

The Multidimensional Masculinity in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's Short Stories

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[Abstract]

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp is a pillar in Vietnamese cultural life after the Second Indochina War, and the fates of men and women at the beginning of *Đổi mới* (Renovation) is one of the prominent themes in his short stories. To show off sexual power, seek glory, and maintain his dominant position, Thiệp's heroes engage in a game of oppressing the weak, hunting animals, and harassing women. However, due to the complex changes in social life, moral values, and gender inequality, men in the postwar period quickly experienced the feeling of humiliation, impotence, and failure. In turn, the sophisticated aspects of masculinity demonstrate the cultural and ethical concerns of contemporary Vietnamese society. By exploring the multidimensional nature of masculinity expressed in Thiệp's stories, this study aims to resolve misconceptions about gender and the relationship between men and women in his work.

Keywords: gender, masculinity, ethical, impotence, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp

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I . Introduction

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp (1950–2021) has been writing for publication since the 1970s become controversial literary phenomenon almost immediately upon his debut. Thiệp emerged during the renovation of Vietnamese literature and became the most typical manifestation of the movement (Nguyễn 2008: 203). Since *Đổi mới* (Renovation)¹ until now, he has been a great Vietnamese writer in general, particularly well known for his short stories. His writing is concise, profound, multi-faceted, and polysemantic. Thanks to the deep influence of Confucian and Buddhist thought, as well as “sử bút” style,² Thiệp has produced stories that are “the best of Vietnamese literature over the last three decades” (Le 2014: 146). He interrogates the eternal relationships between literature and politics, good and evil, and men and women through his creation of unique characters to cultivate compassion, altruism, and search for the true meaning of human life. Diving into Thiệp’s writings can evoke in readers many misconceptions, one of which must be the misinterpretation of men and women.

Men and women—or male and female—are two primary archetypes, as well as a permanent pair of dualistic opposites that govern human thinking. Men and women are different and similar, separated and merged, antagonistic and complementary. They have always existed in a state of interdependence, as in the relationship of Yin and Yang in Eastern philosophy, the anima and animus in C.G. Jung’s conception of the human psyche, and the common conception of a picture and a shadow. Men need women to define themselves and vice versa. They cannot confirm their independent and autonomous identities when excluding the other from their consciousness (Eagleton 1996: 110–30). According to Morin (2015: 123–28), from a genetic, anatomical, physiological, psychological,

¹ “Đổi mới” was a comprehensive reform campaign, especially economic and political renovation, which the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) began implementing in the late 1980s. *Đổi mới* was officially carried out by the 6th Party Congress of CPV in December 1986.

² “Sử bút” (史筆) is the literary style of ancient Chinese historians. This method stands out for its flexible coloration and vivid images, as well as containing praise or criticism of objects based on Confucian moral principles.

and cultural perspective, masculinity is within femininity and vice versa. Each person, male and female, carries inside himself or herself a restrained presence and power of each other. Thiệp's works highlight the duality of men's attitudes towards women. Male characters often affirm female qualities, even while they reject and even demean female characters. Male characters often humble themselves when advocating femininity, self-identifying as weak, pitiful, despicable, or useless. When demeaning women and exalting masculinity, Thiệp's heroes often demonstrate disgust at all manifestations of femininity. Sometimes they try to protect, defend, and support women. At other times, they find ways to harass female characters. On the surface of texts, Thiệp's characters present themselves as victims and perpetrators of the opposite sex. This is an essential point that many critics have missed when analyzing the male-female relationships in Thiệp's writing.

A dynamic nature and monopoly on political power have given men the privilege to explore and create the world. Winning enemies, shooting down quarry, and conquering nature bring glory to men. Because women are considered to embody nature, men also seek glory through subduing and dominating women. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's writings contain a distinctly masculine nature, because his main topics are closely related to the activities of war, hunting, conquering, and raping women. Unlike writers such as Nguyễn Minh Châu,³ Bảo Ninh,⁴ Nguyễn Bình Phương,⁵ Sương Nguyệt Minh,⁶ and many others, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp does not directly write about the war. Rather, the shadows of war in his works are mostly received, edited, and arranged from different texts, or in other words, appear

³ Nguyễn Minh Châu(1930-1989), a writer who made vital contributions to Vietnamese literature after the Vietnam War (1975) and a pioneer who paved the way for *Đổi mới* literature (since 1986).

⁴ A pseudonym of Hoàng Ấu Phương, son of renowned Vietnamese linguist Hoàng Tuệ (1922-1999). He specializes in writing novels and short stories, and is best known to world readers through the novel *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* (*The Sorrow of War*).

