead, were often brutally frank in their details'.²⁸ Ridley notes:

The great majority of serious fiction tackled the problems of inter-racial liaisons from the position of the white *male* partner. It was almost exclusively left to sensationalist popular fiction to chart the murky waters of white women's explorations (Pierre Mille recalled a certain type of publisher tended to reject novels 'because the white woman does not sleep with a native') and serious French colonial fiction took a very negative view of these relationships.²⁹

Published in 1930, *Bà-Dâm* conforms to neither of the early categories of French colonial fiction. It does not detail the relationship between a French *colon* and his Vietnamese concubine, and, while it is an account of the relationship between a Vietnamese and a Frenchwoman, it does not fall into the category of sensationalist fiction. There is nothing illicit in the relationship portrayed within the novel. It is an attempt to examine a marriage between a man and a woman of different cultures and the particular stresses that such a marriage undergoes within the context of colonial Indochina.

Bà-Dâm contains a detailed description of Cochinchina. The people, the costumes, the houses, furniture and layout, the landscape, the colour and pageantry of traditional celebrations, the food, the heat and strangeness of Indochina are drawn in vivid colours. Described also is the expatriate French community of

²⁷Osborne, 'Conviction', p. 10.

²⁸Osborne, 'Conviction', p. 11.

²⁹Ridley, *Images*, pp. 88-89.

colons, with their clubs and tennis courts and their revulsion at the sight of a compatriot married to a *jaune*. There are no references to French literature but there are, on the other hand, brief references to Vietnamese literature. The *Tale of Kieu* is mentioned three times and there are excerpts from classical romances, poems, songs and tales. Sao's letters to his fiancée and then wife are replete with classical imagery and written in flowing, poetic style - missives which, until Janine's loss of illusions, seduced her by the charm of their strangeness:

Unis selon nos vœux en un couple assorti méritant de
caracoler sur le Dragon,
Gravons ensemble sur nos os la lettre: Union.
Nos amours, aussi immenses que l'Océan et le Fleuve,
dureront un siècle.(p. 32)

Sao's letter of blame is couched in equally literary terms:

Je blâme celle qui m'a juré fidélité sur les monts et les
collines,
Et qui me quitte pour d'autres lieux de plaisir.
Je blâme celle que j'ai portée au Paradis,
Où, comblée de bonheur et inconsciente, elle
regrettait sa vie d'antan,
Je plains celle qui, la première, provoqua la désunion;
Qui, au milieu de notre félicité, joue sur la guitare le
morceau de la séparation. (p. 239)

Sao chose to communicate his bitterness towards his wife in these terms, rather than to confront her directly. Even then, she might not have read these comments if she had not fallen on the poem by chance. Ironically, the letter itself, which he had hesitated to show her, proved to be the turning point in her decision to leave him. Couched in poetry and metaphor as they were, his recriminations were no less bitter and plaintive, and a clear indication to Janine that Sao lay the burden of the failure of their relationship solely on her shoulders. This proved the final straw

for her, the death-knell of their marriage. The classical features of Sao's letter serve to underline the gap in comprehension between husband and wife. It is significant that the letter harks back to the literary heritage of Vietnam, which further distances Sao from Janine. Instead of perceiving this letter as strange and charming, as she had interpreted his letters of courtship, she sees it as the symbol of the final gulf which lies between the two of them.

Bà-Dâm is a novel of joint authorship. It approaches the subject of intercultural marriage from the standpoints of East and West, since a Vietnamese collaborated with a Frenchman in its composition. By the same token the relationship between Sao, the Vietnamese and Janine, the Frenchwoman, is depicted, unsurprisingly, from a male angle since both writers are men. The novel is straightforward and descriptive, moving in orderly fashion from the young couple meeting in Paris, their marriage, move to Indochina and the gradual disintegration of this relationship. The man dies, the woman leaves and returns to France. The novel consists of a third-person narrative, the events succeed each other in chronological order, the strangeness and exoticism of Indochina are conveyed in colourful terms. There are various juxtapositions within *Bà-Dâm*. The first is that of politics. The novel is a collaborative effort, written by a member of the colonized and one of the colonizer. The second is that of culture. It charts the progression and destruction of the relationship between a Frenchwoman, a member of the colonizer and a Vietnamese man, a member of the colonized. It is largely set within the context of colonial Indochina and illustrates the tensions between the two communities, the mutual hostility,

suspicion and racism. *Bà-Dâm* is also informative on the smells, sights, sounds, traditions, customs and family relationships in Cochinchina. The third juxtaposition is the fictional representation of a relationship between a man and a woman across the barrier of nationality, race, and colonization. The novel moves along a linear framework. It presents the clash of cultures, the difficulty of intercultural relationships, especially within the alien, exotic setting of Indochina itself. Janine finds her husband to be a stranger and a foreigner. Transplanted outside her familiar setting, she cannot acclimatize herself to the country, the people, or the customs. She gives up and leaves at the end. The novel is ultimately about failure. It charts the failure of ideals and high hopes for both the man and the woman. It charts the failure of any attempt at mutual understanding and tolerance. The cultural and emotional gap between Sao and Janine, exacerbated by the social tensions within colonial Indochina, proved to be insurmountable. They, and the relationship they attempted to forge against such prejudices and pressures, failed.

The colour and exotica of *Bà-Dâm* are dramatically absent from Pham Duy Khiem's *Nam et Sylvie*, published twenty-seven years later under the pseudonym Nam Kim. The bulk of events occur in Paris. The main characters are once again a Vietnamese student in Paris, Nam, and a young Frenchwoman, Sylvie. However, there is no detailed description of their colouring or physique. There is very little exotica in the novel. The only hint of the exotic is the setting in which Nam first meets Sylvie: 'dans la

salle des fêtes or et rouge de notre "Maison de l'Indochine".³⁰ There are no scenes set in Vietnam and therefore no description of local colour. The subject of politics is also avoided.³¹ The novel is not in chronological order. It begins with the end of Nam and Sylvie's relationship, moves backward in time to the formation of this relationship and then forward in detailing its process. So the first scene is Nam's departure from Paris. The action then shifts backwards to Nam and Sylvie's first meeting, then forward with the progress of their love, and finally ends on the ship carrying Nam as it approaches Haiphong harbour in Vietnam. The account is a first-person narrative: Nam's retrospective account of the development of and eventual erosion of his relationship with Sylvie. The novel comprises: firstly, Nam's recollections twenty years later; secondly, numerous letters from Nam to Sylvie and Sylvie to Nam from the period; and thirdly, excerpts from Nam's journal at the time.

Unlike Sao's missives in *Bà-Dâm*, Nam's letters are written in pure, idiomatic French. There are no expressions or references which would indicate them to be foreign or alien, as Sao's letters evidently were. Both Nam and Sylvie are conscious that 'une union mixte' is untenable. Nam refers to 'l'invraisemblance d'une union à cette époque' (p. 24). He would return to Vietnam once his examinations were over. Sylvie would not be able to cope with life

³⁰Nam Kim, *Nam et Sylvie* (Paris, 1957), p. 7. Subsequent references will be given in the main text.

³¹Scott McConnell writes that: 'By 1930, radical Vietnamese students made the rejection of social interaction with the French a political imperative. When students who resided at the government-sponsored Indochina House of the *Cité Universitaire* held a dance and invited French girls, the other Vietnamese ripped down the posters and used the event to demonstrate their political and moral superiority'. Scott McConnell, *Leftward Journey: The Education of Vietnamese Students in France, 1919-1939* (New Brunswick and Oxford, 1989), p. 69. *Nam et Sylvie* makes no mention of this.

in Vietnam. Their union, as a result, could not be anything but short-lived and ephemeral. As Nam relates:

Même si je l'avais jugée parfaite et à jamais sûre, même si j'avais envisagé, dès cette époque, de réserver l'avenir, ... et examiner si l'évolution générale, l'attitude des Français de là-bas et la situation que j'aurais acquise personnellement rendaient possible notre union, je ne me serais pas cru en droit de m'en ouvrir à elle dès lors.(p. 66)

The notion of a mixed marriage was inadmissible in the narrow circles of colonial Indochina. A couple of French *colons* feel entitled to assure Nam that 'une "union mixte" de notre genre était impossible là-bas: ils avaient quitté le pays depuis peu' (p. 166). The weight of social disapproval and the rejection which would ensue not only from the Vietnamese host community but also the cliquish French expatriate community was more than either Nam and Sylvie can contemplate. It might have been possible for them to live and marry in Paris, but Nam had family responsibilities and did not consider staying on in France.

Each did absorb, perhaps unconsciously, some of the other's culture:

Cadot s'écrie: "Ah! ça m'amuse de voir Nam ainsi; ce n'est plus le subtil Oriental."

Alors, ajoutez à votre liste, si vous ne l'avez pas noté, le Nam européen, grand fou. (p. 75)

Quinze ans plus tard, à Hanoï, en lisant cette page [d'une lettre de Sylvie] devant des amis qui n'avaient jamais vécu en France ou qui n'y avaient pas longtemps vécu, j'eus la surprise de les entendre s'écrier:

- Mais c'est une Annamite! Seule une femme annamite a pu écrire cette lettre! Impossible que ce soit une Française! (p. 129)

Both are examples of the preconceptions each race has about the other: hence Orientals are deemed subtle and mysterious, while Westerners are considered thick-skinned and obtuse.

Unlike *Bà-Dâm*, *Nam et Sylvie* does contain references to French literature. Louise Chardonnet takes on the name of Sylvie, one of Gérard de Nerval's *Filles du Feu*, to please Nam. Nerval, however, is never actually referred to by name in the novel. There is in this the imprint of Vietnamese classical literature. The author expects the educated reader to be familiar with Gérard de Nerval's works, the significance of 'Sylvie' and the themes embodied in Nerval's *nouvelle*, in much the same way that classical Vietnamese writers would expect their readers to recognize any references to previous, in general Chinese, literary classics and grasp their relevance to the present work. It is significant that Pham Duy Khiem should have used one of Nerval's works. Edward Said has pointed out:

Theirs [the French] was the Orient of memories, suggestive ruins, forgotten secrets, hidden correspondences, and an almost virtuosic style of being, an Orient whose highest literary forms would be found in Nerval and Flaubert, both of whose work was solidly fixed in an imaginative, unrealizable (except aesthetically) dimension. ... The Orient symbolizes Nerval's dreamquest and the fugitive woman central to it, both as desire and as loss.³²

In the inverse of Nerval's yearning for the Orient, the European figure of 'Sylvie' was to embody both desire and loss for the Vietnamese protagonist of *Nam et Sylvie*.

Why did Louise Chardonnet take on the name 'Sylvie' for Nam? Was it with the foreknowledge that, like Nerval's 'Sylvie', she would come to embody an illusion, a happiness which lay within Nam's grasp but which he then lost?

Là était le bonheur peut-être, cependant...³³

³²Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1978), p. 170 and p. 184.

³³Gérard de Nerval, *Les Filles du Feu, Les Chimères* (Paris, 1965), p. 139.

There is also a reversal of roles in that Nerval's Sylvie is a country girl, with serene, classic looks whose admirer is the Parisian narrator of *Sylvie*, while Louise Chardonnet is a Parisian, with a far from placid personality and the narrator in this instance is a foreigner, a Vietnamese. Like Nerval's Sylvie, however, the woman Sylvie-Louise Chardonnet comes to embody an untouchable reality. Nam can only accept her for the illusions she represents, rather than the woman she actually is, and in the end loses both. Unlike Nerval's narrator, for whom 'l'idéal sublime' and 'la douce réalité'³⁴ were represented by two different women, both are incorporated in the same woman for Nam. In the end, the pressure of keeping up two selves proves to be too much for Sylvie-Louise Chardonnet. As Nam writes of her:

N'était-ce pas plutôt son vrai caractère, que ses sentiments pour moi avaient réussi à réprimer et à mater à peu près, et qui depuis un certain temps remontait plus librement et s'imposait? (p. 184)

She gives up her own dreams and destroys his dreams in the process. The pressures on her were too exacting:

Au fond j'ai tout pressenti dès le début. A mon contact vous êtes un peu sortie de vous-même, de votre milieu d'âme, mais vous retombez vite. "Sylvie" fut un feu de paille. Il n'y a vraiment que Louise Chardonnet.(p. 203)

Louise Chardonnet does not disappear totally from Nam's life; her life carries on, she marries conventionally, becomes a mother, like Nerval's Sylvie, but, twenty years afterwards, Nam still mourns the loss of what might have been and still thinks of her as Sylvie, not Louise Chardonnet. He realizes that he has created a persona in Sylvie, that he had created his own perception of the lover in the

³⁴Nerval, *Filles du Feu*, p. 138.

other, that he had invested in Sylvie qualities and personality traits that he had wanted her to possess. He gradually becomes cognizant of this: 'Au fond, a-t-elle jamais été différente? C'est seulement quand elle m'aimait qu'elle devenait compréhensive et clairvoyante, volontaire et soumise à la fois, voluptueuse' (p. 216).

Nam speaks out on the subject of a pseudonymous French novel: Eliane Tournier's *Elle blanche et Lui jaune*.

Elle blanche et Lui jaune ... était tendancieux et injuste pour les hommes jaunes. En réalité, si une union de ce genre devait forcément échouer, c'était surtout parce qu'elle se heurtait aux préjugés et à la politique des Français de là-bas; les coutumes de nos ancêtres et les défauts réels ou supposés de notre race ne pouvaient jouer qu'un rôle secondaire: je le démontrai aisément, devant l'ampithéâtre comble. Mais si sûr de moi que je fusse, je n'avais point compté sur le succès que j'obtins, sur la sympathie vive et spontanée des auditeurs dont l'un, s'adressant à ses voisins, fit tout haut cette remarque: 'Pour quelle femme parle-t-il ce soir?' (p. 27)

It is ironical that he refers to this novel in order to defend mixed relationships, considering the fact that *Nam et Sylvie* itself chronicles the failure of such a relationship. Granted, *Elle blanche et Lui jaune* obviously referred to the failure of a mixed marriage in the setting of colonial Indochina. Nam is arguing that if such a relationship - between a Frenchwoman and a Vietnamese - failed in Indochina, it was because of the pressures imposed by the community and politics of the *colons*. He stresses that the novel was unjust 'pour les hommes jaunes'. The weight of indigenous values and traditions played but a secondary role in the breakdown of their relationships with white women. The primary culprit was the political system: the French administrators were, after all, the ones who ran the country. Nam does not comment on the way the

Frenchwoman was dealt with in Eliane Tournier's novel, whether her particular plight and concerns, her own sensation of alienation in a foreign country also had its part to play in the failure of the relationship. He also does not touch on the fact that the Vietnamese involved may have proved equally blind to the problems encountered by his partner. The message conveyed by *Bà-Dâm* was very different. The prejudices and hostility of the host family and community - Sao's parents and his social milieu - were as instrumental as the French colonialists in bearing pressure on the breakup of the marriage. It is interesting to conjecture here as to whether *Elle blanche et Lui jaune* is an oblique reference to the novel *Homme jaune et Femme blanche* by Christiane Fournier, published in Paris by Flammarion in 1933. Did the author remember reading this novel many years earlier and did he simply reproduce an approximation of the author and title? Christiane Fournier becomes Eliane Tournier. *Homme jaune et Femme blanche* becomes *Elle blanche et Lui jaune*. If he was referring to an actual book, why not refer to it correctly, especially since he wanted to make a point of raising objections to the views illustrated in the other novel? On the other hand, the slight alteration in the name and title may have been deliberate. He may have been reluctant to criticize another published novel openly and preferred to do so indirectly. In *Nam et Sylvie*, he refers to this French work on interracial marriage to allow his main character, Nam, as a Vietnamese living in France and about to embark on a relationship with a Frenchwoman, to counterargue and present the Vietnamese side of the situation. This novel within a novel allowed an alien to voice his opinion. Nam had to

resort to a French novel in order to articulate his own strong views regarding colonial power. He had to offset his views against Eliane Tournier's. The impression is that as a Vietnamese, he is never a completely autonomous being. He had to move within a French cultural context and could only portray himself in the eyes of the French. He is a projection of the way in which French society views him. It is impossible for him to stand completely alone, because his country is under French rule.

Although he studied and lived in France, Nam still had strong family and filial obligations which led him to return to Vietnam and there bend to the traditional responsibilities expected of the eldest son.

Au seuil de mon pays, à la veille de prendre place dans cette société qui allait se refermer sur moi, je me disais - car j'étais encore jeune - que jamais plus je ne serais aimé pour moi-même comme Sylvie m'avait aimé, étudiant. Maintenant, sur la seule foi de mes titres conquis au loin et pour le dernier desquels les journaux étaient en train de chercher une traduction dans notre langue, les plus beaux partis m'attendaient, déjà on avait dû pressentir ma mère, et les jeunes filles les plus difficiles étaient prêtes à m'épouser les yeux fermés. Etant donné nos moeurs, je n'aurais d'ailleurs point l'occasion de les connaître, sauf celle que j'aurais d'abord acceptée pour femme. (p. 239)

His years in Paris, his relationship with Sylvie were for him a short experience of freedom away from his country - somewhat ironical since he felt less constrained as a member of the colonized living in metropolitan France than as a Vietnamese living in French-ruled Vietnam. In the end, both he and Sylvie would return to their society and culture: Sylvie marrying a Frenchman and becoming what she had always hoped to be - a wife and mother - , and Nam returning to his homeland and obeying the dictates of

conscience as a Vietnamese and the eldest son in the family. Both reverted back to their world. And since this difference in origin proved a stumbling block to any future in their relationship, and in the end, defeated them, the narration of their affair, the crux of the plot, 'le conflit des races', appears, more than the vagaries of the affair itself, the central point of the novel.

In *Nam et Sylvie*, the retrospective account is Nam's. Sylvie is a projection, the projection of his hopes and his desires, and although she is not totally voiceless since her letters to him appear in the novel, the outlook and the representation are essentially his. He is the one to interpret, with hindsight, the way in which their relationship progressed and he chooses which of her letters to reproduce. Sylvie, like the Vietnamese under French rule, has a small, distant voice. There is no question as to who is in charge, and who, accordingly, has the power to observe, to note, to judge and in the end, to regret.

In this novel, Pham Duy Khiem is using French to convey his perspective as a Vietnamese. Is it a sign of ultimate powerlessness that the only way he, as a Vietnamese, can express himself, is through a foreign language, French, a foreign mode, the modern novel, and a foreign woman, Sylvie? Or is the use of French, as Thuong Vuong-Riddick claims in relation to Vietnamese writing in French, 'un outil révolutionnaire'³⁵? Or is there an element of both? There is no other way, after all, for his voice to be heard in a Western context. One way of confronting the colonizer is to use his weapons - his language, literary models, and women. *Nam et Sylvie*

³⁵Thuong Vuong-Riddick, 'Le drame de l'occidentalisation dans quelques romans de Pham Van Ky', *Présence Francophone*, 16 (1970), 141-152 (p. 141).

was published in Paris, just three years after the French withdrawal from Indochina. Unlike other Vietnamese Francophone writers, such as Tran Van Tung for example, Pham Duy Khiem consciously avoids his Vietnamese linguistic heritage. There is no poetry in *Nam et Sylvie*. There are no references to or quotations from Vietnamese poems, proverbs or songs except at the very end, and the saying there bears an element of fatalism, an acknowledgment of the irreversibility of events. The narrator has undergone an experience which he cannot undo. It is part of his life: 'Une fois que vous avez passé la rivière ensemble, la connaissance est faite; une fois que vous avez compté un jour ensemble, c'est une dette et une fidélité' (p. 242).³⁶ No Vietnamese words or expressions appear in the novel. The weight of Chinese and classical Vietnamese literary tradition seems to leave Pham Duy Khiem untouched. Either that or he made a very great effort to lay it aside and turn instead towards the heritage of French literature.

Writers such as Tran Van Tung in *Bach-Yen*, and Mme Ly Thu Ho in *Printemps Inachevé*, used the Vietnamese classic, *The Tale of Kieu* or *Kim-Van-Kieu*, as a model against which to offset their female characters. In *Nam et Sylvie*, Pham Duy Khiem clearly avoids any reference to Kieu and chooses instead a French post-romantic model, Nerval's *Sylvie*.

It is possible that he deemed Tran Van Tung's approach to have failed, that the ornate and complex use of imagery and vocabulary in Vietnamese literature translated poorly into French,

³⁶These are two separate sayings. The Vietnamese originals are: 'Dong chu cong te' and 'Mot ngay nen nghĩa'.

that the result was too *précieux*, contrived and therefore largely inaccessible to a French audience. Or it may be simply that his responses as a writer differed markedly from that of some of his compatriots. He chose to make use of French literary models in order to compose his novel. Firstly, the form of the novel itself; secondly, the use of letters and excerpts from a journal - inspired by French literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and thirdly, the use of Nerval's *Sylvie*, to illustrate different aspects of the self in the form of a woman. Pham Duy Khiem said that as a Vietnamese living under the French protectorate, he had no option but to write in French: 'la vérité m'oblige à préciser que je n'ai pas eu à choisir, sous le protectorat français'.³⁷ He aligns his use of French as a writer to the use of classical Chinese by Vietnamese scholars for centuries.³⁸ As a Vietnamese using the language of the colonizer, he is asserting his independence in the same way his ancestors did when they used Chinese. He had no other means with which to express himself.

Professor André Lebois gave a speech in honour of Pham Duy Khiem, at the time Vietnamese Ambassador to France, at the University of Toulouse in 1956, in which he implied that *Nam et Sylvie* was autobiographical. He identified Nam with the narrator of Pham Duy Khiem's autobiographical *La Place d'un homme: De Hanoï à la Courtine*, published in 1954.³⁹ Pham Duy Khiem denied this link in his *réponse* and went on to state:

³⁷Pham Duy Khiem, 'Réponse de Pham Duy Khiem' dans 'Le Viêt-Nam et la Culture Française', *Revue de la Méditerranée*, 4, 17 (1957), 635-651 (p. 648).

³⁸Pham Duy Khiem, 'Réponse', p. 649.

³⁹André Lebois, 'Le Viêt-Nam et la Culture Française', *Revue de la Méditerranée*, 4, 17 (1957), 635-651 (pp. 639-641).

'Il y a la réalité ordinaire, et il y a la réalité du rêve. Notre besogne à nous, cher confrère, ne consiste-t-elle pas à créer des nostalgies et des rêves, pour les autres bien sûr, mais aussi pour nous-mêmes?'⁴⁰

Is this why the novel is in some ways inaccessible? Is it too consciously purged of anything Vietnamese in the way in which it is written? The French used is pure and classical, the narrative is constantly interrupted by excerpts from Nam's journal and the letters the lovers wrote to each other. The novel is initially difficult to follow. Is Pham Duy Khiem still able to express his 'Vietnameseness' through a foreign medium? There are the outward trappings of cultural differences in the main characters' different expectations, but does the novel successfully convey its unique Vietnamese origins through the language it uses? Unlike Ousmane Socé, Pham Duy Khiem carefully omits any description of exotic colour, any reference to indigenous expressions or vocabulary. The letters Nam and Sylvie write to each other are not distinguishable in style or register. They both write in idiomatic French.

Nam et Sylvie may demonstrate that it is impossible to reconcile Vietnamese and French perspectives. If the French language takes over, the Vietnamese is purged and destroyed, and has no voice. This is perhaps analogous to the colonial situation. In the system of education the French installed in colonial Vietnam, the Vietnamese were deprived of and lost touch with their own language and literature. They were forced to use the imported language of the colonizers. In the end, the only way for them to have their voice heard was to use the only one accessible to them -

⁴⁰Lebois, 'Viêt-Nam', p. 651.

a foreign language. Their own had been cut off and effectively silenced. As Albert Memmi pointed out:

La possession de deux langues n'est pas seulement celle de deux outils, c'est la participation à deux royaumes psychiques et culturels. Or, ici, les *deux univers symbolisés, portés par les deux langues, sont en conflit*: ce sont ceux du colonisateur et du colonisé.⁴¹

In *Nam et Sylvie*, the use of the French language and the resort to French literature convey the sensation of a crippled novel, as if, in the way Nam and Sylvie's relationship failed, another outlook, another potential, was briefly glimpsed but in the end, never brought to fruition.

Both *Bà-Dâm* and *Nam et Sylvie* deal with the theme of the failure of a cross-cultural relationship, whether through social and family pressure and the setting of colonial Cochinchina in the 1920s, or in the context of Paris in the 1930s. Yeager comments that the consequences are not fatal for Nam as they had been for Sao: 'Nam, like Sao, has learned the secrets of the West, but Nam is able to adopt and fit them to his individual, that is, cultural, needs'.⁴² However the result is still a failure in terms of the interracial relationship between Nam and Sylvie. There still exists a gulf in expectations and understanding, even though in the later novel, the superficial differences of colour, customs, costumes, food and circumstances are not touched on. The account is of two people loving and eventually falling apart because they are after all of different nationalities, different racial backgrounds, and one of them had to return to his own country.

⁴¹Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé*, p. 47.

⁴²Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 82.

Bà-Dâm deals in a straightforward way with the theme of mixed marriage and relationships. As the authors stress:

Nous présentons aujourd'hui au public un livre écrit, pour la première fois, en étroite collaboration par un Français et un Annamite. ...

Il nous a paru profondément intéressant de rechercher, s'il fallait souhaiter une fusion des deux races en favorisant l'extension des mariages franco-annamites.

Certains indigènes, naturalisés, élevés dans les écoles de la métropole, imprégnés de civilisation occidentale, valent beaucoup d'Européens au point de vue intellectuel et moral.

Toutefois sont-ils capables de faire des époux pour les jeunes Françaises et qu'advient-il de ces dernières lorsqu'ils les emmènent là-bas, par delà l'Océan, sur des terres tropicales, au sein de familles traditionnalistes, loin des centres européennisés? Le bonheur de bien des femmes blanches dépend de la réponse. (pp. 7-8)

The intention was to examine the progress of such a relationship, between two well-educated bourgeois: one a Vietnamese with all due academic credits from Paris University and the other a young Frenchwoman from the best academic milieu, qualified with a *Licence-ès-lettres*. Sao has obviously studied and lived in France, and appears to adapt quite well to his circumstances. It is evident that he shows proof of flexibility and that the manners and customs of the French are not a complete mystery to him. Janine, for her part, comes from a comfortable middle-class and scholarly background. She is intelligent, gifted with imagination, and is open-minded and open-hearted enough to accept the offer of marriage from a foreigner, the foreigner in question having been introduced to her by her own father as one of his star pupils. Janine has romanticized yearnings for the exotic and the strange. She thinks she is fully prepared to deal with whatever Indochina has to offer her. But she assumes somehow that Indochina will

simply be a convenient, if colourful, backdrop to her life, that she herself will be able to appreciate the country yet somehow remained untouched and unaffected by it, as if the landscape and the people remain giant slides in front of which she and Sao will carry on with their love and their hopes. Her dream of romance in the darkness of an Oriental jungle is symptomatic.

La petite étudiante ne savait plus où était la fiction et la réalité. (p. 45)

The reality of Indochina proves to be a rude shock. She finds herself bodily affected by the heat, the damp, the smells, the food, the people, the colours, the strangeness of her surroundings. Concrete reality comes to seem dreamlike as she makes the mental and emotional effort to adjust to a vastly foreign atmosphere. Nothing in her childhood and adolescence in France had prepared her for this:

Tout ce qui l'entourait lui semblait irréel. Elle ne pouvait se reconnaître dans un tel milieu. ... Son âme, désaxée, flottait en pleine fantasmagorie. (pp. 83-84)

Like others who went to Indochina and were confronted with a reality quite unlike their expectations, she was forced to concede the chasm between her dreams and delusions on the one hand, and the actuality of the colony on the other:

Les livres de Pierre Loti n'avaient donc pas tout dit, la misère, la corruption, les crimes même de l'administration coloniale. Ils n'avaient retenu que le rêve seul, avec ses images exotiques, ses clichés, ses richesses obligées.⁴³

While Janine's responses and perceptions are inevitably tinged by her sensation of dream-like reality, Sao struggles with his own

⁴³Alain Vircondelet, *Duras* (Paris, 1991), p. 27.

sensation of being torn between two cultures, and bears an enigmatic internal world:

Comprenant l'Occident sans se séparer de l'Orient, divers, impénétrable, ondoyant, toujours impartial et jamais subjugué, en quête de science et pétri de traditions, l'Annamite apparaissait sous son vernis d'Européen et son âme était peut-être une énigme autant pour lui-même que pour les autres. ... Vaincu, il comprenait le conquérant, maudissait au fond son vainqueur et l'imitait avec frénésie. ... cet hétéroclisme psychologique eût pu présenter [quelque chose] d'inquiétant. (pp. 23-24)

For both of them, the pressures prove to be unbearable. Janine sees him slowly sliding away from her grasp and finds herself left alone among strangers and foreigners:

Plus que jamais elle se sentit l'étrangère qu'on tolérait par force. ... Elle était seule dans cette foule indifférente et lointaine, seule avec sa peine, seule avec ses regrets. (p. 171)

Her husband is to remain the perpetual alien: polite, courteous, cold and inaccessible. He gives her neither support nor encouragement, and nothing with which to offset his family's hostility towards her, the 'Bà-Dâm', 'une étrangère, fille de maîtres souvent détestés' (p. 174). His mother's terrible accusations as he lies ill that 'tu as offensé les ancêtres. ... Puisque tu t'es fait Français, il fallait rester là-bas ou redevenir Annamite en rentrant ici. Tu as voulu mêler les deux sangs. Les morts et les vivants sont contre toi' (p. 217) reverberate with drowning effect in his mind because deep down, Sao agrees with her. He is cut adrift, lost. He does not know where he belongs any more. He has lost sight of all his goals. His bright ambitions are ashes. He has alienated his family, community, and finally, his wife. His worst

fears, entertained prior to his marriage in Paris, have become a reality:

Confusément, il se demandait, au fond, s'il ne trahissait pas son sang et s'il n'encourrait pas la muette réprobation des siens. ...

Insensiblement, son esprit se retourna vers le passé, et soudain il eut conscience d'être un déraciné, presque un dévoyé. (p. 37)

The sensation of alienation on the part of both Janine and Sao lead to the breakdown of their marriage. The dream was over.

Nam et Sylvie bears some surface resemblance in this respect to *Bà-Dâm*. Both Nam and Sao are Vietnamese students in Paris. Both are accepted by the French community because of their academic brilliance and their manners. Nam, like Sao, met Sylvie within an academic environment. Like Sao, he is also described as 'sérieux, distingué ... d'une politesse raffinée, d'une grâce exquise' (p. 80). He wryly notes regarding Sylvie's mother: 'J'appris qu'elle n'aimait pas les "Annamites", jusqu'au jour où elle avait lu mon diplôme' (p. 79). Both are therefore a credit to their race, conversant with French manners and not too excessively foreign in looks. Sao is described in the following terms:

Le visage large sans être aplati, les oreilles assez grandes, le front haut et bombé, les cheveux drus et noirs, mais soigneusement lustrés, les pommettes un peu saillantes, le nez épaté, le teint coloré plutôt que jaune, les yeux non bridés ... offrait un curieux mélange de caractères inattendus qui surprenaient sans jamais déplaire. (pp. 22-23)

Sylvie looks on Nam in the following terms:

'Tu n'as même pas le bras jaune. Et les yeux à peine bridés.' (p. 5)

Both young men are fairly tempered physical specimens, neither too 'jaune', nor with 'les yeux bridés'. In Marguerite Duras'

Hiroshima mon amour, published in 1960, she laid particular emphasis on the fact that the Japanese protagonist should look rather European:

C'est un homme d'une quarantaine d'années. Il est grand. Il a un visage assez 'occidentalisé'.⁴⁴

She gives the following justification for this:

Un acteur japonais au type japonais très accusé risquerait de faire croire que c'est surtout parce que le héros est Japonais que la Française est séduite par lui. Donc on retomberait, qu'on le veuille ou non, dans le piège de l'exotisme, et dans le racisme involontaire inhérent nécessairement à tout exotisme. Il ne faut pas que le spectateur dise: 'Que les Japonais sont donc séduisants!', mais qu'ils disent: 'Que cet homme-là est donc séduisant' ... Il faut que ce film *franco-japonais* n'apparaisse jamais *franco-japonais*, mais *anti-franco-japonais*. Ce serait là une victoire.⁴⁵

In the case of *Nam et Sylvie*, a similar intention to steer away from exoticism may have been the justification for the tempered foreign looks of the Vietnamese protagonist. Pham Duy Khiem was writing of a love affair between a Vietnamese and a Frenchwoman, and also that of one between a man and a woman. André Lebois interpreted the novel in this light:

Il n'y a pas ici d'exotisme; l'auteur, très justement, honnit le mot et la chose. On ne peut même pas dire que le conflit des races soit le sujet de cette analyse, comme il l'était du roman de Francis de Miomandre: *L'Aventure de Thérèse Beauchamps*. Ce n'est pas l'histoire d'un jaune et d'une blanche, mais d'un homme et d'une femme.⁴⁶

I would query the last sentence, since the story, after all, is one between an Asian man and a European woman, and the transitory nature of the relationship is largely due to the fact that he would

⁴⁴Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour* (Paris, 1960), p. 136.

⁴⁵Duras, *Hiroshima*, pp. 136-137.

⁴⁶Lebois, 'Vietnam', p. 642.

return to his own country and she would remain in hers. However, Pham Duy Khiem did minimize the element of exoticism and also the matter of the foreigner's looks. To a lesser extent, this may also have been the case in *Bà-Dâm*, although there is a full measure of the exotic and the strange in the description of Indochina itself. However, Sao himself is not too utterly 'foreign' in looks. There seems to be a conscious intention to distance the novels from the sensationalism of bizarre and exotic descriptions, an element which surfaces in Pierre Loti's works on Japan and China.⁴⁷ In both *Bà-Dâm* and *Nam et Sylvie*, it is the human, rather than the freakish element which is focused upon.

Nam, like Sao, is unable to divorce himself from his family or to avoid internalizing the judgements of the latter:

Pour tout dire: je me sentais déjà en faute envers ma famille à cause de mes relations avec Sylvie ... Malgré mon indépendance secrète à l'égard de toute règle et de tout préjugé, devant les valeurs de mon pays comme devant celles de l'Occident, je ne pouvais pas imposer silence à mes scrupules et à mes aspirations; ce n'était pas pour un voyage comme celui-là que j'aurais voulu être parti. (pp. 41-42)

For both as well, the relationship with a Frenchwoman has the cadence of a dream about it, the fleeting sensation of a short-lived, ephemeral experience: 'Un peu de rêves, quelques heures d'enchantement, mais la réalité veille' (p. 131). As with dreams, there is a strong element of nostalgia, of a yearning for the illusory, of the impossible. Nam's private confession is a poignant illustration of this:

⁴⁷For example, Pierre Loti's descriptions of Japanese women in *Madame Chrysanthème*, the essay *Femmes Japonaises* in *L'Exilée* and *La Troisième Jeunesse de Madame Prune*.

Je ne lui ai jamais dit - jamais pu lui dire - ni avant cette lettre ni après, tout ce que j'avais rêvé pour elle, pour moi et pour ma mère - pour nous. Certaines images s'étaient dessinées dans mon esprit, je ne saurais préciser quand, mais elles revenaient de temps en temps: 'Je lui enseignerai quelques gestes rituels, elle les accomplira devant l'autel des ancêtres puis devant ma mère, ce qui suffira à combler tout le monde. Ma mère sera même plus heureuse que si sa bru était de sa race, parce que personne ne peut s'attendre à de tels gestes de la part d'une Française.'

Mais je n'ai point eu à parler de Sylvie à ma mère, et ce qui aurait pu être n'a jamais été. (pp. 240-241)

The difference lies in that whereas Sao and Janine seek a permanent relationship, Nam and Sylvie are aware from the start of the transitory nature of theirs. It is important that neither lose sight of the underlying reality of their situation. As Nam writes to Sylvie:

Je vous ai tout dit: je ne peux oublier que notre histoire doit finir un jour et j'ai peur que cette fin ne soit trop dure pour vous. Manque d'amour? Non pas, mais scrupules et froide prévision. Voilà pourquoi je me retiens, je me cache de mon mieux et je vous retiens. Il faut bien qu'il y ait un des deux qui ne perde pas tout à fait la raison! (p. 43)

It should also be noted that the two relationships occur in very different settings. Nam and Sylvie do not have to deal with the political and social realities of French Indochina, except from a distance. Sylvie, unlike Janine, does not have to deal with the overwhelming and mind-numbing surroundings of a geographically and culturally disparate country. She does not have to deal with Nam's family. Neither does he, except, again, indirectly, in the expectations and responsibilities which they had inculcated in him, and which, in the end, prove as crippling for him as for Sao. There lay no future for a mixed relationship in such a situation.

The major difference however, between *Bà-Dâm* and *Nam et Sylvie*, lies in the form of the later novel. While *Bà-Dâm* describes in orderly manner the growing mutual alienation of the main characters and the slow fragmentation and collapse of Sao, *Nam et Sylvie* illustrates this fragmentation in its very structure. The novel is extremely complex in form, with discordant extracts from narrator, diary and letter. It is at first unclear as to which is recollection, which is contemporary recording. The reader has to make constant adjustments in order to follow the events and feelings depicted within. All these elements form a whole illustrative of splintered perceptions. It is not only the narrator, Nam, who is split between past and present, but the woman he loves is also split into two personae: Sylvie and Louise Chardonnet. In her letters, she refers to herself as both 'I' and 'she' or 'Sylvie', while the narrator oscillates between his own letters to her during the course of their affair, entries in his diary which are part-reflective and his own reflections and adjustments twenty years after the events recounted, as he muses on the development of their affair. The discussion of a novel within a novel, Eliane Tournier's *Elle blanche et Lui jaune*, provides a further layer of perception. For the narrator of *Nam et Sylvie*, self-knowledge takes the form of an attempted synthesis of various bits and pieces of his life and in particular his intense and troubling relationship with a Frenchwoman. However, the effort proves too much, or he is still too much of an alien. He attempts to purge himself of all the outward trappings of his culture, so that his use of the colonizer's language is pure and uncluttered. His feelings, however, are not. The bare prose would leave little to the imagination, so there

appears instead a complicated juxtaposition of various literary forms to make an uneasy whole - difficult to read and difficult to follow. In this roundabout way, *Nam et Sylvie* becomes foreign again, the resulting confusion of a writer brought up within one political system, only to be set adrift after the collapse of French Indochina. In *Bà-Dâm*, Sao is described thus:

Il était victime de l'inquiétude psychologique qui, actuellement, tourmente les gens de sa race. Il se sentait plein de réticences et d'oppositions. Son cœur lui paraissait obscur. ... Tout le contraste de son être venait de ce que sur l'immobilité chinoise s'était greffée la fièvre occidentale. (p. 38)

Nam et Sylvie evokes this conflict of identity in its structure. While *Bà-Dâm* could expose in a measured way the plight of an individual torn between two cultures and two states of mind, *Nam et Sylvie* illustrates in a broader way the collapse of an entire system and of the individuals enmeshed within it. *Bà-Dâm* was written at a time when colonialism was a political reality, when the French were secure in their hold over Indochina, this despite the questioning of the colonial administration. There existed a set and stable order of society or rather the perception of such an order. The colonizers ruled and arbitrated and the colonized, with some inner reservations and conflicts, deferred to and strove to emulate the masters. *Nam et Sylvie* on the other hand, was published only three years after the collapse of this order, the end of French Indochina. Whatever the political leanings of the author, he was educated under the previous regime, he was beholden to it, yet at the same time was cheated of his national and literary heritage. This colonial system, however, was the educational system which had made him what he now was, and which had given him the

present means of expressing himself. It both opened up avenues to him - the language and literature of the colonizer - and cut off others - his indigenous and rightful inheritance. It both released and constrained him, was both reward as well as punishment, and the result is a novel like *Nam et Sylvie*. Perhaps this novel, like the last gesture towards Nam from a French acquaintance in Paris - the present of a book and a rose [knowledge and a thorn] - is finally symbolic of 'le fruit achevé d'une civilisation' (pp. 5-6).

Nam et Sylvie depicts the love affair between a Vietnamese man and a Frenchwoman in the Paris of the 1930s. Unlike *Bà-Dâm* and early French colonial fiction, the events recounted take place in metropolitan France. It charts the beginning of the relationship, its progression and its eventual disintegration. The woman leaves. The man leaves and returns to Vietnam. There is no chronological order in the narrative. The novel begins at the end of the affair, returns to the beginning, moves again to the end. It is a partly retrospective account. It contains a first-person narrative interspersed with extracts from letters and diaries. The novel encompasses the fictive persona of 'Sylvie'. It is neither colourful nor descriptive. The prose is bare, the sequence of events interrupted. It is difficult to read. *Nam et Sylvie*, like *Bà-Dâm*, contains a number of juxtapositions. The first is political. The novel is by a Vietnamese, an ex-member of the colonized, and is written in French, the language of the ex-colonizer. The second is cultural. The angle is Eastern and from a male viewpoint. The third juxtaposition is the fictional representation of a relationship between a Vietnamese man and a Frenchwoman within the context of metropolitan France, at a time when Indochina was still

a French colony. Unlike the earlier *Bà-Dâm*, *Nam et Sylvie* is complex and introspective.

Unlike the earlier novel, which has a linear framework, the later one has a complicated framework. It moves back and forward in time, with splintered perceptions from each protagonist over a period of time. The man's impressions of the relationship in some cases date twenty years after the relationship itself. There is no depiction of the strangeness and added pressure which a foreign setting would impose on such a relationship. There is no exotica, the setting is Parisian, but the impermanence of the relationship is already determined. The man has to return to his native land. The woman will stay in hers. In the end, this relationship, like the one depicted in *Bà-Dâm*, also fails because of cultural factors, even if these are couched in a different setting and presented in a very different manner. *Nam et Sylvie* charts the progress of an intercultural relationship within a familiar, non-exotic setting. The point is that the pitfalls, misunderstandings, and hurt are nonetheless present. The element of 'foreignness' is nonetheless there. This novel, like the earlier one, deals with the failure of ideals. All the effort at comprehension and understanding, and the attempt to absorb another culture and another person, succeed for a short while but fail in the end.

Each novel tackles this theme in a different way: straightforward and descriptive in the first, more complex and introspective in the second. The first was written and published during colonization, the second was published after the French pulled out of Indochina. There is a clear difference in style between the two novels. In the end, however, there is no

acknowledgement of greater understanding after thirty years. The strange has not become familiar. The foreigner is still a foreigner, no matter how well educated and fluent in French. There is perhaps a greater amount of insight in the later novel, because the approach and perspective are dealt with in a more personal way. The emotions and tensions of the two protagonists are conveyed through personal letters and diaries. However, there is still a barrier of misunderstanding, ruined hopes and hurt in the end. There is no synthesis. Although there is a greater attempt at understanding the Other in the second novel - whether the Other is a foreigner or a woman, this attempt, like the earlier one, also ends in failure. There is greater use of modern novelistic devices in the second novel. As in the 'nouveau roman', there are different perceptions of time and the progression of emotions and events. The later novel plays with these stylistic techniques while the earlier one approached the subject in a straightforward narrative manner. The disintegration of the relationship in *Bà-Dâm* is not reflected in the style of the novel itself. The disintegration of the relationship in *Nam et Sylvie*, on the other hand, is reflected in the style: back and forward, past and future, split personae 'Louise Chardonnet' and 'Sylvie', split perceptions, actual as opposed to recollected images, actual as opposed to recollected emotions, immediacy as opposed to hindsight, regret as opposed to the urgency of immediate feelings, manipulation, and the allusion to a French post-romantic literary figure.

Both novels set out to portray a difficult subject. The relationship is not only that between a man and a woman but also encompasses the issues of East and West, colonizer and colonized,

Between East and West

a human reflection of Vietnamese Francophone literature itself - a fusion of East and West. Both novels depict the failure of the human relationship. Is this failure then reflected in the literature itself? Both describe the difficulty of marrying the two, the difficulty of foreigners adjusting. Both attempt to illustrate and portray this difficulty and this is in itself reflected in the complex and uneasy style of Pham Duy Khiem's *Nam et Sylvie*. Even if the two novels are nearly thirty years apart, they are still the product of a particular set of historical and political circumstances, a literature born out of the colonization of Indochina. Both are set in the 1920s and 1930s when the barriers against such relationships were still high and proved, in the event, to be insurmountable. What the literature reflects is perhaps the brevity of such a relationship, a brevity which is in turn demonstrated by the short-lived nature of the literature itself, arising as it did out of a concentrated and finite episode of history. However, the effects of colonization, whether in the people involved or in the literature which it gave rise to, were to persist after the end of official colonialism.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ALIEN SELF **The Conflict of Identity**

*So many, stricken by a thousand blows
still walk the earth as bodies with dead souls.*
– Nguyen Gia Thieu

Vietnamese writers who wrote and published novels in French, whether during the colonization of Indochina or the period immediately after, were vulnerable to conflicts of identity which arose out of their historical circumstances. They were Vietnamese writing in the language of the colonizer or the ex-colonizer. In some cases, the conflict of identity and loyalty, the pull of two disparate cultures, proved too heavy a burden for the individual to bear. Two novels illustrate in their different ways the destructive effect of such pressures on an individual. They are Nguyen Huu Chau's *Les Reflets de nos jours*, published in Paris in 1955, and Pham Duy Khiem's *La Place d'un homme: De Hanoi à la Courtine*, published also in Paris in 1958. Both appeared in the period immediately following the end of French Indochina. Both writers were the products of a political system which had come to

an abrupt end. Each novel deals with the difficult and contrasting demands of loyalty and identification of the self. The protagonist of each novel is a French-educated Vietnamese. Where does identity lie for such a man? Where does self-respect? With the colonizers, to whom he is indebted for his formal education and qualifications, or with the colonized, to whom he is indebted for his cultural roots, literary traditions and mentality? The choice is a painful one and the upshot of it is that there is no real choice. The protagonist identifies partly with the colonizers and partly with the colonized, but as a Vietnamese, however well-educated, he remains forcibly a member of the colonized.

In this chapter, I wish to examine the following: What is the conflict of identity dealt with in each novel? How does the protagonist deal with it? What are the surrounding circumstances? Lastly, how are these aspects reflected in the style of the novels themselves?

Both novels open with the statement that the enclosed journal or collected papers are the writings of a man now dead. They both fall under what Philippe Lejeune, in *Le Pacte autobiographique*, would categorize as 'romans autobiographiques':

Dans le cas du nom fictif ... donné à un personnage qui raconte sa vie, il arrive que le lecteur ait des raisons de penser que l'histoire vécue par le personnage est exactement celle de l'auteur: ... soit même à la lecture du récit dont l'aspect de fiction sonne faux (comme quand quelqu'un vous dit: 'J'avais un très bon ami auquel il est arrivé...', et se met à vous raconter l'histoire avec une conviction toute personnelle). ...

Ces textes entreraient donc dans la catégorie du 'roman autobiographique': j'appellerai ainsi tous les textes de fiction dans lesquels le lecteur peut avoir des raisons de soupçonner, à partir des ressemblances qu'il croit deviner, qu'il y a identité de l'auteur et du

personnage, alors que l'auteur, lui, a choisi de nier cette identité, ou du moins de ne pas l'affirmer.¹

Neither novel is autobiographical in the sense of presenting a traditional chronicle of progress in an individual's life: the development of a personality through childhood, adolescence and adulthood. They do not chart the onward progression of the protagonist towards the present narrator. They are autobiographical, however, in exploring, analysing and discovering an inner self in the individual as an adult. In this respect, they may be culturally indebted to the autobiographical writing tradition of the Far East² as well as that of the West. They are influenced by the confessional literature of sixteenth and seventeenth-century China³ and such classics as Shen Fu's *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* (1809) as well as the modern Western tradition of autobiography exemplified by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's eighteenth-century *Confessions*. Nguyen The Anh remarked in an article on the autobiographical genre in modern Vietnamese literature:

The autobiographic discourse is up to a recent date widely believed to be a particular product of the West, a form of expression belonging specifically to the Occidental culture: if it ever occurred to some Oriental individuals to relate the story of their life, it is because they have been affected by contagion from Western culture, because they have been 'annexed into a mentality which is not theirs'. Challenging this opinion nevertheless, some authors have demonstrated that

¹Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris, 1975), pp. 24-25.

²'In strict terms, autobiography is far from a new art in China but goes back to Ssu-ma Ch'ien in the second century B. C.' *Anthology of Chinese Literature*, edited by Cyril Birch, Volume 2: From the 14th Century to the Present Day (New York, 1972), p. 259.