⁵ Nguyễn Bình Phương, a contemporary Vietnamese novelist, was born in 1965 and is currently the editor-in-chief of *Văn nghệ Quân đội* (*Military Arts Magazine*), a prestigious art and literary magazine in Vietnam.

⁶ Sương Nguyệt Minh is the pen name of Nguyễn Ngọc Sơn (1958-), a well-known Vietnamese soldier-writer.

in a kind of intertextual warfare. These are the wars between Nguyễn Ánh⁷ and Nguyễn Huệ,⁸ the resistance against the French by Hoàng Hoa Thám⁹ and Nguyễn Thái Học,¹⁰ the Sino-Vietnamese War (1946–1954), and the Vietnam War (1954–1975). When referring to these wars, Thiệp does not describe battlefields or fierce struggles as seen in other writers' war-related writings. Instead, he primarily focuses on what is behind the war. From Thiệp's perspective, wars are a specific game for men—an extreme form of masculinity. Indeed, Thiệp is not interested in the field of battle as such and replaces it with areas for hunting and travelling. This type of space in Thiệp's works is associated with masculine activities such as catching fish and hunting animals (frogs, monkeys, bear, tigers, and wolves). For Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, trips to the forest or hunting activities are as glorious as war and can satisfy men's desire for adventurous pleasure. However, male characters' efforts to find the extraordinary and glory are a trap, because these activities push them into an unreasonable and meaningless realm. All the pleasure a man obtains from the challenges of taking risks is ephemeral. Disappointed by the impermanence surrounding him, he falls into an embarrassing situation. Thiệp's view shows that the opposition of victory–defeat or glory–humiliation is relative and dualistic: “is there any glory not built on dishonor and shame?” (Nguyen 2013: 205). In this duality, the male–female antagonism illustrates a new face in which a complicated masculinity is imbued with femininity.

⁷ Nguyễn Ánh (阮暎) or King Gia Long (嘉隆), whose real name Nguyễn Phúc Ánh (阮福暎) (1762–1820), was the founder of the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802–1945), the last monarchy in the history of Vietnam.

⁸ Nguyễn Huệ (阮惠) or Emperor Quang Trung (光中皇帝), whose real name was Hồ Thom (1753–1792), was the second emperor of the Tây Sơn Dynasty (1778–1802). Nguyễn Huệ was a prominent military leader who significantly contributed to ending the civil war and defeating foreign invaders in the 18th century.

⁹ Hoàng Hoa Thám (黄花探) (1858–1913), commonly known as Đề Thám, was the leader of the Yên Thế uprising against the French colonialists (1885–1913) in Vietnam.

¹⁰ Nguyễn Thái Học (阮太學) (1902–1930) was one of the leaders of the Yên Bái uprising against the French colonialists in 1930. Hoàng Hoa Thám and Nguyễn Thái Học were considered symbols of Vietnamese patriotism.

II. Hunting Games: Glory and Humiliation

In almost every culture, hunting is regarded as a job, right, and duty of men. It is an activity in which they can exhibit their strength, courage, intelligence, bravery, and world-creative ability. In hunting, males use bows, arrows, sticks, and guns as tools or weapons. These objects stand for masculinity, and psychoanalysts often refer to them as various symbols of the phallus. They hunt in forests, valleys, ravines, and caves, which represent the female vagina. A woman does not enjoy the hunting game but passively waits for her husband to bring back the spoils. As a result, a male's working environment is lively, unfamiliar, and dangerous, unlike a woman's, which is usually static, familiar, and boring.

The hunting motif appears in Thiệp's short stories "Muối của rừng" (The Salt of the Jungle), "Sang sông" (Crossing the River), "Những người muôn năm cũ" (The Accustomed People), and "Những ngọn gió Hua Tát" (The Winds of Hua Tát). "Muối của rừng" narrates the complex story of a monkey hunting trip by the male protagonist Diều. On a spring day, "the jungle is deep green and damp" and "nature is both dignified and sentimental" (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 137). With a new shotgun given to him by his son, Diều goes to the forest to hunt. The old man finds a monkey family foraging with a herd. He shoots and wounds the male monkey, and the female monkey and her babies try everything to save the male monkey. Later, the hunter loses his gun and becomes exhausted. Realizing that he cannot carry the injured male monkey out of the jungle, Diều takes off all his clothes, bandages its wound, "releases" (phóng sinh)¹¹ the animal, and, naked, the man finds his way back home. When he reaches the edge of the forest, Diều is stunned by the countless *tử huyền*, flowers that bloom only once every thirty years. The flower symbolizes the wish for peace in the country and a bountiful harvest for communities.