³The hundred years from 1570 to 1670 witnessed a deep awareness of the human proclivity to evil, an urgent need to counter this proclivity, a readiness for self-disclosure, and a deep anguish over one's own wrongdoings, all to an extent and with an intensity never known before in Chinese history'. Pei-yu Wu, 'Self-Examination and Confession of Sins in Traditional China', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 39 (1979):6, quoted in Avrom Fleishman, *Figures of Autobiography*, (Berkeley, 1983), p. 473.

writing about the self did thrive in the non-Western civilization of China, where such procedures available to autobiography as historical self-explanation, philosophical self-scrutiny, poetic self-expression and self-invention, had been put in practice for a long time.⁴

In *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, the autobiography of the Chinese scholar Shen Fu, each 'chapter' represents a different theme in his life. For Nguyen Huu Chau and Pham Duy Khiem, autobiographical writing can therefore be either Eastern or Western in inspiration or, more likely, both. The mode of presenting the journal and papers of a dead man is reminiscent of, for example, Pierre Loti's *Aziyadé*: 'extrait des notes et lettres d'un lieutenant de la marine anglaise'.⁵ Although inheritors of an Eastern cultural and literary tradition, they were also educated in the West and wrote in French.

In Vietnam, the exposure of the self was largely conveyed through the medium of poetry. The first to express direct confession through his writing was Cao Ba Nha, who was imprisoned after the execution in 1854 of the dissident scholar Cao Ba Quat, a relative.⁶ During his incarceration, Cao Ba Nha composed the following to ask for justice and clemency from the court: an 'Exposé of his feelings' (*Trân tình van*) in Chinese characters, and a 'Confession' (*Tu tình khuc*) in *nom* (Vietnamese) script.⁷ Cao Ba Nha's poems are an early example of a long tradition of prison poetry in modern Vietnam, where the writing of autobiography is linked with the individual in captivity, and

⁴Nguyen The Anh, 'Phan Boi Chau's *Memoirs* and the autobiographical genre in modern Vietnamese literature', Seminar Paper, Asian Studies Centre's Seminars on 'Asian Autobiography', (Oxford, 1990), p. 1.

⁵Pierre Loti, *Aziyadé* (Paris, 1879). Title page.

⁶Nguyen The Anh, 'Memoirs', p. 2

⁷Nguyen The Anh, 'Memoirs', p. 2.

becomes 'a mode of justification, an act of self-defense'.⁸ Both *Les Reflets de nos jours* and *La Place d'un homme*, can be, to a certain extent, similarly described, although neither is prison literature. However, as autobiographical novels, written in a Western language but exposing Eastern personalities, they both present, explain and attempt to justify the mentality of the Annamites to a Western audience. In this particular context, they also expose the added perception of the colonized. In a metaphorical way, they are in a sense 'prison literature', literature produced by individuals imprisoned within a political context, the products of colonialism. The implication is that they can only feel free to express themselves through the voice and thoughts of men now dead, that they are boxed into a certain framework and that these journals or letters are one of the most effective means for them to convey their sense of being incarcerated. Like the writings of Vietnamese political prisoners and poets of the nineteenth century, the novels are also 'a mode of justification, an act of self-defense'.

Les Reflets de nos jours contains a *Préface*, signed by the author's initials, in which he states that: 'Le Vietnamien, auteur de ce journal, était mon ami. Vivant, il ne l'eût pas publié lui-même'.⁹ The author of the *Préface* then goes on to identify himself with respect to the writer of the journal: 'Je suis désigné dans ce livre sous l'initiale Ph... Notre amitié nous a conduits l'un et l'autre vers cette région de "forêts et de marais" d'où il n'est pas revenu'. (p. 9). The latter statement suggests guerilla warfare and the death of the journal's author in combat. There are neither dates nor place

⁸Nguyen The Anh, 'Memoirs', p. 2.

⁹Nguyen Huu Chau, *Les Reflets de nos jours* (Paris, 1955), p. 9. Subsequent references will be given in the main text.

names, and nothing to suggest whether the exposure of this purported journal takes place soon after the death of this man or whether it takes place many years later. The lack of any concrete details can be due to the discretion necessitated by ex or current members of the *maquis*, but this vagueness fits neatly with the complete absence of dates, or indeed of any sort of discernible chronology, in the journal itself. The journal appears to present an Eastern sensibility to the eyes and judgement of a Western reader. The *Préface* carries on:

J'ai retrouvé ce journal après sa mort. Le lecteur d'Occident sera peut-être quelque peu 'dépaycé'. On raconte, en effet, les événements d'une vie, mais on n'écrit pas l'histoire d'une sensibilité. En fait, tel qu'il se présente, ce livre est à la forme littéraire du roman français ce qu'un paysage *Song* serait, en peinture, au *Moulin de la Galette* de Renoir. (pp. 9-10)

The (presumably Western) reader is warned that the format of the journal, its contents and its expressions may appear as unfamiliar, foreign and strange as a classical Chinese painting of the Sung Dynasty set against a work by Renoir. The *Préface* then includes excerpts from the journal to 'acclimatize' the reader to the journal (novel) itself. The purpose seems to be to try to communicate or to form a bridge of comprehension between the Western reader and the Eastern writer:

Aussi, pour en faciliter la compréhension, je crois utile de publier en tête de cet ouvrage quelques notes tirées de notre correspondance, et que l'auteur du journal aurait certainement reprises lui-même s'il avait eu à écrire une préface. (p. 10)

The reader is therefore duly warned. The enclosed journal will be obscure and difficult to comprehend. It also contains unfathomed depths and meanings which will reveal themselves if effort is

expended to try to uncover these layers. On the other hand, if, in the end, the effort proves too much and the journal (novel) is still largely incomprehensible to the (Western) reader, it may be a result of the difficulty of conveying Eastern thoughts and meanings through a Western language. The novel is an attempt to convey an Eastern sensibility from an Eastern point of view. André Malraux had 'presented' both a European and an Eastern sensibility through *La Tentation de l'Occident*, but however committed, Malraux remained a Frenchman. In *La Tentation*, he '[tried] to define what he [saw] as the crisis sweeping European civilization, by comparing the Western and Eastern approach to life. Ling, the representative of the East who visits the West, is struck by the concepts of power and individual action which dominate Western man's thinking'.¹⁰ In the *Indication to La Tentation*, Malraux wrote:

Que l'on ne voie point en M. Ling un symbole de l'Extrême-Oriental. Un tel symbole ne saurait exister. ... Ces lettres ont été choisies. Nous nous proposons, en les publiant, de préciser les mouvements de deux sensibilités, et de suggérer à ceux qui les liront des réflexions particulières sur la vie de leurs sens et de leur esprit, qui peut sembler singulière.¹¹

The young 'Chinese' correspondent notes: '*au centre de l'homme européen, dominant les grands mouvements de sa vie, est une absurdité essentielle*'.¹² *Les Reflets de nos jours* records the jumbled response of an Annamite to the art and literature of Europe. The impressions, however, are neither clear, nor reflective, nor sorrowing, but confused and distressed. The effort

¹⁰Elizabeth Fallaize, *Malraux: La Voie royale* (London, 1982), p. 22.

¹¹André Malraux, *La Tentation de l'Occident* (Paris, 1926), pp. 11-12.

¹²Malraux, *Tentation*, p. 78.

of comprehending and absorbing European thought and art as well as attempting to make some sense of the narrator's particular dilemma as an intelligent, well-educated Annamite prove to be too stressful. They end in the destruction of the individual.

Pham Duy Khiem's *La Place d'un homme*, published under the pseudonym Nam Kim, provides an interesting contrast. The collection of letters in *La Place d'un homme* is compiled by an individual who remains anonymous. *La Place d'un homme* contains neither *Préface* nor introduction, it simply begins with the following statement:

Nam Liên disparut en juin 1940, au cours des combats sur la Loire, quelques jours après avoir tracé le billet qui clôt ce recueil. Il était âgé de trente-deux ans.¹³

This identifies the author of these *billets*, his age, where and when he died. Two short paragraphs following serve to further clarify the situation:

Professeur à Hanoi, il avait été le seul indigène de l'Indochine à demander, en septembre 1939, à partir pour la France comme engagé volontaire. Pourquoi, ce faisant, était-il sévèrement jugé par ses pairs? Pourquoi n'avait-il pas hésité cependant? Comment a-t-il vécu ensuite sa dernière expérience? C'est ce que ses propres lettres vont nous dire - simplement, sinon sans poésie, du moins sans littérature. (p. 1)

There is a strong autobiographical element in this novel since Pham Duy Khiem did volunteer for the French Army when the war broke out in 1939. He travelled from Indochina to France to take part in this conflict and eventually attained the rank of Infantry Officer.¹⁴ Nam Liên's antecedents are described, the unique

¹³Pham Duy Khiem, *La Place d'un homme: De Hanoi à la Courtine* (Paris, 1958), p. 1. Subsequent references will be given in the main text.

¹⁴Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 177.

circumstances surrounding him (sole 'native' volunteer), and the following *recueil* discloses the questions and problems which arose due to his unusual, unexpected gesture as well as his own response and experiences preceding his disappearance in combat. So the subject and the object of, as well as the justification for, this compilation of *billets* and papers are exposed from the beginning. What follows is indeed a clear, chronological progression of events starting from Hanoi, along the long sea journey to France and ending finally at the last military encampment attended by Nam Liên: La Courtine in June 1940.

A major difference between the earlier journal and this *recueil* is that while it is claimed that the author of the journal would not have wanted to publish these writings in his lifetime, and that the journal is therefore the private exposure of the feelings, impressions and thoughts of an individual, the *recueil* consists of short *billets* addressed to an entire circle of friends and acquaintances. The *recueil* can be assimilated to the European tradition of the letter-autobiography. So while the journal was written for none other than the individual himself, the *billets*, while still private, were written for, and addressed to, other individuals, whether close friends or simply acquaintances and correspondents. The variety of correspondents also allows Nam Liên to justify his unorthodox actions to a spectrum of both Vietnamese and French views. This he proceeds to do succinctly and comprehensively, unlike the anonymous narrator of *Les Reflets de nos jours*.

Les Reflets de nos jours, as the *Préface* warns us, is a difficult novel to decipher. The narrator is unidentified, there are

no dates and nothing to indicate where the journal itself was written or over what period of time. Initially, there appears to be no chronological sequence either, so that the novel is difficult to follow. Characters and place names, images and reactions appear unexpectedly on the page and the overall impression is of a jumble of disparate thoughts, set down seemingly at random as the narrator thought of them. Eventually, a pattern and a theme assert themselves. The anonymous narrator of *Les Reflets de nos jours* states that 'le pouvoir de l'art réside dans ce qu'il rend de la vie. ... Mais la condition humaine est essentiellement la solitude' (pp. 10-11). The entire journal is a first person narrative and the two strands of thought which permeate it are solitude and death. The word 'solitude' appears repeatedly throughout the text. The obsessions with solitude and death are reminiscent of André Malraux's *La Condition Humaine*. The themes of solitude, death and violence permeate Malraux's novel: 'il était seul avec la mort, seul dans un lieu sans hommes, mollement écrasé à la fois par l'horreur et par le goût du sang'.¹⁵ In *Les Reflets de nos jours*, the following details can be pieced together. The narrator, it appears, is bereft after his separation from his wife and family. No explanations are provided for this state of affairs. Much is left obscure. Instead, it is the resulting engrossing pain which is conveyed. He wonders: 'Pourquoi dire à une femme: "Je t'ai perdue"? Qu'a-t-elle vraiment donné qu'elle retire? L'a-t-on jamais vraiment possédée pour la perdre?' (p. 26). Her loss is all-encompassing. He has no other griefs with which to compare this. He remembers her, reads her past letters. The first part of the

¹⁵André Malraux, *La Condition Humaine* (Paris, 1933), p. 15.

journal is addressed to her: 'Tu le sais bien, toi à qui, du fond de moi-même, ceci s'adresse' (p. 40). She is referred to as M...:

J'ai souffert il y a deux ans, M...
Mais le mal que j'ai connu autrefois n'est rien à côté de celui que je ressens maintenant que j'ai conscience, à travers un amour déçu, de ce que le monde peut offrir dans une femme d'ombre tendre, de plénitude et de beauté. (p. 56)

He is excruciatingly lonely. As his friend Ph... (the writer of the *Préface*) says to him: 'Tu es effrayant de solitude' (p. 42). Yet, paradoxically, while he suffers from this intense loneliness, he yearns to be free, to be alone, to find the source of loneliness in the self: 'Un besoin, chaque jour plus grand, de partir, d'être seul et libre' (p. 89). When he meets the second woman in his life, Thuy Vân, he still stresses: 'Il est en moi une telle solitude' (p. 159). Allied to this sense of solitude is an intense yearning for death - a violent, agonizing death - as if the notion of dying in pain was the only means of alleviating the pain in his life:

Mourir comme les bêtes dans le désert, trouver dans la mort un épuisement plus profond encore, mourir dans une étourdissante douleur, et m'assurer que chaque goutte de mon sang est chargée de toute la douleur du monde. (p. 16)

There are echoes of Malraux: 'La souffrance ne peut avoir de sens que quand elle ne mène pas à la mort, et elle y mène presque toujours'¹⁶, 'Il y avait d'abord la solitude, la solitude immuable derrière la multitude mortelle'.¹⁷ The thought of death obsesses the narrator of *Les Reflets*. He cannot wean himself away from it. 'Je voudrais faire un effort pour vivre, pour sourire. Mais rien ne se révèle à moi, si ce n'est la mort, un certain sentiment de la mort.

¹⁶Malraux, *Condition*, p. 59.

¹⁷Malraux, *Condition*, p. 67.

Il me semble la connaître à présent' (p. 29). The images are of the decay and death of things which had been beautiful once, like his love for his wife, and whose loss is the more poignant when surrounded by life. 'On dirait que chaque instant a son poids de chose morte, le poids qu'on éprouve devant les pierres des ruines ou devant une fleur piétinée, dans une rue accablée de soleil' (p. 29).

Even his love for Thuy Vân, referred to as T... as he addresses the latter part of the journal to her, is tinged with death. 'Ce désir de mort qui fait qu'on pleure n'exprime pas l'amour. Il est au delà' (p. 141). He had first been drawn to her by the sadness of her smile and by their shared suffering in love - she is a young widow. When this relationship also ends in a final separation, the narrator concludes that: 'La véritable douleur ce n'est pas de perdre un être dans la mort mais dans la vie' (p. 151). His love appears to be doomed from the beginning, as of a concept and an ideal which he cannot quite catch and then loses altogether. He attempts to reach out and hold onto something which always eludes his grasp. But then this seems to sum up his life. The narrator's life, 'cette existence jonchée de mort', 'cette vie déchiquetée', is one in which he has not only failed to achieve what he wanted but has also lost the only two women he has ever loved. Death is the only solution: 'Il n'y a que la mort, ou plutôt la pensée de la mort, qui neutralise la vraie douleur' (p. 153). He can see no other way of dealing with his suffering, which appears to fill his entire horizon and take precedence over every other aspect of his life. His view of life and existence is synonymous with pain and abandonment. Upon his friend Ph... seeking to persuade him to be

less inward-looking and *refermé sur soi-même* he counters: 'Et si la vérité est que je ne puis prendre conscience de la vie que par la tristesse ou la souffrance, que je ressens tout par la souffrance' (p. 29). The intertwining of solitude and death is expressed in the following episode, upon his surviving his first wound in the *maquis*: 'J'ai regretté. J'ai regretté de n'avoir pas pu mourir seul, très seul, sans rien demander à personne, comme un animal, à cet endroit où la terre buvait déjà la chaleur de mon corps' (p. 165). He is eventually killed in combat. His friend Ph... writes in the *Epilogue* that, after love, death had matured in him. The narrator had realised that his life as an adult was neither free nor independent. His was 'une vie qui demande à être libérée' (p. 107), and he found this ultimate freedom of the self through death.

The conflict between East and West in his personality is manifested through his relationship with his friend Ph... He writes of Ph...: 'Dans son amitié, celle de ne pas me comprendre... Mais avec son éducation occidentale, c'est assez naturel' (p. 33). What is he implying? Is he suggesting that if his friend had not had a Western education, he would not have sought to understand him? That if Ph... had been educated in the Confucian mould, he would have deemed it an unwarranted intrusion to seek to understand the reasons for his friend's torment? Or is the narrator implying that a Western education actually hinders the understanding of the Eastern soul? He goes on further down the passage:

L'étranger qui nous observe nous devinera peut-être, il ne pénétrera jamais dans le secret de notre vie. Il ne connaîtra jamais la cause de notre tristesse, la raison de notre bonheur, parce que nous n'aimons pas le dire. Il n'en connaîtra jamais l'intensité non plus. (p. 33)

However, the narrator appears to be uncertain about the extent to which he is himself an Easterner in his thoughts and reasonings. His Western education may have destroyed that part of him, his link with his ancestors. He comments: 'S'il n'est pas trop tard pour s'occuper de l'Oriental qui est en moi, je veillerai à ce qu'il n'aille pas rejoindre comme un étranger les ombres où dorment mes ancêtres sans voix' (p. 34). He writes of the Western perception of Asian stoicism, of what are seen to be the virtues of a Confucian upbringing:

'On croit nous comprendre sous l'apparence du confucianisme, c'est-à-dire d'une contrainte. Mais ce qui caractérise notre âme, les sentiments qui la parent, et que nous appelons la grâce, la pudeur, c'est en réalité notre façon de lutter. Notre révolte est intérieure, et nous lui refusons toute expression violente ou désordonnée. Nous essayons de voiler ce qui la fait misérable. Peut-être parce que nous avons un sens très vif de notre misère' (p. 112).

The conflict which, according to the narrator, characterizes Easterners is an inner conflict, rather than an outward demonstration as in the West. But the feelings are as strong, perhaps stronger because they are kept hidden and not displayed. This philosophy is epitomized by the narrator's father. Referring to a recent visit by his father, the narrator says: 'Il m'avait en effet enseigné que des passions on ne fait pas une vie, et que c'est de la contemplation qu'une âme tire sa vérité' (p. 45). A more concrete example of this attitude is illustrated in the following episode, when the narrator recounts a conversation with one of his old teachers:

Il m' a dit: "Quand on est déjà sur le déclin comme moi, on se rend compte qu'il n'y a que la vérité des principes" (p. 111).

Upon his pupil challenging this, he details his own experience:

'Il y a eu une femme dans ma vie, une seule, et qu'à notre deuxième rencontre j'ai décidé de ne plus revoir. ... Pour nos sentiments, nous n'exigeons pas des objets réels. La plus profonde possession n'est pas concrète. Nous savons que sous l'apparence du quotidien, sur quoi nous n'avons parfois aucun pouvoir, la vraie vie se noue ailleurs. Il n'y a plus de désespoir quand nous avons cette certitude' (pp. 111-112).

These are conflicts which exist within the narrator himself. He is unable to resolve them. 'Quoi conquérir sur cette solitude de l'Asie?' (p. 171). There is nothing left for him. As he says himself: 'Mais quand un être n'a plus rien, à quoi reconnaître qu'il est parmi d'autres vivants? Il ne se passe plus rien qui m'importe. Il n'y a plus qu'une attente entre la vie qui coule en moi et le néant.' (p.42)

A rough chronological order does emerge in the journal of this anonymous narrator, although there is no indication of day, month or year. Paragraphs and sentences are short, and sentences are occasionally without verbs, as if the narrator chose to set down whatever random thought struck him at a particular moment of time. This haphazardness reinforces the sense of a split and fragmented self. There is no apparent order in the thoughts. The narrator is torn by the loss of first his wife and then Thuy Vân. He longs for death and yet suicide is not an option as he has too much respect for his parents to submit them to such anguish. He is unable to reconcile the Oriental inside him with the Western-educated man on the surface. The obsessions with solitude and death are brought without compunction into the narrative since there is no flow in the narrative as such, and as a result no fear of interrupting the flow. There is only a broad outline of continuity.

The mundane details of day-to-day life are given no place in the journal. Only the musings and emotions of the narrator are set down. *Les Reflets de nos jours* conveys immediacy in the sense that any moments of self-discovery or insight are experienced by the reader at the same time as by the narrator. There is an apparent lack of structure in the novel because the narrator is concurrently trying to draw some meaning to life out of the disorder and intensity of his emotions.

Les Reflets de nos jours portrays a protagonist within a society and a world in a state of flux. During the 1940s and 1950s Vietnam was in a state of continuous military and political upheaval. The erosion of colonial power was in process but without the clear emergence of an independent government.¹⁸ From 1940 to 1945, Vietnam was subject to both French and Japanese occupation. The war of independence begun in 1945 ended with the 1954 Geneva Accords which divided the country into two politically opposed halves at the seventeenth parallel. It was therefore a time of political controversy and economic hardship, and one which saw the questioning of many values and beliefs in a society which had operated under colonial authority for the past eighty years. Any certainties regarding one's place and position in society (already tenuous in a country which had undergone such rapid social and economic changes within a relatively short period

¹⁸During this transitional period, the Vietnamese experienced the erosion and then disappearance of Vichyite French rule under Japanese occupation (July 1940-March 1945), the rise of two 'independent' Vietnamese governments (The Empire of Viet-Nam in March 1945 and the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam in late August 1945), the Allied occupation (1945-1946) and, finally, the first waves of Gaullist French reconquest'. Chieu Ngieu Vu, 'Political and Social Change in Viet-Nam between 1940 and 1946 (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1984), p. xiv.

of time) were particularly shaken, the more so at this crucial point in history.

The narrator is attempting to find a fixed point in the disorder, a measure of stability. But where will he find this centre of calm and with whom or what can he identify? He is an Annamite educated in the language and literature of his colonial masters. Is he a 'traitor' to his country because he has absorbed to some extent the culture and values of the West? He obviously feels deeply Vietnamese underneath. The Orient in his makeup is too deep a part of him to be submerged by the veneer of Western education. It is possible to argue that the original source of conflict and anguish within the protagonist is indeed this dichotomy in his personality. Nguyen Huu Chau writes of the anonymous narrator of *Les Reflets de nos jours*: 'En effet, seule lui importait la sensibilité, plus exactement sa sensibilité d'Asiatique, que la douleur, l'impossible, l'absurde, affinent' (p. 9). In other words, the Oriental in him forms the central core of his experience and provides the creative impetus for his exploration of the self. Finally, the contradictions were too great and ended by destroying the self. Death is an escape route: 'C'est en soi que se replie toute source de vie. Quand on est décidé à quitter le monde, on doit graver' (p. 170). It is perhaps symbolic that this death is a violent one, a microcosm of the toll in human bloodshed which was the price Vietnam paid for decolonization.

Yeager writes of *Les Reflets de nos jours* that the novel:

fits into a long tradition of reflective literature, including such writing as the poetry composed for the examinations of the mandarinat. The novel relates to Western traditions as well. The pretext of the *journal trouvé* ... was a convention in eighteenth-century

French novels, a device used to reinforce the illusion of a fiction's veracity. In his preface the narrator's friend (who found the diary, changed the names, and presented it for publication) places it in the tradition of *La Princesse de Clèves*, *Dominique*, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, and *Madame Bovary*, preparing the reader for what turns out to be a thinly plotted *roman sentimental*.¹⁹

He then goes on to analyse *Les Reflets de nos jours* in the resulting light, pointing to the link between nature and the narrator's mood and 'his emotional wasteland after these failed relationships'.²⁰ According to Yeager, the narrator's relationships with these two women are a reflection of current social and political circumstances, 'in which the lover lost is also the country lost - its heritage, traditions and culture'.²¹ The narrator 'desires to "se fondre dans l'humanité" ... and "dans le temps"' and the notion of transcendence is underlined by the disappearance of the narrator at the end of the novel.²² Yeager also writes that *Les Reflets de nos jours* 'was envisioned by the author as a response to Malraux's *La Tentation de l'Occident*'.²³ This would confirm the novel as the assertion of an Eastern personality and interpretation. But the symbolism in *Les Reflets* goes much deeper than the issues stated by Yeager. It is not only the external facets of the narrator's relationships with these women which illustrate the political climate of the time. Instead the contradictions and conflicting demands of the times are revealed in the internal exposure of the narrator himself and in the format of the text.

¹⁹Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 147.

²⁰Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 148.

²¹Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 148.

²²Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 150.

²³Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 150.

The difficulty of conveying an interpretation of the self and the internal processes of the mind is fully recognized by the author of *Les Reflets de nos jours*. The narrator of the journal stresses that writing itself is a poor medium with which to convey one's thoughts and feelings and can be misleading.

Je me suis rendu compte que ce que nous écrivons, même avec la plus grande sincérité, n'exprime pas nécessairement bien ce que nous pensons ou éprouvons. Dans une page, il n'y a peut-être qu'une ligne ou deux qui soient très proches de notre vie intérieure. Le reste est regret, sursaut ou révolte parmi des ombres, et plutôt hantise que réalité. (p. 78)

He therefore has strong reservations about keeping a journal or even of writing at all for that matter, but the compulsion is too strong. He cannot resist it, whatever his self-denials: 'Je voudrais renoncer à tenir ce journal, comme à écrire. Mais écrire est affreux, si des rêves qu'on croit vaincus surgissent, quand, ressuscitant du passé, une espérance n'est plus une espérance, mais une inquiétude, sinon une douleur. On perd sa lucidité entre la recherche de la vérité et l'effort de vivre...' (pp. 76-77). For the narrator, the process of writing is an active and creative exercise which allows the resurfacing of past hopes and fears. At the same time, it is also a means of distorting them. The narrator feels on the one hand that writing cannot adequately reflect life and on the other that his life is not worth writing about, acknowledging therefore the power of writing: 'Par contre, écrire sur ce que j'ai fait, ce qu'on a fait de ma vie, ne présente pas d'intérêt. Quelque pitié qu'on ait de soi, il n'y a pas là nécessairement de quoi écrire' (p. 54). The strength of writing resides in the illusion of reality it conveys; the danger is therefore that it can portray falsity as truth: 'Le pouvoir d'un art a pour domaine le vraisemblable' (p. 11). The

narrator shows insecurity and uncertainty about the value of what he is attempting to convey. This concern with the power of words and their capacity for distortion was recognized by Nathalie Sarraute, whose first novel, *Portrait d'un Inconnu*, appeared in 1948:

[Nathalie Sarraute], as much as anyone, is aware that if we are not extremely careful about the way we arrange words, the words may well arrange us. She draws attention in her novels to the self-generating force of language operating through association of ideas or even simple sonority: she shows how stereotypes derived from literature or the maxims of folk-wisdom deform experience and obstruct new perceptions.²⁴

In *Portrait d'un Inconnu*, Sarraute reveals the narrator's hesitations and his fear of words, in particular of the wounding power of words:

Il y a des mots - anodins en apparence comme des mots de passe - que je ne prononce jamais devant elle, je m'en garde bien. ...
Ces mots me font très peur. J'aurais l'impression, en les disant devant elle, d'arracher un pansement et de mettre à nu une plaie à vif... 'l'Ecorchée vive...' 'l'Hypersensible...' il me semble que je mettrais à nu ses plaies.²⁵

The interpretation of any self is subjective. The acknowledgement of fictional intent allows the writer to describe aspects of his own self while at the same time giving him the flexibility to use his imagination since an imaginative process takes place in the recreation of past emotions anyway. *Les Reflets de nos jours* asserts the growth of the self beyond the boundaries of family and society to embody in the person of the anonymous narrator the conflicts tearing a country apart.

²⁴Valerie Minogue, *Nathalie Sarraute and the War of the Words* (Edinburgh, 1981), p. 16.

²⁵Nathalie Sarraute, *Portrait d'un Inconnu* (reissued Paris, 1956), p. 53.

Between East and West

The main elements of *Les Reflets de nos jours* are the notions of solitude and violent death. The difficulty and loneliness of an individual who has imbibed elements of both Eastern and Western culture, and is as a result unsure of his place in society, are revealed through the perceptions, the insecurities and the pain of the narrator. He undergoes a severe crisis in identity. His many and conflicting emotions and perturbations end in the only solution which afforded him a semblance of peace: death. The disparate thoughts and feelings of the narrator are conveyed through the seemingly haphazard organization of the journal. The sentences, paragraphs, and the images they convey reveal not only the difficulty of disclosing the different layers of thoughts and feelings in an individual, but also in this instance the private agony of a Vietnamese born and brought up within a colonial system which has just ended. He is an anomaly of history, the result of a temporary and distressing clash of cultures. Rather than drawing a measure of added wealth in having experienced and gaining access to such disparate cultures - Eastern and Western -, his confusion and sense of loss result in the gradual disintegration of the self. In a metaphorical way, the narrator, like a prisoner behind bars, has no escape route. He can convey his condition to the 'outsiders', the 'Westerners', but he remains trapped (within his condition as a member of the ex-colonized, a hybrid of colonialism).

The conflict within the individual is portrayed in a less vehement way in Pham Duy Khiem's *La Place d'un homme*, although the outcome is similar: the protagonist also dies in violent circumstances, disappearing anonymously in the shambles of war. This individual, identified as Nam Liên, dies fighting for

France during the Second World War. A member of the colonized, he volunteers to fight for the colonizer against what he perceives to be a greater threat: Germany. He does not speak of this threat in concrete terms, however. It is an implicit one. The *recueil* makes no single mention of Germany, Nazism, fascism or dictatorship. The actual details of the war do not feature in this account. It forms instead a perpetual background and (outwardly) provides the impetus for the protagonist's gesture. This gesture itself is heavily ironical: fighting for the oppressor against another oppressor. More than two decades later, Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon would put forward the interpretation that fascism was not a unique aberration but 'simply ... European colonialism brought home to Europe by a country that had been deprived of its overseas empire by World War I'.²⁶ The colonial greed of one European nation for another had not struck Nam Liên, himself a product of colonization. For him, this war is too vast a struggle to query the 'rights' or 'wrongs' of himself volunteering. The situation was an emergency and needed urgent action. He acted in response. It was inevitable. He did not think of himself as 'Annamite' or 'French' or as owing particular loyalty to the French. It was a matter of fighting together against a greater threat. He could not, however, escape from the political consequences of his act. Vietnamese nationalists, patriots and revolutionaries disapproved of his actions: why should he lay his life on the line for the colonizers? What had the war in Europe to do with him as a Vietnamese? Should he not struggle for his country's

²⁶Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London, 1990), p. 8.

independence instead of acting quixotically as the sole native volunteer for the French Army and travel half-way around the world to act out this impulse?²⁷ Nam Liên was not immune to criticism even from the French for this gesture. It is the rare French acquaintance who accepts his choice. As he writes to M. T... in the first *billet* dated September 1939:

Au milieu des commentaires sans aménité qui s'élèvent de tous côtés, il m'est doux de vous lire: "Je vous comprends" (p. 5).

Nam Liên himself becomes aware of the meaning of this gesture.

Yeager writes of *La Place d'un homme* that the novel:

is a personal apology by the author ... The autobiographical *La Place d'un homme* - 'à peine romancée' ... according to André Rousseaux - and Khiem's own statements elsewhere serve to confirm his own fidelity to France, his gratitude toward French culture, and his hope for a lasting relationship between Viet Nam and France. As with previous texts, the general outlines of verifiable political circumstances form the background, and an invented narration is placed within it.²⁸

This interpretation is justifiable to a certain extent, but it does not explain the death of the narrator at the end of the *recueil* and the many strands of conflict which underlie Nam Liên's actions. Yeager writes that 'unlike the revolutionary movement afoot in his own country, he has decided to support colonialism and rejects his country - leaves his family and culture - to fight on foreign soil for the oppressors'.²⁹ This appears a somewhat black-and-white denunciation of the narrator's actions - betrayal of his homeland

²⁷It is significant that Nam Liên is a volunteer. France had extracted a heavy toll on the Indochinese colony during the First World War. 'During World War I, France's demands upon her colonies fell most heavily upon Indochina ... more than 43, 000 Indochinese soldiers and almost 49, 000 workers were sent to Europe'. John T. McAlister, Jr., *Viet Nam: The Origins of Revolution* (London, 1969), p. 67.

²⁸Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 111.

²⁹Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 110.

and loyalty to the colonizer. What is omitted here are the circumstances surrounding Nam Liên's actions and what such an action itself, from the viewpoint of the colonized, says of the underlying nature of colonialism and oppression.

The entire *recueil* in *La Place d'un homme* charts the gradual unfolding of the protagonist's feelings and emotions, the entire train of events which followed his request to volunteer in France:

Aujourd'hui, je voudrais seulement vous confier: ce que je sens par-dessus tout, c'est une transformation inattendue. Il semble que je découvre, au moment où j'accepte d'y renoncer, les dimensions et la valeur exactes des choses. Il n'y a rien qui n'apparaisse sous un aspect nouveau, comme baigné enfin de la vraie lumière.
C'est une fraîcheur, une certitude, une légèreté infinies. (p. 5)

This sentiment of 'une certitude' is to permeate his entire account through the *billets*. It is as if the rest of his life had lain in wait for this decision and that nothing mattered much afterwards. Whether he lived or died, he felt at peace with himself because he had made the right decision and had acted on it. He writes that he was physically frail as a child and that this undertaking will also be a physical challenge for him: 'Je veux voir si je peux tout endurer, résister jusqu'au bout' (p. 8).

What is he setting out to prove to himself (to others)? That a despised member of the colonized can show proof of enterprise, courage and resilience, and that he alone undertook to carry out his resolutions? He was coerced into acting thus by neither the colonial authorities nor his peers. It was a decision he made independently. He was not carrying out a family or patriotic duty but simply responding as an individual to a particular situation.

Ironically, it is also something which he can only undertake in metropolitan France. As a 'native', he does not have the right to bear arms in his own country:

'Indigènes', nous ne sommes pas astreints au service militaire, et nous n'avons pas le droit de détenir une arme. (p. 9)

He points to the difference, as he sees it, between his own upbringing and that of young European men:

Le jeune Français, le jeune Allemand, s'attendent à combattre et mourir un jour. Ils grandissent dans cette pensée, on les y prépare ensuite. Chez eux, tous les aînés, de l'aïeul au grand frère, ont été soldats. Sur les murs familiaux sourient les portraits des morts au champ d'honneur. Au jeune Annamite, il n'est permis que de mourir de maladie. Ses yeux n'ont à contempler, dans l'une et l'autre sociétés, que des réussites matérielles, des modèles de vie bien calculée. Il n'est pas superflu de lui rappeler, autrement que par des mots, l'existence du sacrifice, le renoncement, pour une idée, aux biens de ce monde. (p. 9)

He seems to observe with admiration as well as some trepidation the militaristic tradition of European manhood as opposed to the relatively impotent upbringing of Vietnamese youth. This impotence is imposed on the colonized. He feels that they are only permitted to die by illness - illness itself suggesting weakness and helplessness as opposed to the virile choice of marching out and dying on the battlefield. One may wonder why anyone would yearn for this sort of fate, but for a member of the colonized the crux is the question of choice. He has no choice and no power in his own country. He cannot assert himself in his native environment. Familial and social pressure impose conformity, obedience and duty on him as well as the concept of 'lying low'. He is not master

of his fate. He can only assert his will by leaving. This paragraph conveys rebellion against imposed bonds and inertia.

He is struggling to express himself as an individual. His is also a gesture of defiance against the *colons* based in Indochina. In a note addressed to 'Un Français d'Indochine', he writes: 'Vous n'êtes pas le seul Français à opérer un revirement complet à mon égard... Il fallait savoir qu'il existait des Annamites honnêtes et dignes, prêts cependant à s'offrir pour la défense de la France' (pp. 10-11). This is an allusion to the *colons*' opinion that no native is honest or worthy. He also reiterates that this is too large a conflict to concentrate on nationality:

Je veux entrer dans la grande bagarre - car cela va être grand, quelque autre jugement qu'on puisse porter sur cette affaire qui commence. Il n'est plus question d'Annamites et de Français. C'est au-dessus, au-delà des ordinaires querelles. (p. 13)

To Nam Liên, others' concerns and queries about his motivations are baseless: 'Il y a un péril, un homme se lève - pourquoi lui demander des raisons? C'est plutôt à ceux qui se tiennent cois à fournir les raisons qu'ils auraient pour s'abstenir' (p. 12). He should not have to justify his actions. It is the others, who have not acted, who ought to justify theirs. He acknowledges his appreciation to those who let him go his own way, even though they may, for political reasons, disapprove of his gesture. He writes to an old Vietnamese nationalist, M. Trần Trong (to whom France, naturally, is the enemy): 'J'ai agi seul, ne voulant entraîner personne, ni perdre de temps. Je vous remercie de me laisser suivre mon destin, après m'avoir désapprouvé tout d'abord' (p. 17). He does not expect a reward for his actions, whether for himself

individually or for his countrymen politically. As he writes to the old nationalist:

Qui calcule risque d'être déçu. Surtout: noblesse n'attend point salaire. Quand la maison du voisin brûle, même si ce voisin ne vous aimait point, on ne lui demande pas: "Je vais vous apporter un seau d'eau, que me donnerez-vous en échange?" (p. 18).

On the long sea journey to France, Nam Liên reads French novels on the First World War and he goes with a sense of fatalism. He is not seeking rank or glory. He does think of those, especially his mother, whom he leaves behind. As he writes to 'lieutenant L. C.': 'Le plus difficile d'ailleurs n'est pas de renoncer au présent et à l'avenir, mais de se séparer de son passé' (p. 24). He feels that he can only be judged on his own merits in metropolitan France. Those 'Français d'Indochine' who know he volunteered are suspicious of his motivations: 'Pourquoi les uns ont-ils parlé de "reconnaissance" et les autres d'"indigène francisé"?... Il m'a fallu attendre d'arriver en France pour être compris. Faut-il, pour se faire colonial, qu'un Français cesse d'être juste et clairvoyant? Est-ce en traversant les mers qu'on rétrécit ses horizons?' (pp. 28-29). Here is another allusion to the prejudice and bigotry manifested by the *colons* in French Indochina. It seems a pervasive irony that the colonized feels more appreciated in the metropolitan country than on 'native' soil and that the metropolis appears to be more enlightened towards the colonized than its representatives overseas.

Nam Liên, as the letters convey, is an individual attempting to act of his own volition, a freedom seldom allowed to a member of the colonized. In a reversal indicative of the perverse nature of colonialism, he can only assert this self-will by volunteering to

fight for the colonizer. He rationalizes that the fight against oppression is a worthy one, that the threat and the emergency are real, but he is not overly concerned about the actual nature of this threat. His letters are empty of references towards the nature of Nazism, fascism, domination, annexation, or the master race. Perhaps such discussions would be an uncomfortable reminder of the reality of colonialism, so he omits them. He can safely absorb himself in a wider struggle in order to turn away from the uncomfortably close reality of French Indochina. His is an escape from the claustrophobia and constraints he experienced as a powerless member of the colonized in his native country, an escape towards a measure of freedom. The irony is that this escape is largely illusory. He cannot escape from his particular condition. Both his constraints and his relative freedom lie within the orbit of the colonizers.

Once he is accepted as a recruit in the French Army, Nam Liên notes the reality of soldiering: the repetitive nature of Army chores, the tough and spartan conditions. Certain aspects of Army life affect him more than others. As an Annamite he is particularly vulnerable to the misery of winter in France. Coming as he does from a warm, near-tropical climate, the sheer physical pain of being cold often surfaces in his *billets*. He is at first glance an unlikely recruit. An intellectual, university graduate and 'professeur de lycée' in Indochina, Nam Liên joins the French Army as a private. He writes of his companions: 'Rien à dire sur mes compagnons, de pauvres diables qui se demandent ce que je viens faire parmi eux, et qui éclatent de rire en me voyant accomplir les corvées. Dans l'ensemble, c'est assez pénible, mais

je m'adapte vite' (p. 34). He resents the lack of privacy and quiet in this life yet at the same time notes with some wonderment: 'Quelle vie étrange et riche!...Ils sont là, cela ne sent pas bon, on entend des banalités ou des sottises, on est gêné - brusquement on oublie tout pour cette camaraderie, ces secondes de pureté que nulle part ailleurs je n'ai connues' (p. 42).

Nam Liên appreciates the anonymity provided by a soldier's uniform. This is something which is new and alien to him. He is no longer 'Monsieur Liên' or a 'native' from the colonies, but a soldier in the uniform of the French Army. The anonymity of the uniform allows him to surrender himself, his individuality, his aspirations, his fears. It provides an illusory relief from his condition as a member of the colonized. He finds comfort in this sense of anonymity. He blends into a general mass and in this way reaches happiness:

D'un mot: malgré le froid (il gèle depuis trois jours), malgré la discipline, la fatigue, les sergents, malgré la poussière, la terre, l'eau froide, je suis heureux. Précisément parce que j'ai voulu ce dépouillement: être soldat et rien d'autre; nulle attente, nul calcul, nul espoir. (p. 45)

In this 'dépouillement' he finds the freedom to put away his burdens, to leave behind his obligations to others. By the same token, this state of readiness means that he is resigned to any eventuality: 's'attendre à tout, à chaque instant.' (p. 49) He feels that his friends misunderstand his state of mind. No one, it seems, can comprehend that he could feel contentment or happiness in the path he has chosen. He writes: 'Même ceux qui ont compris mon départ commettent une erreur complète sur mon état actuel. L'un m'écrit que je dois me sentir seul et malheureux, l'autre

souhaite que ma vie ne soit pas vide.' (p. 50). His friends mistakenly pity him, while he, on the other hand, feels a deep sense of satisfaction and purpose, because this was his decision and he was abiding by his choice. What this reveals is the scarcity of choices left open to him. If the only way for a man to achieve happiness and self-respect is by becoming an anonymous soldier in barracks, it is a dispiriting outlook on the paucity of options left to such an individual.

It is not that the company is inspiring or that Nam Liên feels heroic in carrying out what he perceives to be his 'duty', but that he had made a choice and therefore feels at peace with himself. He does not glorify or idealize Army life. As he comments wryly: 'L'intelligence est rare, dans l'Armée comme ailleurs' (p. 51). Tasks are boring and yet he dances: 'C'est une valse lente, il fait soleil, et c'est la première fois que je danse tout seul' (p. 57). Along with this external and internal dance, the notes bear many descriptions of the beauty of nature, the surrounds of the Army camp. Nam Liên observes this grace with surprise and delicacy:

Il faut vous dire que nous voyons le Mont Saint-Clair, et les pentes qui viennent mourir au pied de la caserne étalent leurs bouquets de pins, leurs maisons roses et vertes, leurs jardins et leurs vergers. Un soleil qui se voile et se découvre tour à tour caresse le chien allongé dans une allée. Là-bas, vers la ville, de délicats pêchers sont roses, d'un rose presque blanc. (p. 63)

The war seems very far away. There are no news bulletins, no comments on the progress of the war, only a brief mention towards the end that there exists a threat from Italy. And of course, the recruits have to be tested for fitness to be transferred closer to the fighting itself. Nam Liên was not the sole Vietnamese in his unit. He mentions that there were thirteen Annamites in all,

most of them established permanently in France and married to Frenchwomen. He, however, is the only Vietnamese to have travelled all the way from the Indochina to join up. He feels saddened by this:

J'ai toujours pensé que les efforts des hommes de bonne volonté sont ridiculement vains. Mais il faut justifier sa présence sur cette terre. ...

Il est malheureusement vrai que j'ai été seul à pouvoir venir, que nous avons été seulement quelques-uns à vouloir venir. J'en suis profondément attristé, et pour la France, et pour l'Annam. (p. 69)

So despite his claims of a measure of pride in acting alone and voluntarily, he wishes that more of his countrymen had had a similar impulse. He does not want to think of the future and his response to friends who write and enquire as to his plans 'afterwards' is: 'Il faut me croire, je ne pense nullement à un avenir quelconque' (p. 66). He is absorbed in the daily minutiae and concerns of Army life and his thoughts do not stretch any further. It is useless to conjecture a 'future' when he may not come back at all. He has passed the test the Army set the recruits and is now, along with all the others, in intensive training. It is no use his friends lamenting his situation when he himself is too busy to do so: 'si je ne reviens pas, ou si je reviens sans bras ou sans jambes, ou gazé, cela m'est absolument égal. Je ne vois pas pourquoi l'on me plaindrait' (p. 68).

He does occasionally reminisce about his past life - his childhood and early education in Indochina and his later University education in France, German friends in the inter-war years, but most of the *billets* discuss the current concerns of his unit. Occasional reminders of another 'peace-time' existence, such as an impromptu evening of music at a friend's house, are painful:

'Pourquoi m'arrachez-vous à la réalité où je dois vivre? J'ai déjà tout oublié. Pourquoi me rappeler qu'il existe un monde de beauté et de douceur?'(p. 75)

He is also constantly justifying his decision to old friends or acquaintances, clarifying his reasons for himself as time goes on and attempting to communicate to them the measure of serenity he experiences and which others have some obvious difficulty accepting:

Ce n'était d'ailleurs pas un élan. Ni "un geste" non plus, comme l'a écrit un journaliste. Mais une action naturelle, qui n'avait pas eu besoin de préparation ou de réflexion préalable, pas plus qu'elle ne réclame le fouet de l'enthousiasme ou la tension de l'effort. Déjà j'ai traversé avec bonheur l'hiver à la caserne. Avec bonheur et facilité, et plein de contentement de l'âme. Plus d'une occasion pour sourire de sérénité et de joie. J'attends la suite de l'aventure, prêt et calme. (p. 76)

Nam Liên's happiness in the changing season is evidenced in bright and vivid descriptions of nature. As he writes to Mme B.: 'Excusez ce bavardage, mais je suis si heureux, et il me semble naturel de vous en faire part, quand votre lettre vient s'ajouter à une telle journée. C'est d'ailleurs répondre à votre question: "Etes-vous bien, au physique et au moral?" (p. 79). He writes that his expectations of Army life were worse than the reality, so that in the end he was rather agreeably surprised. He expected to serve under lesser men. He records the sensation of letting go:

De ma vie, jamais je n'ai été plus tranquille, jamais aussi serein. Songez à cette victoire totale sur soi qu'est le renoncement. Radieuse délivrance. Quoi qu'il puisse m'arriver, tout m'est indifférent, dès maintenant. ...

Le sentiment qu'on a de sa propre force ne suffit pas, la conscience de son caractère ne suffit pas; il faut les avoir mis à l'épreuve. Si la guerre cesse dans un mois, j'aurai su que j'ai été prêt. (pp. 88-89)

In a sense, this temporary abdication of concern for the future or anything other than the immediate present is another means of escape. It is easier for Nam Liên to absorb himself in the detailed minutiae of his present existence as a soldier, in the plethora of images, impressions and colours around him than to think of his own condition or that of his country. He finds relief in attempting to escape from his real condition and the much deeper (and unresolved) concerns arising from it. His short experience in the Army and eventual death in combat provide a relief, similar to that experienced by the narrator of *Les Reflets de nos jours*, from the imprisoning effects of his personal condition. Like the anonymous narrator of *Les Reflets*, Nam Liên is an individual caught between two cultures and two loyalties.

He writes many *billets* to women, especially a 'Mme B...' towards the end of this recueil. He perhaps expects greater empathy and compassion from women. During a bout of illness earlier on he had written: '(En réalité, ils sont loins d'être délicats, mais malgré moi, quand ils me soulevaient, quand ils ramenaient la couverture, je rêvais: mère, femme, sœur)' (p. 54). Images of gentleness, care and comfort are associated with women. As he is transferred to different military camps, and gradually gets closer to the fighting, the war and the possibility of being killed in combat, he writes note after note describing his immediate impressions of his surroundings and the people in it. It is to another woman 'Mme D...' that he communicates his guilt relating to his mother:

Je viens de traduire [votre lettre] à l'intention de ma mère, et elle regrettera de ne pas vous connaître, de ne jamais vous connaître.

Pour ma part, j'apprécie qu'une Française m'ait exprimé cette idée: ma mère doit souffrir plus qu'aucune mère française, car elle ne pouvait pas s'attendre à voir son fils partir soudain pour la guerre. Mais je suis surtout ému parce que c'est vous qui l'avez dit. (p. 106)

As the time draws closer he is amazed at some of the trivial concerns expressed by his correspondents in Indochina. The community is agog with gossip about his possibly having rung up a young Vietnamese woman in France. He is incredulous. The war is uppermost in his mind but 'over there' they appear oblivious to it. The tension also rises: 'C'est terrible, la vie que je mène dans ce pays perdu' (p. 113). He evinces a mixture of anticipation, apprehension and indifference: 'Je me découvre une parfaite indifférence pour ce qui est de ma propre sécurité. Toute la journée, je couds calmement ou j'écris, me demandant si mes lettres partiront' (p. 116). If he is indifferent to his physical fate, he is keen to communicate to the utmost of his ability his sensations to his correspondents and by the same token, receives with joy any letters which reach him. He writes to Mme B...: 'Quand une lettre parvient jusqu'à moi, c'est un miracle. Si vous saviez! Ah! l'effroyable désordre!' (p. 118). He justifies himself once again, this time to a Frenchman who disapproved of his volunteering:

Je n'aime pas la guerre, je n'aime pas la vie militaire, mais nous sommes en guerre, et je ne saurais demeurer ailleurs.

Il ne s'agit point d'un choix entre France et Annam. Il s'agit seulement de savoir la place d'un Annamite comme moi, en ce moment. Elle est ici. Et je dois l'occuper, quelque dangereuse qu'elle soit ou qu'elle doive devenir. (p. 120)

He writes to Mme B...: 'Tristesse, et apaisement en même temps' (p. 121). He pities the men who are fathers of young families: 'Leurs lettres; ces pauvres enveloppes, ces adresses au crayon, ces écritures mal formées...' (p. 129), and later on 'Pourquoi toute cette tranquillité? Pourquoi?' (p. 131). He records the sensation of unnatural quiet before the storm. The last few notes finally mention major battles, the detritus and visible results of war: 'les réfugiés avec leur effroyable détresse (ni les photos, ni les journaux, ni les livres ne diront tout)' (p. 133). The last *billet*, which ends this *recueil*, is extremely brief. It is dated 12 June and is addressed to Mme B... It states: 'Nous partons. Dieu vous garde!' (p. 136).

Unlike *Les Reflets de nos jours*, *La Place d'un homme* contains no afterword or *Epilogue*, although the presence of whoever compiles the *recueil* is pervasive throughout in the short explanations which describe the recipients of these *billets*: 'vieux nationaliste', 'un Français d'Indochine qui avait écrit à Paris pour qu'on admît Nam Liên à un des pelotons préparatoires aux Elèves-Aspirants' (p. 39), 'M. R... un Français qui n'avait pas approuvé l'engagement de Nam Liên' (p. 119). The variety of correspondents stretching over two continents provides a wide array of different political and personal views which in turn allows the narrator to respond likewise and comment on both the politics and the personal reasons for his actions, as well as to convey his private feelings.

La Place d'un homme is a means of self-justification and a plea for understanding. Nam Liên is attempting to justify himself to all his correspondents, whether they are male or female,

French or Vietnamese, revolutionary or conservative. He is in a category apart, belonging to no discernible group. He stands as a lonely and isolated figure. He is the only Annamite to have volunteered to join the French Army from Vietnam. The only other Vietnamese recruits are men who have settled in France and have French wives. As a Vietnamese living in his own country, he had few resources open to him and few means of asserting his self-will. He could only do so by volunteering to join the French Army. Few can understand this. He is French-educated, academic. Yet he finds a measure of relief and happiness in shedding all the doubts and uncertainties surrounding his life in French Indochina. He plunges into his daily existence as a private in the French Army, into the largely anonymous, dull and repetitive nature of such a life - and finds a measure of liberation. However, this sensation of freedom, of casting all his previous worries aside, is an illusory one. After all, whatever his attempts, he is still Nam Liên. He is still caught and imprisoned within his condition. He is uncertain of his identity and confused about his loyalties. That he is so is evident in his attempts to justify himself to so many correspondents. Hence the many letters to others in which he tries, rather desperately, to convey the reasons for his decisions, his relief, his happiness, his laying aside a cumbersome burden. But the question is, does he really? As for the narrator of *Les Reflets*, there is no relief in sight for him. The war provided a temporary distraction, and his death in combat a fitting end to an unresolved problem. Like the narrator of *Les Reflets*, Nam Liên is also a prisoner of his condition. He tries, through his letters, to communicate to the many 'outsiders', but remains and dies within

Between East and West

his own prison. His temporary escape and happiness as a soldier are illustrative of the underlying entrapment, for in the end they are illusory. There is no escape. The only solution is death.

In both *Les Reflets de nos jours* and *La Place d'un homme*, the narrator and protagonist dies. The anonymous writer of the journal in *Les Reflets* is killed in combat, and Nam Liên disappears in June 1940 in the battles around the Loire valley. What is the significance of these deaths? What purpose do they serve? Apart from the *Préface* or brief introductory passage in each novel, the death is expected. The narrator expected to die and even yearned for it. *La Place d'un homme* is far less gloomy and pessimistic, yet in the end the narrator (writer) also disappears in combat. It appears that both deaths serve a definite purpose. They provide an end to an insoluble problem, that of identity and of identification.

Both men are torn between two cultures and subject to conflicts of personality and identity. The nameless character in *Les Reflets* is in constant and visible torment, a state of mind which is reflected in the writing of the journal itself. Images of the East are constantly juxtaposed with images of the West - study, travel, literature, art. But rather than the protagonist gaining a sensation of added wealth, and acknowledging an added perception in having experienced two very different cultures, the pressures result in a fragmentation of the self. The private pain and failures of relationships with women compound the destruction of an individual who was already beginning to break apart. It was perhaps this incipient disintegration which precipitated the breakdown in any steady relationship he could have had. The journal, after all, begins with his separation from his

wife and the strongly-defined and corroding despair which followed. The ensuing fragmentation is evidenced in the style of the journal, with its intrusion of thoughts, images, memories, sudden reflections as well as the occasional recording of a letter or communication received - which serve to remind the reader every now and then that this is a journal. Rather than forming a coherent whole or even the formation or progression of thought, the short sentences and paragraphs, apparently unlinked and uncoordinated, illustrate a despairing, broken-up consciousness. The torrent of allusions to Eastern upbringing and philosophy and Western art and interpretations appears to have overwhelmed the narrator. He has been exposed to so much he cannot choose which to absorb, which to reject. The weight is too heavy for him to forge his own individual path through these manifold perceptions. He does not have the strength to inform himself, and then to select whatever elements from each disparate culture will be most enriching and fulfilling for himself as an individual. The resulting effect is of a person who tried to encompass all of both cultures and cracked apart at the seams because of the strain. The plethora of images and perceptions can also suggest a self too full, trying to communicate any and all aspects of the self at random without any sense of selection or purpose. If the narrator felt too replete with ideas and feelings, one way of exorcising some of them was to set them down on paper in his 'journal', as they arose and assailed him. This allowed him to unload some of this inner torment, to lighten some of this immense burden which in the end grew too heavy to bear. He had no option but to die. It was the only way for him to put to rest once and for all the disparate voices and

streams of thought running through his head and his personality. He could not find peace and comfort anywhere, neither in himself nor in relationships. This was the only way to resolve the conflict of an alienated self.

Nam Liên in *La Place d'un homme* also resolved the conflicts of a self which was too complex, perhaps too disturbing for him to deal with. After the individual struggle which involved his decision to volunteer he went ahead despite opposition and concerns voiced both by well-wishers (in Indochina and in France) and those among the *colons* who disapproved of his gesture and perhaps felt secretly guilty that a 'native' showed proof of greater patriotism for the mother country than they themselves (even though this was not the way Nam Liên himself perceived it). At the very least this gesture raised questions as to the presumed subject nature of the natives in question, their lack of autonomy in their own homeland. In a perverse manner, the only way for Nam Liên to exert himself and to assert his will and autonomy was to leave his homeland and join the French Army as a raw recruit at the beginning of a major war - a war which to him overrode nationalistic differences between the French and the Annamites. He behaved, even if he denies it, in the manner of a patriotic Frenchman volunteering to go to the defence of his homeland. But Nam Liên, of course, is not French, and France is not his homeland. His gesture reveals much not only about the nature of the colonized but also about that of the colonizer.

Mimicry at once enables power and produces the loss of agency. If control slips away from the colonizer, the requirement of mimicry means that the colonized, while complicit in the process, remains the unwitting and unconscious agent of menace - with a resulting

paranoia on the part of the colonizer as he tries to guess the native's sinister intentions. Though of course the native may well have violent thoughts of forms of resistance, we are not here, it should be stressed, talking about such orthodox forms of resistance, but a process which simultaneously stabilizes and destabilizes the position of the colonizer.³⁰

Nam Liên's gesture, while on the surface a subject of self-congratulation on the part of the colonizer (the ultimate act of native gratitude towards the colonizer) bears on the reverse side a negative critique of colonialism - in that it has the power to reduce the native to such means in order to assert an individuality submerged under a greater system. It can be argued that it was because he could not deal with the conflicting demands and restrictions imposed upon him as a member of the colonized in Indochina that Nam Liên turned with such eagerness towards this method of escape. He was escaping from the self to find comfort and serenity in the anonymous conformity and physical hardship of Army training. He wanted to lose his self, his concerns, his ambitions, his conflicting loyalties. What made him 'un gentilhomme'? Was he inspired by Eastern standards of loyalty and nobility or by the Western impulse to action and change? Was he simply escaping and letting go of all these queries? He finds that it is all of these. He both loses and finds a self. He loses the self imposed externally by society and the colonial system and discovers the inner self underlying this outer layer.

Unlike *Les Reflets de nos jours*, which charts the disintegration of a personality, *La Place d'un homme* charts the gradual formation and affirmation of the narrator's thoughts and feelings. The *billets* portray an unfolding consciousness, as the

³⁰Young, *Mythologies*, pp. 147-148.

protagonist clarifies for his correspondents as well as for himself the reasons and motivations which lie behind his gesture as well as the positive assertion of self and individuality which ensues. However, this way of reaching for and achieving a measure of happiness - the greatest sensation of happiness he had ever experienced in any circumstances in his thirty-two years - would also lead, in the end, to the destruction of the self. As for the anonymous narrator of *Les Reflets*, this decision would lead to bodily death. Nam Liên's abnegation of the problems surrounding his life as a member of the colonized and his embracing the life of a French soldier lead to a fatalistic acceptance of whatever fate holds in store for him and eventually to an early death in a European war (or what was still then a largely European war). Nam Liên feels joyful and serene, but these sensations are dearly bought. They hide an undercurrent of despair and loss, of being cut adrift, of not knowing where he belongs, of not knowing where his life's work and energies should lie and be directed towards, an existence so fraught with uncertainties and loose ends that he turned with relief to the dull routine, the constant exertions and intellectually undemanding surroundings of an Army camp.

Nam Liên, the intellectual, became too busy simply living, acting and feeling to think. And he bends all his energies to the business of living from day to day and writing brief notes to acquaintances. He is finally free from his condition of being Nam Liên, an Annamite of bourgeois background, born and brought up in Indochina and later educated in the metropolis, with the responsibilities thrust upon him by his family and the limits beyond which he may not exert himself set by the colonial

authorities. He becomes a soldier in the French Army and the outside world looks upon him as just that: another unidentified face in uniform. He wanted to be caught up in a large and encompassing conflict. This war was too major for him to perturb himself about the 'minor', niggling concerns of colonialism and nationalism. But that he had to resort to such means in order not to think of these concerns indicates how powerfully they loom in his consciousness. This is why he is constantly denying that they had any part to play in his decision. This war allowed him to forget himself and absorb himself in a far greater, more immediately urgent conflagration. Because he could not contemplate a future and could not figure this new-found self in the bind from which he had just recently escaped, he had no choice but to die. He found release and oblivion in this. For the day-to-day and ever-present realities of his condition as an Annamite had bound him in heavy and inescapable shackles. For him, as for the young man in *Les Reflets*, the only escape lay in death. They had tried hard to break free, but neither could escape their condition and both, in the end, are tragic because no resolution is offered which will heal or compensate for the damage which colonialism inflicted on them as individuals.

Colonization afforded the colonized a glimpse of freedom and potential - in the form of education and a few brief years of University studies in the metropolis - while at the same time slamming the lid down on any hopes or ambitions.³¹ Once back in

³¹The relationship between academic performance and career possibility was muddled by the colonial situation ... Vietnamese still were barred from the highest positions in the administration and judiciary of their country. Careers in politics and the press, though possible, existed only under the confining rules of ultimate French sovereignty'. Scott McConnell, *Leftward Journey: The Education of*

Indochina, the Annamite had to reconcile himself to the true nature of his condition. He was a subject native and owed his privileges, his education, the language in which he communicated, his gaining access to European thought, to the magnanimity of the colonizer. By the same token, he was debarred from exerting any autonomy and power was, in large measure, denied him. This tangled vein of loyalty and resentment manifests itself in different ways, in both *Les Reflets de nos jours* and *La Place d'un homme*. In *Les Reflets*, the gradual disintegration of the self is manifested in the style of the novel itself. The journal is a mass of disparate impressions, emotions, perceptions, and illustrates the corroding despair of the narrator. In the case of *La Place*, the splintered perceptions appear in more orderly form as a collection of letters addressed to different recipients. However, these letters are also an attempt to communicate a sense of loss, the lack of a firm base, a search for identity which *Les Reflets* displayed in more violent form. For both, the solution and the end result is death. There is no other means of resolving this conflict of identity. Neither novel is a denunciation or an exposition of the vices and virtues of colonized as opposed to colonizer. What they portray instead is the enriching as well as destructive effect of the enmeshing of two cultures when power is so heavily slanted one way.

The fate of the two protagonists is perhaps a metaphor for the ensuing fate of the colonial system: that it would destroy itself in the end and that this would be in a sense inevitable. The

Vietnamese Students in France 1919-1939 (New Brunswick and Oxford, 1989), p. 66.

system, like these two protagonists, carries within itself the impetus for its own disintegration. But the damage is of course the greater and more costly, in individual terms, for the weaker and more vulnerable participants: the colonized. In this way, it was generally less stressful for those Annamites who stayed on in France after their studies and often settled down with French wives. The metropolis recognized their educational qualifications and competence and if there existed prejudice - inevitably - it was less marked than that evinced by the colonial administration in French Indochina.³² In Pham Duy Khiem's *Nam et Sylvie*, the protagonist Nam is cognizant of the fact that he enjoys greater freedom as an Annamite living in the metropolis than he would as a member of the colonized in his native land. The fate of Sao in Truong Dinh Tri and Albert de Teneuille's *Bà-Dâm* is indicative of this. While Sao's brilliance and academic qualifications are recognized and given credit in Paris, they are disregarded and ignored in French Indochina.

Both *Les Reflets de nos jours* and *La Place d'un homme* portray the fate of Vietnamese intellectuals who were educated at University level in France and later returned to Indochina. They each came from the more privileged classes and had the opportunity not only to study but also to travel in Europe, and to mingle with European intellectuals. For both the narrator of *Les Reflets* and Nam Liên, the memories of these early and formative student days are poignant and fleeting. These short years of

³²As Ly Binh Hue, a law student and editor of the moderate *Journal des Etudiants Annamites* put it in an "open letter" to a compatriot, ... what was striking about French life was that one was treated with dignity, respect. ... He stressed that one found in France a completely different species of Frenchman than was in the colony'. McConnell, *Journey*, pp. 59-60.

discovery and freedom were transitory and deceptive and are looked upon with nostalgia, as a world gone for ever. For many Vietnamese, these years would be their only experience of freedom, of laying down, if not putting away for good, the ties which linked them to family, and the burdens of duty, obligation, and constraints, exerted by both society and the colonial administration. This transitory illusion of freedom and of letting worldly burdens fall would be briefly experienced again by each protagonist towards the end of his life. Involvement in guerrilla or Army life allowed each individual a brief surrender of self. Each sacrificed himself to a greater cause, putting away the concerns of his existence for a greater emergency. Their actions, however, serve but to underline the destructive and hypnotic nature of the colonial system to which they were subject and from which they attempted, in the end, to free themselves.

For these two writers, writing was perhaps a way of exorcising the contradictions of their situation. Their dilemma echoes that of other Francophone writers. As the Lebanese writer Evelyne Accad noted:

L'écriture comme refuge, comme quête, et comme expression de la division de l'être. ...
L'écriture m'a aidée à guérir certaines blessures. Elle m'a réconciliée avec mon passé. En exprimant ce qui me bouleversait, j'exorcisais la colère, la douleur et la souffrance de situations insurmontables, et je pouvais aller de l'avant.³³

Les Reflets de nos jours and *La Place d'un homme* are a metaphorical reflection of the prison literature which

³³Evelyne Accad, 'L'Écriture (comme) éclatement des frontières', *L'Esprit créateur*, 33, 2 (summer 1993), 119-128 (pp. 124-125).

characterized autobiographical narratives in Vietnam.³⁴ They do not detail the physical incarceration of the narrator-protagonist, but they expose instead his condition as an individual caught in an inescapable bind between two cultures and two conflicting loyalties.

³⁴This tradition persists in autobiographical accounts such as Doan Van Toai, *Le Goulag vietnamien* (Paris, 1979), Lucien Trong, *Enfer rouge mon amour* (Paris, 1980), and Tran Ti Vu, *Lost years: my 1,632 days in Vietnamese reeducation camps* (Berkeley, 1988).

CHAPTER SIX

THE STRANGER IN THE VILLAGE

The Search for Identity

*The self must hide from wind and dust –
the door is always tightly shut.*

– Cao Ba Quat

Alienation can be illustrated within a distant or foreign setting, as in *Les Reflets de nos jours* and *La Place d'un homme*. It can be illustrated as powerfully within an ostensibly familiar setting. For some, the return to the native village proves the ultimate experience of alienation, alienation from one's roots, family, and society. The village, small, contained and familiar, the place of one's birth and family roots, becomes, in this context, a place of nightmarish unfamiliarity. The village comes to embody a claustrophobic and stifling strangeness. The traveller, instead of returning home, finds himself an alien in his own land.

In this chapter, I will compare two novels which deal with the portrayal of the Vietnamese village as a microcosm of the country and of society in general. They are Pham Van Ky's *Frères de sang*, published in Paris in 1947, and Cung Giu Nguyen's *Le Fils*

de la baleine, published originally in Paris in 1956. Both novels are indictments of village life and of the narrowness of perspectives within a restricted environment. The village in Vietnam has historically maintained a fierce independence from royal and bureaucratic authority.

The life of the people was regulated, according to custom, within the confines of the village, the basic unit of Vietnamese society. ... The imperial government had no direct contact with the individual but only with his village, which paid taxes and provided men to labor on public works and to serve in the army. For the rest, the village directed its own affairs, supervised by the Council of Notables recruited from the village oligarchy.¹

In the north of the country, each village was surrounded and protected by a thick hedge of bamboo, a physical and symbolic barrier,² which, while it protected, also cut the villagers off from the outside world.

The old proverb 'Phep vua thua le lang' (The laws of the emperor yield to the customs of the village) is known by all Vietnamese, and in many respects, it characterizes the village in Vietnam as a self-contained homogeneous community, jealously guarding its way of life - a little world that is autonomous and disregards (if not disdains) the outside world.³

In both novels, the village is particularly resistant to change and in the end is destroyed or partly destroyed. The village, its inhabitants and its adherents embody an entrenched and outmoded mentality and are capable of acts of petty and occasionally intense cruelty. The village in Vietnam remained in

¹Ellen J. Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina* (Stanford, 1954), p. 62.

²In Tongking, it was usual for villages to have thick bamboo hedges which provided an effective local defence against marauders, whereas in Cochinchina such defences are only rarely found'. Ralph Smith, *Vietnam and the West* (London, 1968), p. 58.

³Gerald Cannon Hickey, *Village in Vietnam* (New Haven and London, 1964), p. 276.

many ways impervious to the changes brought by the French administration of the country.

Whereas the French began to reform the Cochinchinese village system in 1904, they did not make similar changes in Tongking until 1921, and in Annam the village system appears to have remained largely unchanged down to 1940.

Even so, both in Cochinchina and in Tongking-Annam, the French impact on peasant life in the villages came very slowly, and the cultural assimilation which made fairly rapid headway in the metropolis of Saigon or Hanoi never completely embraced the countryside.⁴

In both novels, this life is threatened by the arrival of an outsider, the spark which eventually leads to a series of changes and questionings which shake the foundations of the village. The village becomes a symbol of the individual's alienation from his past, his family and society.

Each novel is set in an isolated Vietnamese village. Each deals with a man returning to his homeland after many years of study overseas. In both novels, the men end up as aliens in a 'native' village. The first, in Pham Van Ky's *Frères de sang*, loses his mind. The second, in Cung Giu Nguyen's *Le Fils de la baleine*, escapes. Each provides the initial momentum in the process of change and destruction of the village.

The two novels differ in the portrayal of the stranger, and in his response to the village. The circumstances in each instance also differ. While the traveller in *Frères de sang* is a son returning to the native village, the traveller in *Le Fils de la baleine* is a true stranger to the village in question. While the first traveller realizes he has become a stranger in his own village, the second is made to feel a stranger by the villagers. The first, in other words, is fully

⁴Smith, *Vietnam*, p. 57.

aware that he returns as a changed man. The second, on the other hand, attempts to adapt to village life, is steadily rejected, and eventually recognizes and accepts his condition as an outsider. In this chapter I will examine the portrayal of this return to the sources in each novel, whether real or illusory (as is the case with *Le Fils de la baleine*, where the traveller returns to the homeland, but to the wrong village), and the way in which this return affects both the traveller and the village in question.

The major points I wish to examine are the following: How does each novel treat the theme of alienation? What is the significance of the imagery in each work? How does the stranger perceive himself and his surroundings in each case? Lastly, what do these novels reveal about the condition of alienation, both within the individual, and with regard to the individual in society?

Pham Van Ky's *Frères de sang* relates the return of the son to the native village after ten years of study in Europe. Yeager, Nguyen Hong Nhiem and Thuong Vuong-Riddick have each pointed to the historical and political aspects of the novel. Yeager writes of the narrator in *Frères de sang*:

He stands in direct contrast to the example of traditional Vietnamese society he finds there, and yet within his family the influences of the revolution and Marxism are apparent. The narrator's brother, Ho, embodies these radical breaks with a static if not corrupt Confucianism represented by the father, a mandarin. The narrator's 'blood-brother', Le Tam, stands for tradition as well, not the easily-defined social pattern of Confucianism, but Taoist mysticism. The character of the narrator reflects the psychological background of the larger socio-political landscape.⁵

⁵Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, pp. 82-83.

Thuong Vuong-Riddick stresses the relevance of current political events in Vietnam. *Frères de sang* was published at a crucial period in Vietnamese politics. The contrast between the old and the new, between tradition and revolution, which characterizes the novel, had its dramatic counterpart in the events of 1945-1946. The period saw the end of a political system:

Mais parler d'étude ethnographique, d'œuvre d'art, c'est laisser de côté la dimension historique et dramatique qui constitue l'essentiel de ce roman du déchirement et de la mauvaise conscience. Publié en 1947, le roman situe son action un an après la 'Ligue pour l'Indépendance du Vietnam' et à la veille de l'abdication de l'empereur Bao-Dai. Située entre août 1945 et décembre 1946, c'est l'une des périodes les plus importantes de l'histoire du Vietnam du fait qu'elle voit la fin du dernier empereur, la victoire du Parti communiste Viet-Minh et le début de la guerre d'Indochine.⁶

Vuong-Riddick notes the importance of these events in relation to the subject matter of the novel and its time of publication. The historical setting of the novel is undeniable. Nguyen Hong Nhiem comments:

En 1947 parut, au Seuil, ... *Frères de sang*. L'action se situe dans la charnière d'une bipartition. Ou, qui plus imagé est, à quelque 38^e parallèle, qui coupera le Vietnam en deux. En l'occurrence, dans un village, dans une étendue pure qui, dans la tradition géopolitique sino-vietnamienne, représente la totalité du pays.⁷

Vuong-Riddick makes the added observation that Pham Van Ky, as an exile, had a greater degree of freedom with which to express the political tensions of the time. He was less subject to the

⁶Thuong Vuong-Riddick, 'Le drame de l'occidentalisation dans quelques romans de Pham Van Ky', *Présence francophone*, 16 (printemps 1970), 141-152 (p. 144).

⁷Nguyen Hong Nhiem, 'L'Echiquier et l'antinomie je/moi comme signe et substance du conflit occident/extrême-orient dans les œuvres de Pham Van Ky' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1982), p. 24.

ideological pressures which both North and South exerted on their writers and intellectuals:

Alors qu'au Vietnam l'état de guerre installe un étau idéologique, peut-être aussi contraignant au Nord qu'au Sud, l'écrivain vietnamien à l'étranger dispose d'une marge de manœuvre beaucoup plus grande et peut aussi éventuellement s'offrir le luxe d'écrire pendant les périodes où cette activité s'avère être impossible pour ceux qui sont restés au pays. D'ailleurs en 1946, Pham Van Ky a publié la seule œuvre francophone de l'année, au titre d'ailleurs significatif *L'Homme de nulle part*⁸ suivi l'année suivante de *Frères de sang*.⁹

However, apart from its date of publication and the brief note at the end of *Frères de sang* which relates the period in which the writer wrote his work: 'Orme[sic]-Paris. Été-automne 1946' (p. 205), the novel does not allude overtly to the current political situation. The tensions within the family and the village reflect in microcosm the wider events of the country, but this recognition is implicit rather than explicit. Pham Van Ky mentions the 'Ligue pour l'Indépendance du Viêt-Nam' (p. 25), but he does not elaborate on it. The 'Ligue' serves to offset the intensely reactionary nature of his father and the village over which the latter presides:

Aucun changement de dynastie, aucun bouleversement politique n'auraient pu modifier la structure de ma famille. ... La 'Ligue pour l'Indépendance du Viêt-Nam', depuis un an, eût-elle brisé ce triangle social, changé le nom du pays, renié le roi, discrédité le mandarin, Père continuait à sévir, doté d'un pouvoir absolu. Les ordonnances de la Cour cédant à la loi communale, selon un dicton, la coutume était son sceptre. (p. 25)

Looking beyond the social and political meanings, which other critics have already acknowledged, the most striking elements in

⁸*L'Homme de nulle part* (Paris, 1946) is a collection of Vietnamese legends.

⁹Vuong-Riddick, 'Le drame', pp. 144-145.

Frères de sang are the twin motifs of alienation and duality. Formed first by the East and then by the West, the narrator is a personality split between two cultures. He is caught between East and West. Nguyen Hong Nhiem sees the *Je* in the narrator as the foreign, Europeanized part of his personality, while the *Moi* remembers and recognizes his roots and traditions.¹⁰ The motif of duality appears throughout the novel. The Westernized narrator is contrasted with his *frère de sang* Lê Tâm and his younger brother Hô. The particular difficulty experienced by the narrator is that he bears aspects of both brothers within his self. The dilemma has a paralysing effect on him. He finds himself alienated not only from those around him, but also from a firm sense of self. Throughout the novel, objects or people with distorted mirror reflections of themselves illustrate this dichotomy in the narrator's background, formation and identity.

The first image to greet the narrator on the night of his return is one of reflection and contrast, a prelude to others: 'Deux lunes semblaient en marquer la hauteur: l'une sur l'assiette du ciel comme un gâteau aux fêtes de la mi-automne, l'autre noyée dans le bol de l'étang'.¹¹ This first image of duality is a striking one. One moon is triumphant in the sky, the other is drowned in water. The first moon, shedding its light on all living things underneath, can be construed as a vivid metaphor for the colonizing power as it imposes education, 'civilization' and paternalistic control over a subject country. The drowned moon, in contrast, may be a symbol of lost values, cultural norms and practices, a metaphor for the

¹⁰Nguyen Hong Nhiem, 'L'Echiquier', pp. 83-84.

¹¹Pham Van Ky, *Frères de sang* (Paris, 1947). p. 13. Subsequent references will be given in the main text.

submerged voice and literature of the colonized. Jung notes in *Symbols of Transformation* that 'Sun and moon [are] divine equivalents of the parent prototype',¹² the parent in this case represented by either the colonial power or the mother country. The moon can also be seen as 'the gathering place of departed souls, a guardian of the seed, and hence a source of life with a feminine significance'.¹³ The moon has been interpreted as either feminine or masculine in different cultures. The moon in the water is a reflection of the moon in the sky yet there lies an immense, unbridgeable gap between them. The two moons embody opposite concepts, and are reflections of two different cultures. They can, concurrently, embody a sign of hope. Jean Harrowven points out that 'it is not surprising that early stories and superstitions were woven around the moon, as it gave light in the terrifying darkness of the night'.¹⁴ Anne Baring and Jules Cashford write that the moon was 'undoubtedly the central image of the sacred to ... early people because, in its dual rhythm of constancy and change, it provided not only a point of orientation from which differences could be measured, patterns conceived and connections made, but also, in its perpetual return to its own beginnings, it unified what had apparently broken asunder'.¹⁵ That the moon is represented in the water is also significant since 'the ebb and flow of tides ... are also within the moon's power'.¹⁶ It

¹²C. G. Jung, *The Collected Works*, edited by Sir Herbert Read, Michael Fordham and Gerhard Adler, Volume 5, *Symbols of Transformation*, translated by R. F. C. Hull (London, 1956)p. 369.

¹³Jung, *Symbols*, pp. 317-318.

¹⁴Jean Harrowven, *Origins of Rhymes, Songs and Sayings* (London, 1977), p. 6.

¹⁵Anne Baring and Jules Casford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (London, 1991), p. 21.

¹⁶Harrowven, *Origins*, p. 11.

seems somehow fitting that the first sight to greet the traveller, returning from faraway lands, is the moon, both shining and submerged, a question mark as to the reception he will receive in his native village. The moon can also signify perception or sight. In ancient Chinese mythology, when Pangu, creator of the Universe, died, 'his breath became the wind, his voice became thunder; his left eye became the sun and the right the moon'.¹⁷

What emerges in *Frères de sang* is a partial and in some senses crippled perception of the village and its people. The narrator returns to his village, but he has changed, while the village, or rather those who run the village, have not. The following extracts from the writer Su Shih (1037-1101) and from the dramatist T'ang Hsien-tsu (1550-1617) illustrate the two major points regarding the moon and the water. The first, from Su Shih, indicates the permanent nature of both moon and water:

'Have you really understood the water and the moon?' I said. 'The one streams past so swiftly yet is never gone; the other for ever waxes and wanes yet finally has never grown nor diminished. For if you look at the aspect which changes, heaven and earth cannot last one blink; but if you look at the aspect which is changeless, the worlds within and outside you are both inexhaustible, and what reasons have you to envy anything?'.¹⁸

The second, from T'ang Hsien-tsu's *Peony Pavilion*, illustrates the difficulty of portraying such splintered perceptions. The following is related by a woman, but applies equally to the narrator's situation in *Frères de sang*:

¹⁷Tao Tao Lu, 'Chinese Myths and Legends', in *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, edited by Carolyne Larrington (London, 1992), pp. 227-247 (p. 227).

¹⁸Su Shih, *The Red Cliff, I*, in *Anthology of Chinese Literature*, edited by Cyril Birch, Volume 1: From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century (New York, 1965), p. 380.

Harder to portray the individual self
when the image reflects the reality
like flowers seen behind closed lids
or the moon on water.¹⁹

The moon and the water, whether indicative of the hierarchy of power within the country or within a Vietnamese village and family, embody two concepts: first, a dominant image and its distorted reflection on a shifting, uneven surface and second, the difficulty of seeing and adequately representing this reflected image. The narrator of *Frères de sang* is in a position to observe both images. He is a member of the colonized, but has lived and studied in the metropolis. He is a product of his family, his village and society and at the same time has detached himself from them by going overseas and exposing himself to a different society with different values. Both had an undeniable influence on him. Thuong Vuong-Riddick observes:

Ce corps modifié par les contacts avec la culture occidentale, comment est-il perçu dans son milieu natal? Quels sont les signes du changement qui trahissent le processus d'acculturation?
Dès l'approche du village, ce corps présente avec son odeur particulière, non reconnue par le chien du village et uniquement perceptible par l'ami aveugle.²⁰

The narrator reflects the values of both East and West. Like the shifting and reflected moon, his is a difficult and uneasy personality.

The second image of duality emerges as the narrator meets his blood brother after ten years of separation:

¹⁹Tang Hsien-tsu, *Peony Pavilion*, in *Anthology of Chinese Literature*, edited by Cyril Birch, Volume 2: From the 14th Century to the Present day (New York, 1972), p. 109.

²⁰Thuong Vuong-Riddick, 'Corps et acculturation selon Pham Van Ky', *Présence francophone*, 18 (printemps 1979), pp. 165-176 (p. 166).

- Il existe deux sortes de puits: eau potable et eau amère...

Que de franchise brutale sous tant de précautions métaphoriques. Serais-je un puits amer? (p. 18)

These two wells illustrate the possibilities and dilemmas confronting this man. They encapsulate, in a nutshell, the many strands that lie in front of him. 'Eau potable' indicates something palatable, the narrator's acceptance of his status in the family, the village, and in his country as a member of the colonized. 'Eau amère' suggests bitterness, a rebellion against his situation, a chafing against his responsibilities and the restrictions which these impose on him. Water, however, is also a sign of regeneration. It provides life. 'The maternal significance of water is one of the clearest interpretation of symbols in the whole field of mythology, so that even the ancient Greeks could say that "the sea is the symbol of generation." From water comes life'.²¹ In this context, the water in the well has an ambiguous significance. The narrator is returning to his homeland, his village, his 'source', but rather than providing him with sustenance, the native village embodies elements which are potentially destructive. Upon first arriving, he does not know which it will be. There is an element of exclusivity. There are two wells, with either *eau potable* or *eau amère*. It is not possible to mix the two. It is either the one or the other. The narrator either resigns himself to the situation or struggles against it. Those are the two choices open to him. The dilemmas lying in front of him are overwhelming: 'Dix ans d'éducation européenne m'avaient appris à délimiter, à cerner, mais ne m'avaient pas désappris à donner aux choses les

²¹Jung, *Symbols*, p. 319.

dimensions relatives de mes soucis' (p. 13). The well can provide life in the form of *eau potable* or can poison in the form of *eau amère*.

Both Lê Tâm and the narrator need to make a concerted effort to understand each other across a gap of years, experience and cultural separation. It is an immense task for the two blood brothers to rediscover each other: 'Des frères de sang! Une parabole avec ce qu'elle comportait de vérité et d'erreur' (p. 19). The image of the well in this context is quite apt, for, just as it takes effort to bend over and draw water out of the well, so an effort of will is needed to see into another's personality and motivations, to look beyond the surface (beyond the reflection in the water) of an individual or for that matter a country or a culture. The narrator has to unlearn what he has learnt during ten years overseas: 'Je me contentais de réétudier ce que j'avais désappris, de préparer mon vrai retour parmi les miens' (p. 20). All these elements concern the narrator as he returns to a family, society and culture which he had left far behind when he undertook to study overseas. As he reflects: 'Que de franchise brutale sous tant de précautions métaphoriques' (p. 18).

The water in the well reflects a distorted image of the moon and a distorted ^{image} of the self. The narrator does not know what he will discover by returning to the village: 'Ne retournerait vraiment chez soi que celui qui s'y retrouve, ce qui eût confirmé mes pressentiments' (p. 20). Freud provides a sexual symbolism for the image of water - 'phantasies of intra-uterine life'²²- and for that of

²²Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of dreams*, translated and edited by James Strachey (London, 1954), p. 399.

the moon in the water: 'We can discover the locality from which a child is born by calling to mind the slang use of the word 'lune' in French (viz. 'bottom'). The pale moon was thus the white bottom which children are quick to guess that they came out of.'²³ To use this in a metaphorical way, the narrator is attempting to rediscover his roots, the culture and society which had given 'birth' to him, and to gauge the extent of their influence on him. In noting the dual nature of these images, the narrator acknowledges that this return to the fold will have either positive or negative consequences.

The narrator is already torn over the decision to return to his native village.

Contrarié à cause de cette rupture brusque avec un pays qui m'avait adopté et que j'avais adopté. Révolté contre ce serment qui engageait, non pas moi, acquis à un autre continent, mais ce que j'avais été. (p. 57)

He answered an appeal by his blood brother Lê Tâm. He rebels against a promise to which he felt bound not by his present but by his previous self. He had created this bond with Lê Tâm, the means of chaining him to his native society.

Pourtant, je ne serais pas venu au chevet du lit d'agonie de Père, ni accouru à l'appel de Mère. En dehors de ce serment ancien qui me liait à Lê Tâm, rien ne m'aurait déterminé à quitter la France. Pas même une femme qui comblerait ma vie... (p. 19)

Thuong Vuong-Riddick makes the point that:

Il se différencie, par sa conduite, de la norme acceptée et introduit l'élément de comparaison qui lui fera prendre conscience de l'étrangeté de la conduite des autres.²⁴

²³Freud, *Dreams*, p. 400.

²⁴Thuong Vuong-Riddick, 'Corps', p. 166.

The narrator's blood brother, Lê Tâm, appears as an antithesis. The two blood brothers are like two sides of one coin. Both are Vietnamese and from the same village but one is Westernized while the other is imbued with the philosophies of the Far East. One was educated in Europe while the other felt the disappearance of the mandarin system of education. The first is a symbol of a changing Vietnam, the product of a hybrid education and with it facing an uncertain future, since whether this hybrid will lead to failure or to success is yet to be seen. The other is a symbol of traditional Vietnam. Lê Tâm is at peace with the values and traditions of his country, but not necessarily of his milieu or the society in which he lives since he is referring to values which pre-date the Europeanization of Vietnam. He is therefore an anomaly since the society around him cannot but be affected by changes engendered by the West. Even the narrator's father, the head of the village, traditionalist, autocratic and conservative as he is, has had a veneer of western education, while Lê Tâm appears in some way to stand outside of this:

Tout le mystère, les paradoxes, la subtilité du Taoïsme transparaissent dans le personnage de l'étrange Lê Tâm qui incarne ici l'une des plus grandes forces spirituelles de l'Orient, l'une des plus opposées à tous les systèmes en place, puisqu'elle se refuse à toute définition.

Mais si le Taoïsme peut constituer une source d'inspiration absolument féconde à point de vue poétique, mystique, philosophique, au niveau du quotidien et du social, dans l'urgence des choix et des affrontements, il n'offre (tel que présenté ici), que la négation du monde, le repli sur soi, la recherche de l'anéantissement, bref une fuite à l'intérieur.²⁵

²⁵Thuong Vuong-Riddick, 'Le drame de l'occidentalisation dans quelques romans de Pham Van Ky', *Présence francophone*, 16 (printemps 1970), 141-152 (p. 145).

Between East and West

Lê Tâm is himself a dual image, described as a 'lettré-orfèvre'(p. 21). He is skilful with his mind and with his hands. But the two images fit into the mould of traditional society. With both, he can lead the retiring life he has chosen to lead. The way in which he works reflects the slow workings of the East:

L'emboutissage qui s'effectuait à froid, contrairement à la mode occidentale. Car à chaud, l'or pur, très malléable, risquerait de se craqueler pendant l'écroutissage, à cause du resserrement des grains. (p. 41)

The slower way to mould the gold is in the end less likely to cause damage. Changes occur slowly in the East but they may need to be slow to have a firmer base in the end. By contrast, the fast-moving changes which the narrator experienced can lead to the fragmentation of the individual, as the resulting stresses prove too great a burden. Lê Tâm is not pulled apart in two ways like the narrator, but in standing outside his contemporaries, he is similar to the narrator.

The contradictory split between East and West is evident in the gap of perception which exists between the narrator and his father. It is illustrated in the following statement from the father to his son: 'Confucius ne disait jamais: "Je pense", mais "Yao pense"'.(p. 49) Yet the son points out the hybrid nature of his father's education:

Toujours cette logique qui me désaxait! Aggravée encore chez Père par cet état hybride qu'il tenait de l'école confucéenne et d'un vernis de culture française acquis au cours de ses contacts avec les occupants, à la province. Et par où prendre cet homme qui tantôt s'exprimait comme moi, tantôt me prêchait l'humilité devant Yao? (p. 49)

The father uses the 'je pense' and 'Yao pense' for his own convenience, either to assert himself or to indicate humility to his son. He is not consistent in his usage of the terms. His incomplete Confucian education is confused by a veneer of French education. But there is a world of difference between 'I think' and 'Yao thinks', between what is acceptable behaviour to the son and what is so to the father. The father made a drama out of the return of his son: 'L'Occident a rendu mon fils. Mille grâces à l'Occident!' (p. 24). But for the father, as for the son, the reunion proves illusory.

It is through his brother Hô that the narrator is presented with a particularly vivid image of escape:

Je veux une porte à l'Est, une porte à l'Ouest, une porte pour l'aube, une porte pour le midi, une porte dans la violence, une porte dans la démence, une porte dans ce qui n'arrive jamais...Je veux... (p. 84)

The images are graphic. They are not dual, but multiple. The doors can symbolize many things. The doors lead in divergent directions, East and West. Doors can indicate access to different ways of thinking. Hô speaks of many possible destinations and these in turn suggest a multiplicity of meanings behind the image of 'doors'. A door can mean access to another being, access to a woman or a country, virgin territory colonized by the French. Freud wrote that 'penetrating into narrow spaces and opening closed doors are among the commonest sexual symbols'.²⁶ Doors are also a means of making a space completely enclosed, a barrier with which to lock oneself in and locking others out, much as the village itself shuts its inhabitants in and strangers out. In this context, the door is an actual, physical barrier to freedom for Hô.

²⁶Freud, *Dreams*, p. 397.

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He is incarcerated in a prison cell. His revolt against a physical barrier is echoed by a revolt against the constrictions of the village and the old traditions around him:

- On étouffe dans ce cachot. Pas une seule fenêtre. Et toutes ces vieilleries! ...
- Toute cette littérature morte dans une langue morte! Tout ce fatras de 'confuciuseries'!
Le jeune homme qui avait hier pris le parti de Lê Tâm, ce dépositaire le plus ardent de 'confuciuseries', lançait à présent l'anathème contre ses pairs! Il fallait à tout prix que ce révolté trouvât des obstacles pour y essayer sa force gratuite. (p. 84)

Hô's rebellion, his physical and mental attempt to escape from prison and the imprisoning effect of customs and traditions is something which the narrator sees but cannot act on for himself. The narrator helps his brother to escape. He unlocks the door and Hô escapes in more ways than one. It remains otherwise for the narrator however. Having opened one door, he finds himself unable to step through it. Doors, with the number of openings suggested by Hô, indicate the number of options available to the narrator. But although he recognizes the possibilities awaiting him, which his brother Hô articulates, he is unable to take the necessary steps to avail himself of these possibilities. He is a man in a room of many doors, but has neither the will nor the energy to use any of them. His situation reflects the setting described by Han-shan (late eighth and early ninth centuries) in his *Cold Mountain poems*:

Cold mountain is a house
Without beams or walls
The six doors left and right are open
The hall is blue sky
The rooms are all vacant and vague
The east wall beats on the west wall

At the centre nothing.²⁷

Rather than pointing to freedom, the doors serve to reinforce the narrator's inertia.

A vivid image of opposites, reflecting the narrator's alienation within the village community, is provided by the scene of a village burial.

Tout de noir vêtu, pour être dans la note, je m'étais aperçu que le blanc était la couleur de deuil: ce blanc qui me rappelait la clarté des stades olympiques, la candeur des robes des mariées. (p. 90)

White is the traditional colour of mourning in Vietnam, not black as in the West. 'Le deuil blanc' does exist in the West, but its manifestations are rare. François Mauriac makes a brief reference to this in his novel *Le Nœud de vipères*.²⁸ In his response to the colours of mourning, the narrator reveals the extent of his *dépaysement*. To him, black is the colour of mourning, while white is the colour of life, the white dress of a bride, the white gleam of a stadium, indicative of movement, vitality and potential, as opposed to black, the colour of darkness, death, stillness and finality. White is also a symbol of purity, cleanliness and light; black of the dark, the unfathomable. White is the light of the West, of the colonizers, black of the East, opaque and mysterious. The narrator is dressed in black for the funeral, the others in white. As Frantz Fanon wrote:

Le noir, l'obscur, l'ombre, les ténèbres, la nuit, les labyrinthes de la terre, les profondeurs abyssales,

²⁷Han-shan, *Cold Mountain poems*, in *Anthology of Chinese Literature*, edited by Cyril Birch, Volume 1, p. 200.

²⁸Tout était blanc sur toi, jusqu'à tes bottines aux hautes tiges: tu étais vouée au blanc, me disais-tu, depuis la mort de tes deux frères. J'ignorais ce que signifiait "être vouée au blanc". J'ai su, depuis, combien, dans ta famille, on avait de goût pour ces dévotions un peu bizarres'. François Mauriac, *Œuvres romanesques et théâtrales complètes*, t II (Paris, 1979), p. 401.

noircir la réputation de quelqu'un; et de l'autre côté: le regard clair de l'innocence, la blanche colombe de la paix, la lumière féerique, paradisiaque.²⁹

The picture is in stark contrasts. The narrator provides the note of incongruity or non-conformity, unintentionally since, ironically, he had wanted to blend in, to be part of the community on this occasion 'pour être dans la note' and then finds out that in fact, he is not.

Lê Tâm, for his part, also makes a significant sacrifice for the sake of his blood brother. He had been practising the notion of detachment for ten years but interrupts this with the arrival of the narrator.

Je t'ai parlé comme à un frère de sang. ... Je l'ai deviné: tu t'es défait du bracelet de coton qui nous liait. Et tu as volé à mon secours. Et moi, au tien, chacun selon ses moyens, chacun selon sa vérité. Pourquoi? (p. 94)

Each comes to the rescue of his blood brother. Each has his own truth, his own abilities, his own concept of the significance of blood brotherhood and the responsibility this entails. The contrasting notions are of the bond and of freedom. The bracelet symbolizes a constraint, a restriction. For each it is a sacrifice, a giving up of their time and of the normal patterns of their life to go towards the blood brother.

The narrator realizes that the old reflexes and traditions of his upbringing are strongly present beneath under a Western veneer. In discussing literature, symbol and vehicle of different civilisations, he asks whether he is torn between the two.

Littérature, ce désaxement à la mode. Littérature, ce conflit 'aigu' entre deux hémisphères. ... Ne m'étais-je

²⁹Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris, 1952), p. 173.

pas fait autant à l'Orient qu'à l'Occident? Etais-je écartelé, et une moitié de moi s'était-elle détachée de l'autre? Littérature de coupeurs d'âmes et de cheveux. (p. 99)

He concludes:

Si banal que cela pût paraître, et si difficile qu'en fût le contrôle, je conservais, dans mon sang, les coutumes, les maladies, la santé de mon pays. J'étais né avec lui, et quoi que je fisse, j'en subirais la loi. (p. 99)

There is a sense of fatalism in this. He is still subject to old laws, old ways of looking at things (or so he thinks; is he really? Is he not torn between two? Are his responses not Western?). He states that there is no conflict, that he has taken equally from both East and West:

Je me portais très bien, moi qui en étais la résultante ... Que l'Annam, dans sa marche vers la vérité, use d'un procédé qui serait l'inverse de celui de 'l'Ouest', un même besoin d'universalité les inspire. (p. 99)

He claims that deep down he has kept the values of the East.

There are contradictions. He cannot say that he took equally from both if he feels himself bound by one in the end. He writes:

Il s'agirait plutôt de savoir si, oui ou non, j'aimais Lê Tâm, c'est-à-dire ce que j'avais été. Si, oui ou non, j'étais capable d'aimer. (p. 99)

The capacity, the ability to love and accept his roots are encapsulated in his feelings for his blood brother, his opposite. His country, culture, traditions and attachments are embodied in the person of Lê Tâm. The bond which the term 'blood brother' symbolizes for him reverts to the culture itself and the significance it places on the meaning 'blood brotherhood'. The bracelet of cotton or gold reinforces this circular image. The bracelet is a circle, with neither end nor beginning just as their responsibilities towards each other have neither end nor

beginning, being somehow inevitable and inescapable. There exists only a pattern which repeats itself, going round and round the same circle. Each man is dependent on the other.

The circle also bears an element of destructiveness. Lê Tâm refers to a gold circle as a dragon trying to swallow its tail. Will each consume the other? The question of Lê Tâm obsesses the narrator: 'Aimer Lê Tâm ou le repousser, voilà sur quoi devrait se jouer la partie. Du camp rouge ou du camp noir, lequel l'emporterait?' (p. 101). It is a clear dichotomy, to love or to reject Lê Tâm as a metaphor for loving or rejecting an entire culture. In reasoning this way, the narrator gives his past the power to maim the present and potentially, the future. His failure to resolve this issue is borne out by his failure to act in any way later on in the novel. Sunk in apathy or detachment, trapped in his past, in the limitations and constraints of his culture and milieu and in the defeat of his self, he observes events pass him by. His passivity, in the end, signifies the failure of his 'je pense' as opposed to his father's 'Yao pense'.

The live game of chess which takes place in the village provides a symbol of a society abiding by the rules of the game. All players in the chess game are individuals. The narrator notes:

Qu'est-on sinon une somme de correspondances numériques, physiques ou morales? Qu'est-on, en dernier ressort, sinon la valeur d'un support? (p. 102)

What do individuals consist of but the sum of their past and the structures around them? What about the sense of self? What individuals make of themselves is surely more important than what the past made of them. 'Que le plus bas ou le plus noble de nous se charge de signification mystérieuse, et il touche d'emblée

à sa réalité la plus secrète, à sa vérité pour tout dire' (p. 102). The individual's own reality is what matters in the end. Nguyen Hong Nhiem analyses *Frères de sang* in terms of the chessboard and live chess pieces. The village is a chessboard. She examines the position of the various chess pieces in relation to the board and the position of the *frères de sang* within the chessboard. The chessboard signifies the wider country as well as the village itself.

L'échiquier du *co nguoi* (échecs vivants), dans *Frères de sang*, assume donc la totalité des conflits du village et par extension, du Vietnam tout entier, deux ans après la Révolution d'Août 1945.³⁰

The events in the village reflect the political realities of the country around it. It is one game in which the narrator voluntarily plays a part, but the game, unlike the village itself, is artificial. It is not a prelude to the narrator participating fully in village life.

The narrator acknowledges his debt to both his blood brother Lê Tâm and to his younger brother Hô. He addresses himself to Hô:

Lê Tâm est une partie de ma vérité, sinon la totalité. Et je l'ai tué en moi 'avec un plateau de marbre!' ... Sache cependant que c'est toi le plateau de marbre. Toi qui es également une partie de ma vérité, je n'ose dire la totalité. Mais une partie combien actuelle, combien vivace. (p. 165)

Yet Hô is also a sinking prop. When Hô leaves, the narrator loses his brother for ever. He is slowly ridding himself of Lê Tâm and of his brother as the village empties itself. 'Il me resterait moi et ce ne serait pas assez' (p. 167). The emptiness of the 'moi' reflects the emptiness of the narrator. It was a mistake to invest himself in another, whether his blood brother or his real brother. He could

³⁰Nguyen Hong Nhiem, 'L'Echiquier', p. 68.

rely on neither to give himself a sense of self or of validity. He should have learnt to rely on his own sense of self. Otherwise, as he realizes, his hands are tied, he is ineffective. He admits his failure to his brother: 'Que mon échec te serve. Je n'ai pas su aller jusqu'au bout de moi-même. C'est pour cela que je me suis égaré en route' (pp. 167-8). Hô escapes from prison. In the end, Lê Tâm also escapes, by dying in a fire. The fire and the wind conspire to destroy all that is left of Lê Tâm, his house and his body. The fire is also symbolic of the consummation of all the currents running through the village:

Une flamme pour le bien, une pour le mal, une pour le droit, une pour le tort, une pour l'avantage, une pour l'inconvénient. La septième pour la raison! La raison grésilla, odeur de graisse rancie. Le bien fuma, odeur d'os calcinés. Le mal siffla, odeur de visères cuits. Le droit ricana, odeur de peau fumée. Le tort crépita, odeur de cheveux carbonisés... (p. 199-200)

Once again, there are notions of duality: 'le bien', 'le mal', 'le droit', 'le tort', but whether symbols of good or bad, the ultimate image is one of death and destruction. The grisly destruction of Lê Tâm is the final indication of the slow disintegration of the village: 'Le temps s'assombrit' (p. 200).

For Nguyen Hong Nhiem, the *Je* of the narrator empowers him to help his brother Hô escape while the *Moi* watches, paralysed, the death of his blood brother Lê Tâm.³¹ She concludes:

Et, puisque le narrateur se confond parfois avec l'auteur, le roman étant en partie autobiographique, la position de Pham Van Ky, face aux déchirements du Vietnam, ressort nettement des lignes qui précèdent. Il n'est pas entré dans le jeu dont l'enjeu est l'auto-anéantissement ou l'aliénation. ...
Or, à l'en croire, l'homme sauvé de cette époque, c'est l'homme qui se situe. Il se situe, en un sens, dans la

³¹Nguyen Hong Nhiem, 'L'Echiquier', p. 85.

conscience de ce qu'il est entre ces deux pôles, c'est-à-dire, ce qu'il est devenu après son absence de dix ans, après l'abandon de sa culture pour une autre, avec la certitude, illusoire ou non, de leur fusion harmonieuse en fin de parcours.³²

Nguyen Hong Nhiem sees the narrator abandoning the village and returning to France at the end of *Frères de sang*.³³ He may do so. The novel ends with:

Leur rumeur me submerge, me charrie, m'entraîne à vau-l'eau. Je suis une pauvre petite chose, sans réalité, sans patrie, sans vérité: une petite chance de vivre, gangue noire recouvrant le grain d'or fin que j'étais!
Et Lê Tâm me dit... Et Hô me dit...- (p. 205)

Even if the narrator leaves the country and returns to France, part of him has been destroyed by the traumatic events which took place in the village. I see him as an individual who loses, in some measure, his sanity through the disparate pressures from all sides. His fate remains uncertain. The novel ends with the voices of the dead and the gone echoing endlessly in his ears. In terms of the writer, the choice is to communicate this anguish in the language of the colonizer. Thuong Vuong-Riddick notes that in choosing to follow neither Hô nor Lê Tâm, the narrator chose a third path:

Ces deux frères, incarnations du Taoïsme et du Marxisme, représentent les différentes étapes de l'évolution personnelle du narrateur, des visages du passé et du présent qu'il refuse ou ne peut assumer. Certes, il semble osciller entre ces deux voies, mais en fait il a aussi déjà choisi en s'engageant dans une troisième voie. Incarnation de ce choix, la littérature devient le lieu où la parole devient possible, où le drame peut se nommer, mais en raison du langage même et de son statut équivoque, en raison de sa provenance cette parole ne peut que s'accuser et vivre de sa contradiction.³⁴

³²Nguyen Hong Nhiem, 'L'Echiquier', p. 86-87.

³³Nguyen Hong Nhiem, 'L'Echiquier', p. 83.

³⁴Thuong Vuong-Riddick, 'Le drame', p. 147.

The narrator's presentiment had borne fruit: 'mon drame le déborderait' (p. 16). The destruction went beyond the physical depletion of the village itself to encompass the erosion of traditional values and the questioning of traditional authority and mores. The patriarch's vicious assertion of power is but a last-ditch attempt to hold together a decaying fabric and one which, it appears, will not survive him.

The narrator is left alone, with the voices of both brothers, his brother Hô and his blood brother Lê Tâm, one gone and one dead, chiming in his ears, pulling him one way and the other. The narrator is now adrift, with neither country, self, nor truth. His brother, symbol of rebellion, of high ideals, of hope, is gone. Lê Tâm, the resigned, acquiescent embodiment of the ancient traditions of his culture, is dead. Left to himself, the narrator is no longer confined to one race, one god or one continent, yet instead of experiencing freedom, he hears the voices of his brothers reverberate endlessly in his head. His inability to reconcile his past and his present result in total inertia, an inability to act in any way. He is like a puppet swung too far one way and then the other, the strings of which finally break, leaving it in a crumpled, helpless mass with no volition of its own. His judgement of himself is self-explanatory:

Je n'avais commis aucune mauvaise action. Je n'en avais pas accompli de bonnes. J'étais de trop! (p. 202)

Frères de sang records the alienation of a man within his family and his village, and most of all within his self. Having returned unwillingly, the narrator finds himself a stranger in a setting which should have been familiar. That it is not and that he

cannot either reconcile the changes in his personality to this new situation nor activate any changes within the community reflects his isolation, not only with regard to others, but with regard to his own desires. He does not take up the traditional responsibilities which his father expects him to shoulder. But neither does he rebel against the abuses of power he sees perpetrated in the village. He loses his brother Hô through imprisonment and escape, and his blood brother Lê Tâm through punishment and death. There are a number of contradictory images in the novel. The narrator is confronted by images of duality: the moon, the wells, and doors. His blood brother, the blind Lê Tâm, is a scholar and a goldsmith. The narrator is obsessed by two brothers: a real brother and a blood brother. Although he is a native son of the village, he is also a stranger. He is Vietnamese, but French-educated. The fire-death of Lê Tâm is reflected in the fire-death of the village. Unable to reconcile the separate halves of his self - the thinking and the active, the conservative and the rebel, the East and the West - the narrator finds himself instead in the grip of a crippling inertia. Paralysed and, in large measure, powerless, he watches the unfolding tragedies around him. He remains nameless, and an outsider from the first to the last.

The dramatic impact of the stranger's arrival on a village is the focus of Cung Giu Nguyen's *Le Fils de la baleine*, published nine years after *Frères de sang*. The outsider in this novel is truly an outsider. *Frères de sang* deals with a man, originally from the village, who has become a stranger as a result of years of study overseas. But the original link or rather links with the village are there. No such link exists with the man in question in *Le Fils de la*

baleine. He is not only a stranger to the village, but a victim of a shipwreck who has forgotten his own identity. His arrival is described in the following passage:

Deux pêcheurs avaient traîné sur le sable un corps entouré d'algues et de varech. Le visage, meurtri, était méconnaissable. On lava les taches de sang et de boue qui le couvraient. Ce n'était pas quelqu'un du village.³⁵

The stress on his being 'not of the village' is symptomatic. The villagers are afraid of possible repercussions. They realize that the man is still alive. While the women try to revive him and are concerned for his well-being, the village Mayor has one overriding concern:

'Que cet inconnu ne meure pas dans le village. Cela ferait trop de bruit. On nous accuserait de l'avoir tué. Transportez-le vite, pendant qu'il respire encore' (p. 22).

The village and its reputation remain uppermost in the Mayor's mind, in contrast to the attitude of the women and the demands of common humanity. The village itself is run by notables (all men). They preside over village activities and are responsible for implementing village policies. They are distressed when the unknown man is returned to them.

- Mais ce n'est pas notre homme, fit le maire. Ce n'est pas un citoyen du village. Nous n'avons rien de commun avec lui.

- Pourtant, c'est bien vous qui l'avait envoyé à l'hôpital. En tous cas, j'ai reçu des ordres. Je ne fais que les exécuter. Voici les papiers. Donnez-moi quitus.

- Ah, c'est le noyé. Mais nous ne pouvons signer. On doit le renvoyer à son village natal. (p. 27)

³⁵Cung Giu Nguyen, *Le Fils de la baleine* (revised edition, Quebec, 1978), p. 22. Subsequent references will be given in the main text.

Mô is a man cut adrift from himself and his past. He is obviously intelligent and the loss of his previous existence is a source of pain and anxiety:

Puis, plus rien. Chaque fois que Mô se mettait à réfléchir, à se demander quelle vie il avait vécue, il se heurtait à un mur impénétrable. ... Et puis, plus rien. De l'encre de Chine s'était répandue sur sa mémoire. ... Mô supposait que la fêlure maintenant réparée était bien l'origine de son malheur, de la coupure de sa vie en deux univers, l'un plongé dans les ténèbres, l'autre restant encore à découvrir. (p. 35)

He wishes to know what will happen to him. He cannot see himself with a present and a future when he does not have a past. Since none of the villagers appear to show much sympathy or understanding of his plight - they feel that his loss of memory is a convenient ploy to mask an unsavoury past - Mô tries to seek understanding and compassion from those outside the village. As it is, only four people evince good will towards him, and all four are, like himself, outsiders to the village. The first is an old man, a self-imposed exile. The second is a young girl, an adopted orphan. The third is a thief, a total outsider. The last is an old coral merchant.

Mô is a stranger not only to the villagers but to himself. He has lost his memory, so is unable to identify himself or his own village. He is a countryman, but not a native from the village, and is considered an outsider as a result. The village is ostensibly an aspect of 'home', after all, the same language is spoken, the same race and nationality of people inhabit it. But Mô finds himself completely adrift within this setting. He is doubly an alien here, an alien in the village, and also an alien to himself, since he does not know his own name and cannot remember what experiences formed him as an individual. He has no identity, whether inner or

outer. He does not recognize himself, nor do the villagers recognize him. Only the few who are themselves outside the pale of village life recognize him and acknowledge him. Yeager writes:

Cung Giu Nguyen clearly presents the traditional Vietnamese village collective as Confucian microcosm in *Le Fils de la baleine*. Village structure depends on the principle of filial piety, and its power resides in the strictness and integrity of the hierarchy reflected both in the family units within and in all the like villages without. Mo's single voice, like the novelistic "voice" outside Vietnamese tradition, contrasts sharply with that of the Vietnamese community, an opposition that plainly shows that in traditional Vietnamese society collective concerns outweigh those of the individual, that the public surpasses the private.³⁶

Le Fils de la baleine encompasses a further level of meaning. Beyond the social dimensions of the novel lie the private dimensions of an individual's anguish in an environment which should have been familiar but is not, and is actually hostile. Memory of his past identity returns slowly to M^o. The glimpses are fleeting, triggered off by momentary contacts, sights and sounds. 'Je venais de découvrir un lambeau de moi-même et voulais vous l'offrir en échange de votre carré d'étoffe. L'écran qui était lumineux s'est assombri de nouveau' (p. 49). The dearth of any positive response only serves to reinforce his already existing doubts on the validity of his 'memory'. He is handicapped by the general perception that he is mad, so that he is rendered unsure as to whether his recollections are true recollections or the results of an active imagination: '- Je ne suis pas fou. J'ai eu des lacunes de mémoire. Comprenez-vous? C'est un accident qui peut arriver à tout le monde. A vous aussi' (p. 55).

³⁶Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 70.

The significance of the title *Le Fils de la baleine* is explained when M^ô inadvertently discovers the body of a dead whale on the beach. The villagers rush to view the remains and the *maître des cultes* tells him: 'M^ô, tu seras le fils de la baleine'(p. 64). An elaborate rite is then undertaken in which M^ô is officially decreed the *fils de la baleine*. He is an unwilling recipient of this ritualistic honour. The significance of the whale here is manifold. The whale 'as protector of Vietnamese fishermen, is celebrated and enshrined in every fishing village as a guarantee of safety. The whale cult is one of the oldest and most respected of traditions'.³⁷ This is the way in which the villagers interpret the fortuitous appearance of the dead whale on their beach. The importance of this shrine to the whale is an integral part of village tradition.

Whilst each family or clan in the village had its own ancestral altars, a more important temple was the *dinh* which contained a shrine to the protective deity of the village.³⁸

The whale, however, just like its honorary 'son', would portend the breaking rather than the protection of traditions and customs, and in a wider sense, the destruction of the village itself. The whale becomes a symbol of invasion from the outside, the outsider in this case represented by M^ô, bereft of memory and identity. In the biblical story of Jonah, after 'three days and three nights', the great 'fish spewed Jonah out on to dry land'. (Jonah 1. 17 and Jonah 2. 10). Although not confined in the body of a whale, M^ô's voyage and shipwreck also denote a temporary absence from the world of men. Jung recounts the following legend:

³⁷Jack A. Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, pp. 68-69.

³⁸Smith, *Vietnam*, p. 57.

A hero is devoured by a water-monster in the West (*devouring*). The animal travels with him to the East (*sea journey*). Meanwhile, the hero lights a fire in the belly of the sea-monster (*fire-lighting*), and feeling hungry, cuts himself a piece of the heart (*cutting off of heart*). Soon afterwards, he notices that the fish has glided on to dry land (*landing*); he immediately begins to cut open the animal from within (*opening*); then he slips out (*slipping out*). It was so hot in the fish's belly that all his hair had fallen out (*heat and hair*). The hero may at the same time free all those who were previously devoured by the monster.³⁹

There are a number of similarities with the story of Mō. Mō and the whale are both beached within the domain of the villages (although separately). The water-monster in the legend is from the West. Mō also comes from the West. He is on his way home from studies overseas, when a mishap at sea causes him to be washed up unconscious on the beach of the village. Both he and the whale 'glided on to dry land'. Instead of being deprived of hair, Mō is deprived of his memory. Mō had been 'devoured' by the West during the extent of his years of study overseas. A combination of circumstances would land him on this shore, with a privileged and foreign education behind him, but handicapped with a temporary loss of memory. His effect on the village however would be dramatic and if the villagers believed that by baptizing him 'the son of the whale', they would somehow nullify the potential threat that he represented as an outsider, they would discover that they had been wrong. The beached whale, in this instance, does not bring luck or fortune to the village. The familiar emblem becomes instead a portent of disruption and later destruction. The sea, symbol of life and of regeneration, the source of the fishermen's livelihood, brings in strangers this time. The changes signify

³⁹Jung, *Symbols*, p. 210.

renewal, in the sense of the questioning of ossified values and customs, but also bear the reverse effect of undermining and eventually destroying the village which harboured these values. So both these potentially positive images, the whale and the sea which brought the village the body of the whale, are to herald negative events for the villagers and for the village itself. The stranger, the 'threat', however handicapped on the surface because of his lack of memory, comes to threaten not only the mores and values of the village but also the village itself. The honour of being 'the son of the whale' does not gain Mō greater acceptance amongst the villagers and he is no closer to finding his own identity.

- Si vos dieux sont puissants, demandez-leur de me rendre la mémoire, de me dire qui je suis, qui j'étais, d'abattre ce rideau d'ignorance qui me sépare de tout mon passé, de tout ce que j'ai acquis comme connaissance. Je voudrais être un homme comme les autres. (p. 71)

His one desire is to be treated like a normal human being: 'Je désire qu'on me traite de façon convenable' (p. 74). But the mixture of uncertainty, seeking and yearning to belong, which made up Mō, was too threatening to the villagers.

Mō continues to seek acceptance from the village. He must belong somewhere. He is willing to work and to learn. Apart from the still unresolved question of his identity, he is a young, fit and able man, and he can see no reason why he should not play a part and carve himself a life and identity in the village. He finds himself constantly up against a succession of bureaucratic and administrative obstacles.

- Je n'existe pas aux yeux du village, et je demande à être quelque chose.

- Il ne faut pas trop demander aux hommes. D'ailleurs, on ne t'a jamais rien demandé, pas même de venir végéter dans notre village qui n'a pas besoin de ta présence.

- Justement, monsieur l'instituteur! Mais il ne m'est plus permis de sortir de ce pays, faute de pièces d'identité. Quand je demande une pièce d'identité, on me répond qu'on me connaît pas, qu'il me faut trois témoins, naturellement introuvables. Vous qui détenez les tablettes du Conseil communal, dites-moi donc ce que je dois faire pour devenir un citoyen comme les autres. (p. 102)

He comes up against a wall of obfuscation. He is indeed cut adrift. His problems are circular. He cannot have recourse to the law or civil rights until he is identified and he cannot identify himself since he has lost his memory and he has no one to vouch for him since he is a stranger to the village anyway. So what is he to do? The instructor is unmoved. Laws exist. His response is revealing.

- Surtout, on ne les modifiera pas pour satisfaire les désirs d'une seule...

L'instituteur hésita dans le choix du mot adéquat. ... Il se demanda s'il fallait employer le mot personne. M^o était-il une personne? Il ne pouvait pas dire: d'un seul homme. ... Cependant, M^o lui souffla le mot: créature, et trouvant cela convenable, puisqu'il s'appliquait aussi aux oiseaux, aux mammifères, aux poissons, il répéta:

- Oui... d'une seule créature. (p. 103)

If the laws had 'always' existed, it stood to pass that they were not going to be changed for the sake of a 'creature' who didn't conform to an accepted mould. The instructor elaborates:

- Pour appartenir au village, il faudrait que tu y fusses né, ou que tu réunisses cinq ans de séjour ininterrompu, ou que tu te maries, légalement bien entendu, avec une fille du pays. Patiente donc. (pp. 103-104)

What these laws approximate to are in effect immigration and citizenship laws for countries. The village here is a microcosm of society and of the country at large. You either have to be born in

the village, or have to fulfil residential requirements or be legally entitled via marriage to a citizen of the village.⁴⁰ In other words, you have to prove, through law-abiding behaviour, that you are a fit citizen and will thereby earn the rights and privileges which native-born villagers are automatically entitled to. That is the price of not belonging, of being an outsider, a foreigner and seeking to be accepted within a community. Being a citizen is in itself not an indication of personal worth. But as a foreigner, you have to merit it. This is something all immigrants and refugees experience. The irony is that, even in these circumstances, they are not necessarily well accepted by the host community. Mō's desperate yearning to form part of the fabric of the village and his willingness do not lead him any closer to acceptance by the villagers.

Yeager makes the point that:

Cung Giu Nguyen's *Le Fils de la baleine*, though not mentioning a specific historical context, criticizes the stasis and injustice of traditional Vietnamese society and forecasts its insolvency with the coming of modern industrial society to the villages of Viet Nam. Though the novel is in a sense timeless, the conflict of social traditionalists and progressives that so characterized Vietnamese politics in the first few decades of the twentieth century is the dynamic operating within it.⁴¹

And further on:

The outsider who unmaskes the real concerns and motivations of the villagers behind their posture of piety and respect is perceived as a threat and imprisoned. His fresh perspective, uncluttered by

⁴⁰Nous avons ... parlé de la farouche indépendance de la commune à l'égard du pouvoir central et des autres communes. Un autre aspect de cette tendance à l'isolationisme est précisément cette hostilité intraitable à l'égard de toute intrusion dans sa vie interne. Les réfugiés (*dan ngu cu*) sont traités comme des parias. Ils doivent habiter à la lisière du village et faire preuve de mérite pendant trois générations au moins, avant d'être admis au village'. Phan Thi Dac, *Situation de la personne au Viet-Nam* (Paris, 1966), p. 30.

⁴¹Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 92.

acquired cultural baggage, enables him to cut through the veneer of civility and 'ultimate truth' of the traditional Vietnamese hierarchy.⁴²

Mô's perspective also reveals the uncertain identity of the outsider. Since he has no single one, he harbours the potential of several different identities. In the same way, these separate identities can each offer separate perceptions. Mô remains a stranger. Official recognition as the 'son of the whale' does not offer him status or citizenship. His identity remains in doubt. The sense of isolation he experiences does not dissipate or ease with the passing time. He is still isolated, a stranger and an alien within the village. The return of his memory, a momentous event, does not change the situation. The proof of the massive indifference of the villagers, or for that matter, society, is that they remain ignorant of his condition. Mô confides in a deaf man. The man is literally deaf but no more deaf than the villagers around him.

Mô is in a curious way like a man moving in stasis. He is changing, discovering, noticing things while the rest of the villagers appear unmoving, unchanging, static and indifferent. Mô is battling against obstacles that no one notices. The only figures who are separate from the symbolic inertia of the villagers are those, once again, who stand apart from the village. What actually happens is that no one, none of the notables believe him. And to compound things, he has forgotten how to write. He attempts to produce a written request, but the result is undecipherable. Mô cannot escape his circumstances. He is stuck in this situation. He has no recourse, no one and no authority to turn to. He knows of

⁴²Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 97.

no one who can vouch for him. It appears physically impossible for him to leave the village.

The realization that he cannot write comes as a shock to him. If he remembers his full name, his family, his years of study, then he is of course a literate person. Yet he cannot write: 'Le sol avait disparu sous ses pieds; il s'était retrouvé au fond de l'abîme' (p. 131). He begins to doubt his own memories. He feels a multitude or possible multitude of personalities within him. How will he uncover the truth? How will he sift imagination from reality?

Souvent le doute le saisissait. Les hommes lui montraient la même hostilité ou la même indifférence. Tous, du plus petit au plus vieux, n'avaient jamais voulu croire à ce qu'il disait. Détenaient-ils la vérité? Tout ce qu'il trouvait dans sa tête n'était-il que vives illusions? Le passé auquel il pensait appartenir ne s'attachait peut-être à aucune vérité. Cent personnages pouvaient habiter en lui. Lequel correspondait à son moi véritable? (p. 131)

It is perhaps better to let things be and let them go. But this is difficult. It is difficult to divorce oneself from the past and Mō is particularly obsessed with the idea of the repossession of this past. It is something he feels is constantly eluding him. He wants to give meaning and structure to his existence and he cannot do so when his own past self remains vague and still unacknowledged by either his fellow men or the authorities. He has no status to speak of. It is not enough that he is a person. He needs to be given a civic identity. But the village authorities and society at large refuse to grant him an identity unless he can give civic proof of it.⁴³ He finds it impossible to heed the old man's advice of: 'Lâchez les

⁴³En fait, l'individu n'existe au Viet Nam que pas sa commune, l'état ne le connaît pas'. Phan Thi Dac, *Situation de la personne*, p. 25.

amarres et laissez la barque aller à la dérive. Vous aurez moins d'ennui' (p. 139).

Events are precipitated when he discovers his boat vandalized and destroyed. It is the final straw to him, proof that whatever he attempts, however hard he tries, the villagers will never accept him as one of their own. Mô has to make a decision on his life and destiny. He cannot continue dallying and procrastinating. The wanton destruction of his boat, the only real means of livelihood in a coastal fishing village, becomes symbolic of the ultimate rejection on the part of the villagers.

Il pouvait être le premier ou le dernier homme à sentir, au milieu d'une terre abandonnée, près des ruines de son bateau, le terrible choix qui s'imposait à lui, de périr ou de survivre. Il n'était pas nécessaire au monde; l'humanité entière qu'il représentait pouvait disparaître à jamais sans que la mer changeât le rythme de ses marées et sans que le soleil s'éteignît pour en porter le deuil. (pp. 174-175)

Marc Laurent wrote of *Le Fils de la baleine*: 'Le personnage principal, l'inconnu qu'on ignore et qui s'ignore, symbolise le drame de l'être que l'instinct grégaire rejette. Le destin de l'homme sur la terre, de l'homme isolé dans un univers indifférent à son sort, ne diffère guère de celui du naufragé échoué dans un milieu hostile et qui cherche vainement à découvrir et à faire valoir son identité'.⁴⁴ The village authorities will only tolerate those who abide by their rules and their laws. Anyone who has the temerity to defy village conventions is ostracized. Respect and good will is only extended to those who bow to the village bureaucracy and accept uncomplainingly the notables' judgement

⁴⁴Marc Laurent, 'Cung Giu Nguyen: Ecrivain vietnamien de langue française', *Présence francophone*, 5 (automne 1972), 53-59 (p. 55).

on what is right and what is wrong. Charity is selective. The village went to enormous lengths and expense to bury the carcass of a dead whale but refuses to give an old man a simple burial.⁴⁵ M^ô is once again imprisoned. Yeager comments on the social and political significance of M^ô's actions:

The full impact of such awareness as Mo exhibits led to the conclusion on the part of a segment of Vietnamese society in the 1920s and 1930s that traditional political structures were bankrupt. This was the first step in the total rejection of the past as a model for future governing systems. Mo's unabashed criticism of Vietnamese Confucianism as it appears in this anonymous village, at once one and all villages, captures this historically documented realization.⁴⁶

The winds begin to blow.

Le vent devint perfide. ... En même temps que ce vent étrange, un autre malaise avait envahi le village. (p. 203)

Much as in *Frères de sang*, the winds of change begin to howl through the village: 'Il faut que cela change!' (p. 205). This sentiment is reiterated. And the realization that: 'Il faut avoir pitié des hommes, nos semblables' (p. 207). As is the case with the winds of change for the village in *Frères de sang*, this wind blows ill for the villagers. The wind is 'the wind of the common people', vividly illustrated in the early Chinese *fu* entitled *The Wind*:

The wind of the common people
Comes whirling from the lanes and alleys, ...
When this wind blows on a man
At once he feels confused and downcast
Pounded by heat, smothered in dampness,
His heart grows sick and heavy,

⁴⁵This is unlike the situation described by Phan Thi Dac: 'La commune rend paradoxalement hommage aux "indépendants" vrais ... qui se détachent de tous les liens et devoirs prônés par tous et qui vivent délibérément en marge de la communauté. Il s'agit de ceux qui ... se sont retirés radicalement du monde "bruyant" et "médiocre" des hommes'. Phan Thi Dac, *Situation de la personne*, p. 35. The old hermit in *Le Fils de la Baletne* was not respected by the villagers.

⁴⁶Yeager, *Vietnamese Novel*, p. 97.

And he falls ill and breaks out in a fever. ...
He stammers and cries out,
Not knowing if he is dead or alive.
This is what is called the lowly wind of the common
people.⁴⁷

Here, the wind blows ill against the injustice and superstitions of the villagers. When a fishing boat is lost at sea, Mō has to escape before the villagers vent their superstitious wrath upon him. Before leaving, he desecrates the temple of the whale and pays his respects to the coral merchant. The old man tells him: 'Il n'y a rien dans ce village: ni justice, ni injustice. Tes actes sont bien vains si tu ne trouves pas en toi-même leur propre justification' (p. 213).

The old man sets fire to a kitchen in order to distract the potential pursuers. The fire began to take hold:

- Le village brûle! (p. 217)

Fire is powerful and symbolic. It is burning up the village, not only the village itself but all that the village represents: the past, traditions and blind prejudice. Fire can be cleansing as well as destructive and seems, as in *Frères de sang*, to sweep all away, the good and the bad, 'justice, injustice'. Mō, having left Europe and returned to his homeland, finds himself heading for an unknown and uncertain destination. The West and the East provided choices which he refused or was unable to take up. Cung Giu Nguyen wrote in an article on the Vietnamese scholar Pierre Do Dinh:

La fuite de l'Oriental dans un exotisme occidental, comme à l'inverse, l'évasion de l'Occidental dans un amour suspect de l'Orient, tout comme la fuite de

⁴⁷Sung Yü, *The Wind*, in *Anthology of Chinese Literature*, edited by Cyril Birch, Volume 1, pp. 136-137.

l'individu en général devant les problèmes de la véritable histoire ne conduisent qu'à des déceptions. Le message de l'Asie, c'est celui de son absence depuis une centaine d'années, et c'est aussi pour l'Asie que se vérifie le mot de Valéry sur la mort des civilisations. Mais il n'y aura de restauration spirituelle de l'Asie que ne soit faite aussi sa restauration physique sur la scène des luttes et des conflits de ce monde.⁴⁸

Le Fils de la baleine has a number of contradictory images. Because of a dead whale, Mô is named 'son of the whale'. Although he is Vietnamese, he is regarded as a foreigner. As a man with no name, he gains a title which does not gain him greater acceptance on the part of the villagers. He gradually regains his memory, but no one believes him. He is Vietnamese but French-educated. He is University-educated, but has forgotten how to write. The sea brought him and he escapes by sea. He leaves the village in flames behind. He leaves with a young girl for an unknown future. From the beginning, his alienation takes the form of isolation from others and from his own identity. When he finally recovers this identity, he still remains an alien to the others. *Le Fils de la baleine* relates the unchanging nature of the 'outsider'. Whatever events befall him and whatever changes he undergoes, Mô, like the narrator of *Frères de sang*, remains the perpetual outsider.

The destructive effect of the outsider's arrival in the village is more marked in *Le Fils de la baleine* than in the earlier *Frères de sang*. The physical destruction of the village at the end is also greater. It is Lê Tâm's house which burns to the ground at the end of *Frères de sang*, while the conflagration spreads to many village houses in *Le Fils de la baleine*. Mô escapes from a burning village, burning and consuming itself. It is not only then being physically

⁴⁸Cung Giu Nguyen, 'Souvenirs sur Pierre Do Dinh suivi du "Le grand tranquille", poème de Do Dinh', *Présence francophone*, 9 (automne 1974), 80-96 (p. 86).

destroyed but had previously experienced a steady undermining of its values, rules and practices. The arrival of the 'fils de la baleine' is indeed traumatic for the villagers. The destruction of the temple of the whale is symbolic of this. The whale, portent of fortune to the villagers, brings disruption to the village. The 'son of the whale' achieves the destruction of the village. His arrival precipitates disturbance and change in a village which appeared truly isolated and independent. The arrival of Mô is the catalyst for the questioning and perturbation of ancient rules and laws. His presence throws all the notaries into a quandary. Much of village xenophobia becomes evident in the confusion arising out of clarifying his civil status and his place within village life. Yet village laws simply reflect, in a smaller context, wider immigration and citizenship laws to be found in every country. Because the village is a restricted environment, each constraint assumes a greater significance. In *Frères de sang*, the narrator's arrival initiates the winds of change which sweep through the village. He is the catalyst rather than the instrument for change, while Mô in *Le Fils de la baleine* is both, and the resulting impact on the village is the greater. While Mô makes his escape, the fate of the narrator in *Frères de sang* remains ambivalent.

Both novels are rich in imagery. Thuong Vuong-Riddick writes of *Frères de sang*:

Certes nous retrouvons les structures narratives, des personnages, une action nette, mais l'écriture très travaillée, la beauté des images et des symboles rappellent que pour la sensibilité vietnamienne, la poésie demeure depuis toujours une réalité

quotidienne, vécue, compagne du travail et du loisir, du privé et du social.⁴⁹

The images of the moon, the well with *eau amère* or *eau potable*, the doors as doorways into other destinations, other perceptions, the images of the village and the people are richly presented in *Frères de sang*, and are evocative of the choices and conflicts which the narrator finds himself exposed to. The dual images provided by the moon and reflected moon, the waters of the well, and the doors opening in opposite directions emphasize the dual nature of the choices open to him. The narrator is a man caught between two worlds: the world of the West, where he went for his University education and qualifications, and the world of the East, which gave birth to him and nurtured his early mentality and emotions. In *Frères de sang*, the narrator feels the terrible pull of both East and West. Just as the images conjured are incompatible, as the water in the well cannot be both 'potable' and 'amère', the narrator finds himself adrift both in the village and within himself. For he is influenced by both his country's traditions and by his later life in Europe, but he cannot reconcile the two. There is no gradual absorption of both cultures or the selection of elements from both which the narrator can then build on. Instead the result is paralysis.

In *Le Fils de la baleine*, the images are equally striking, images of the impact of the strange and unexpected washed up, literally, on the shores of the village. The village, the fishermen, the huts, and the sea are conveyed as timeless, unchanging. Upon this scenery erupt the disturbing body of a young man and the

⁴⁹Vuong-Riddick, 'Le drame', p. 143.

beached carcass of a dead whale. The imagery of the sea and of the whale is here rich in symbolism. The sea, source of livelihood and sustenance to the villagers, washes up two bodies, the unconscious body of a young man, who, it eventuates, has lost his memory, and later the body of a dead whale. However, instead of the whale representing luck and protection, as the fishermen have traditionally seen it, this whale and the sea which offered it to the villagers herald change and destruction. The stranger, whose strangeness the villagers attempt to allay by baptizing him 'le fils de la baleine', carries in his wake the undermining of all the villagers' traditional values and beliefs. Their early fear and hostility prove to be justified, for this stranger will indeed upset the workings of the village and question the entire structure of life and order within the village. The two beings washed up on the beach, the unconscious man and the dead whale, at first sight powerless, carry in their wake the impetus for the destruction of the village. An impetus of change, of different values, and in the person of M^ô, the perception of a man 'innocent', innocent in the sense that he has at first, no clue as to his name, his identity or his origins. In attempting to blend into village society and gaining acceptance, he gradually begins to shake the foundations of the village's beliefs. Unattached, unclaimed and adrift, he will question the perceived stability of the village and its mode of existence, which the villagers had believed to be 'timeless'.

The difference in approach and perspective between *Frères de sang* and *Le Fils de la baleine* is reflected in the first-person narrative of the first novel as opposed to the third-person narrative of the second. There is a feel of the personal, direct

experience in the first and a more detached observation of events in the second. In *Frères de sang*, the narrator undergoes a drastic examination of personality and motives, within the context of the disintegration of his native village - a disintegration which appears to be also symptomatic of the times. The more distant authorial voice in *Le Fils de la baleine* describes the upheaval of a village community, with its many and varied interactions, all of which are inevitably touched by the arrival of the stranger.

Another factor is the isolation of the village in question in *Le Fils de la baleine*. This fishing village appears lost in time, somehow divorced from the twentieth century. There is no mention of the colonial presence or the French authorities or the impact of French civilization, in however partial a form. Like past villages in Vietnamese history, this village remains impervious to central bureaucratic authority. The only encounter with the 'outside' world so to speak is the *fracas* surrounding the return of the stranger from the district hospital. Apart from this incident, there is a curiously anachronistic feel to the inhabitants of the village, their livelihood, the rhythm of their lives, their council meetings, the rites surrounding the burial of the whale. They appear to be untouched by the modern world. The arrival of the stranger in their midst, his eventual realization that he had spent many years studying overseas and was on his way home when he was shipwrecked, provides a shocking intrusion from the outside world, a hint of the wider country and of wider politics.

Frères de sang and *Le Fils de la baleine* present two male protagonists. Both are Vietnamese and received a University education overseas. Both return to their homeland after many

years of study. The first returns to his native village. The second lands in an unknown village. The first rejects traditional practices, traditional justice, traditional values. The second is rejected by the village authorities and by the village community. He has lost his memory, so has no basis and no identity. The first is paralysed by the stresses of his experience. The second queries village laws and escapes. The response of the alien in *Le Fils de la baleine* is to leave. The response of the alien in *Frères de sang*, on the other hand, is to disintegrate inside.

These two characters may be metaphors for the situation of Vietnamese Francophone writers. Like the protagonists of their novels, both Pham Van Ky and Cung Giu Nguyen are Vietnamese. Both were educated in the metropolis. The situation of their protagonists perhaps reflects their own. The narrator of *Frères de sang* and M^ô are both hybrids and, in a sense, misfits. They do not wholly fit into French society, but then neither do they fit into traditional Vietnamese society, as these novels pointedly demonstrate. They are isolated in a world of their own, in the way these villages are isolated. Their experience is contained and troublesome and painful. They are alien and uneasy, rejecting and rejected. There is no real solution. There is neither adjustment nor acceptance of either the stranger by the village or of the village by the stranger. The only endings are madness or escape. They illustrate the dilemma of Vietnamese Francophone writers and of Vietnamese Francophone literature.

The village, especially in *Le Fils de la baleine*, has an anachronistic feel to it. It appears to be isolated and divorced from the rest of the world. This impression is mostly conveyed by the

stranger's lack of mobility. He is imprisoned within the confines of the village until his dramatic escape by sea. Walking to a nearby village does not even feature as an option. Yet, despite its timeless and curiously ahistorical feel, it is not a village 'anywhere in the world'. It is instead a particularly and exaggeratedly Vietnamese village, enclosed, inward-looking and hostile to outsiders. The dual nature of the village as metaphor is that it symbolizes both tradition and the past on one hand, and, on the other, the isolation of Vietnamese Francophone literature, a literature born of colonialism.

The male protagonists of *Frères de sang* and *Le Fils de la baleine* both seek to escape from the village (whether physically or symbolically). One interpretation, which Yeager, Nguyen Hong Nhiem, Thuong Vuong-Riddick and Laurent have commented on, is that the protagonist is seeking to escape from the confines of his native culture and traditions - or at least the extreme elements within it. However, the village can also symbolize the political system which gave birth to these writers and which had ended or was soon to end. Painful as it was to acknowledge, these writers and their male protagonists were the products of a colonial regime which had bankrupted their country politically and economically. Were they also seeking to evade that narrow categorization?

Frères de sang and *Le Fils de la baleine* illustrate the alienation of the individual within a hostile environment. The theme of alienation is a preoccupation of much modern literature, both Eastern and Western. Although there is a universal element to the plight of these protagonists, these novels are also characterized by the particular nature of the individuals they deal

Between East and West

with and the context in which these individuals are placed. These novels deal with the dilemmas facing Vietnamese men who were born and educated under French colonialism. They narrate the private anguish which these men underwent when the system which gave rise to them collapsed and died. These protagonists are inheritors of the rich and ancient literary heritage of Vietnam and China and inheritors of French and European literature through their education. But they are left stranded and bereft by the political and social changes which take place in their country, and by changes within their own personalities. As individuals, they are vulnerable to the conflicting pull of disparate cultures and disparate loyalties. In addition, they were subject to the particular stresses and conflicts of identity which members of the colonized experienced within the colonial or immediately post-colonial environment. Like the literature in which they feature, these protagonists do not really fit in anywhere. They are adrift. Adrift either in madness (a form of escape) or at sea (another form of escape). They are the product of a period but, paradoxically, they stand outside it. In doing so, they form a separate entity of their own, and each novel reveals an individual response to this condition.

CONCLUSION

*Of old and now, the world has tales to tell,
Strange stories making plain the universe.
– Anonymous (Tre Coc)*

I have treated four major themes in this thesis. The first is the influence of the classic *Kim-Van-Kieu* on the works of these modern Vietnamese Francophone writers. The second is the portrayal of women and its significance in the novels of a woman writer as opposed to those of a male writer. The third is the nature of interracial relationships, in particular between Vietnamese men and Frenchwomen, within the colonial context. The last is the theme of alienation: alienation within the self and within the context of one's birthplace. All four themes emerge distinctively from the novels and *récits* of Vietnamese Francophone writers.

Vietnamese Francophone literature grew out of particular historical circumstances: the French colonization of Indochina. The notion of the 'stranger' and the 'outsider' is an important element of this literature. The novels illustrate the dilemma of

Vietnamese men and women writing in the language of the colonizer or ex-colonizer. Most were born and educated within the colonial system. Their coming to writing and to French is marked by the legacy of colonial experience and/or the policy of cultural assimilation'.¹ They pursued further studies in the metropolis or became voluntary exiles from their homelands. Many lived in France and the majority of novels were published in Paris. A number were recipients of French literary prizes, and yet few have heard of these writers or of their works. Most of the novels are now out of print.

The subjects which these novels deal with are in many ways painful ones. They examine themes, options and relationships which are fraught with difficulty. None of the novels contain simple solutions or happy endings. All of them, in one way or another, illustrate a sense of loss, of being cut adrift, of not belonging, of facing an uncertain future. For this reason, they can make for uncomfortable reading. And yet the nature of their insights, and the dual heritage which these reveal, are also enriching. The works illustrate the enmeshing of cultures, the encounter of old and new. They display a consciousness which attempts to respond to the vast cultural and literary differences between East and West. The novels are rich in imagery and contain several layers of literary meaning. References range from classical Vietnamese and Chinese sources to modern European literature. Pham Van Ky drew the title of one of his novels from an Old High German source; the writers Truong Dinh Tri and Albert

¹ Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyl, 'Préface', *L'Esprit créateur*, 33, 2 (Summer 1993), 5-7 (p. 5).

de Teneuille quoted the Japanese writer Okakura Kakuzo at the beginning of their novel *Bà-Dâm*. In both cases, the choice was of particular relevance to the subject matter of the novel.

The Lebanese writer Evelyne Accad has queried the negative emphasis in the portrayal of those caught between cultures. She sees instead the positive and enriching effect of such perspectives:

De nombreux écrivains Nord-Africains, tels Driss Chraïbi, Albert Memmi, Abdel Kebir-Khalibi et Marguerite Taos-Amrouche, pour ne nommer que ceux qui ont dit leur écartèlement entre deux cultures, leur déchirement et finalement, leur malheur, utilisent des expressions come 'bâtard historique', 'aliénation culturelle', 'entre deux chaises', 'malaise'. Quant à moi, je partage la vision d'Andrée Chadid qui insiste sur ce qu'il y a de positif dans le mélange, qu'elle appelle hybridation, soulignant le cosmopolitisme, l'enrichissement, la tolérance et l'ouverture d'esprit qu'il apporte.²

Vietnamese Francophone writers expressed their condition as cultural and literary hybrids. They are the inheritors of the rich literary legacy of both the Far East and the West. Their works highlight the difficulty and also the complexity of combining the two traditions. 'The characters' quest for identity and history goes against the grain of totalization and of an invariable, fixed identity'.³ Although they wrote in French and used the modern mode of the novel, the sensibilities and philosophies which permeate their works are largely Eastern in inspiration. In some novels this led to a manner of synthesis, in others to fragmentation. There were no set responses to the pressures which these individuals experienced. The differences between the novels attest to the writers' individuality. Although they were all

²Evelyne Accad, 'L'écriture (comme) éclatement des frontières', *L'Esprit créateur*, 33, 2 (Summer 1993), 119-128 (p. 121).

³Mudimbe-Boyi, 'Préface', p. 7.

shaped by the colonial experience, each writer responded in his or her own way to this condition. It may also be that many felt that they worked and wrote in relative isolation. The corpus of writers and of their novels and *récits* is small: just under forty books⁴ and fifteen writers over a span of seventy years. There was hardly a glut of Vietnamese Francophone writers on the French literary scene.

In this thesis, I have explored the influence of Vietnamese classical literature on these modern writers, a subject which has not been examined in previous studies. The different layers of literary meaning, drawn from both East and West, provide a rich field for detailed study and analysis. Vietnamese classical literature may surface in either the structure, the language or the theme of the novels, as is the case with the works of Trinh-Thuc-Oanh and Marguerite Triaire, Ly Thu Ho, Tran Van Tung and Kim Lefèvre. Or, conversely, the philosophical heritage of the Far East may form the backbone of the novel, as in the works of Pham Van Ky. The novels express the difficulty of being exposed to two traditions and two loyalties. The result may be an attempt to withdraw from the fray and to lose the self in external causes, as is the case with the protagonists of Nguyen Huu Chau's and Pham Duy Khiem's novels.

The portrayal of women, in the works of both Ly Thu Ho and Pham Van Ky, serves to underline the difficulty of being the Other. I have explored the subversive nature of Ly Thu Ho's novels and the sense of alienation and distance conveyed in Pham Van Ky's works. The men experience the sense of being Other as members of the colonized and as individuals caught between two cultures. In

⁴I am including novels, *récits* and collections of Vietnamese legends and stories in this number.

the representation of women protagonists, the double colonization of women gives an added dimension and depth to the theme of being outside and alien. Evelyne Accad has noted the different usage of French by male and female writers from North Africa: 'l'on peut lire chez un ... écrivain maghrébin ces paroles qui expriment le besoin de posséder la langue comme on possède la femme, en la violant, en l'assujettissant, plutôt qu'en l'aimant et en l'aidant à s'épanouir'.⁵ She quotes Kateb Yacine:

Une langue appartient à celui qui la viole. Pas à celui qui la caresse ... la langue française est très belle ... mais tous les jugements que l'on portera sur moi en ce qui concerne la langue française risquent d'être faux si on oublie que j'exprime en français quelque chose qui n'est pas français.⁶

Accad contrasts this with the writing of women: 'Les écrivains femmes n'expriment pas ce rapport de violence face à la langue'.⁷

Among the Vietnamese Francophone writers, Nguyen Huu Chau and Pham Duy Khiem use the language in an experimental form, with the resulting impression of fragmentation in their novels. Ly Thu Ho, in contrast, writes a measured and contained prose.

Vietnamese Francophone novels present the encounter of two cultures from the perspective of the Vietnamese. The works of prominent French writers such as Pierre Loti, André Malraux and Marguerite Duras, whose writings on the East reveal perhaps more of their author's personal condition and dilemma than the reality of the East, present one side of the picture. The work of the Vietnamese Francophone writers presents the other side. The novels express the voice of the Vietnamese, the colonized. The use

⁵Accad, 'L'écriture', p. 122.

⁶Accad, 'L'écriture', p. 122.

⁷Accad, 'L'écriture', p. 123.

of French, as Elizabeth Mudimbe-Boyi wrote, is 'both empowerment and subversion'.⁸

As to the future prospects of this literature, perhaps the Vietnamese who have settled in France will continue to write of their condition, as Francophone writers from North Africa are currently doing.⁹ The situation of the Vietnamese differs, however, from that of the North Africans. A cultural gap separates them. It may be that as the colonial and immediate post-colonial experience - the primary mover of Vietnamese literature in French - recedes into the background, the novels and autobiographical narratives will also cease to be written. The fate of the literature, like that of the outsider in Cung Giu Nguyen's *Le Fils de la baleine*, remains uncertain. Is the future to be shaped by the stranger? The Vietnamese Francophone writers blend into neither traditional culture nor Western culture. They stand instead on the margin or the watershed of two different cultures. As the Algerian writer Assia Djebar stated:

Quoi que nous fassions ou voulions, nous sommes au confluent de deux mondes, de deux âges, et donc de deux langues.¹⁰

In examining Vietnamese Francophone literature, it is necessary to move beyond the concept of a conflict between East and West. The novels reveal the influence of both East and West. They are an

⁸Mudimbe-Boyi, 'Préface', p. 5.

⁹In a general discussion of Beur film-makers which spills over into the consideration of literary and other cultural practices, Belghoul went on to situate Beur culture at the intersection of two conflicting systems of signification. One is the dominant culture of France, which Belghoul calls her 'milieu d'adoption', and wherein resides her audience; the other is that of the immigrant community, the 'milieu de contre-référence' from which she speaks'. Alec G. Hargreaves, *Voices from the North African Immigrant Community in France: Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction* (New York and Oxford, 1991), p. 140.

¹⁰Quoted by M. Pierre Emmanuel in 'Discours de M. Pierre Emmanuel', *Littératures françaises hors de France*, Séance Publique du 14 décembre 1968, 263-274 (p. 267).

amalgamation of Eastern and Western elements: philosophical, cultural, and literary. They express an interplay of both thoughts and words across cultures. But the writers are, inescapably, Vietnamese, and it is this aspect which emerges in their novels and which constitutes their originality. The Vietnamese heritage is a striking feature of this literature and colours the works of these writers. As Kim Lefèvre expressed it:

Le Viet-Nam a modelé le noyau de mon être.¹¹

In their context, the Vietnamese Francophone writers created a literature of their own.

¹¹Kim Lefèvre, *Métisse Blanche* (Paris, 1989), p. 339.

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