Hunter and beast are not new motifs in world literature. Consider the story of Santiago and the swordfish in Ernest

¹¹ In Buddhist and Vietnamese culture, "phóng sinh" is finding a way to redeem, liberate, release, and save the lives of animals that are captured, imprisoned, or about to be killed.

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, widely popular in Vietnam, and thus reinforcing and increasing local readers' impression of the motif. In traditional Vietnamese literature, stories such as *Truyện kì mạn lục* (*Casual Records of Transmitted Strange Tales*) by Nguyễn Dữ¹² exploited the theme of hunting or used the hunter–beast motif. Contemporary writers such as Vũ Hùng (1931–2022),¹³ Trần Duy Phiên (1942–),¹⁴ and Suong Nguyệt Minh (1958–) have created many excellent stories on the theme of hunting. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, too, embraced this topic, but did not emphasize politics, ethics, ecology, or environmental protection; rather, Thiệp praises the male protagonist's cognitive process and journey back to nature. Diều's monkey hunting, for example, is a journey of awareness back to nature. The man starts from a position of antagonism and moves toward the perception of the reciprocal relationships between male and female, victory and defeat, nature and culture. In the beginning, Diều presents the male and female monkeys as genders of mutually exclusive antagonism, but near the end of the hunt, he provides profound insights. He highlights the similarities between humans and animals, the interdependence between nature and culture, and the correlation between rulers and subjects, males and females. The hunter is suddenly enlightened by the shared burden of the species that nature bestows on each individual, regardless of gender. Departing with a cultural/civilized consciousness and a wish to dominate nature, Diều reaches his destination only by giving up all the male/ruler/culture characteristics to integrate with the female/subject/nature ones. The image of Diều walking naked in the

¹² Nguyễn Dữ (阮興), whose real name Nguyễn Dữ (阮興) (dates unknown, although he seems to have lived and wrote around the 16th century). His only remaining work is *Truyện kì mạn lục* (《傳奇漫錄》 literally, “discursive notes of strange stories.”) The book includes 20 stories written in Chinese characters and combines prose, poetry, and commentary by the author and others. *Truyện kì mạn lục* has been praised as a “spectacular work through all ages.”

¹³ Vũ Hùng is famous for his works about nature and animals for children. His first book, *Mùa săn trên núi* (*Hunting Season in the Mountains*) was released in 1961. At the time of his death, Vũ Hùng had composed more than 40 works for children, many of which have been translated into English, French, Russian, and Chinese.

¹⁴ Trần Duy Phiên (born 1942) is a writer and poet closely associated with the highlands of Vietnam. His compositions primarily portray the environment, people, and culture of the land, and hunting appears as an important theme in some of his works.

wet spring rain, surrounded by countless blooming *từ huyền* flowers, his soul full of hope for the future, is beautiful. It is a typical metaphor for Thiệp: human beings should understand how to give up their sense of hegemony in the face of nature. It also suggests the possibility of redemption through transformation despite the ironic logic of that transformation (Taylor 1996: 451). The unusual flower reflects Diêu's transition from glory to humiliation. The figure of the male hunter explores glory, which is not the one that occurs after defeating nature. On the contrary, it appears after the protagonist fails and compromises with great Mother Nature.

In *Những ngọn gió Hua Tát*, a series of ten concise stories composed in the 1970s, Thiệp's message focuses on karma and the vanity of glory, which is precisely the lesson learned by the male character Nhân in "Sói trả thù" (A Wolf's Revenge). Nhân leads a group of hunters to prey upon wolves. The man and his fellows show their brutal strength as they faced the proud, wise, tricky, and cruel wolves. They chase and destroy the entire pack of wolves, including the leader, who flees to "a deep cave with mossy stone pillars" (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 121). Nhân kills the wisest leader of the pack, captures the most beautiful wolf, and takes it home to raise with his dogs. This little wolf later bites San, Nhân's only son, to death. Surprisingly, Nhân does not take revenge or transmit hatred, as the lead wolf did to its cub. He cuts the metal chain and sets the wolf free into the jungle. The passage where he "swung the axe down onto the metal chain" (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 122) is filled with symbolism: it terminates the cycle of mutual vengeance and affirms man's free will to aim for good, so that humans can indeed be benevolent beings, as the name of the protagonist suggests.¹⁵ Nhân accepts defeat, and in return, he overcomes his instinct to suppress, destroy, and take revenge. Winning himself, rising to be an actual human being, is Nhân's most significant victory.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp also depicts the vanity of victory in another short story, "Trái tim hổ" (A Tiger's Heart). Khó, the main character, is an ugly orphan who tries to chase a fierce tiger to get its heart.

¹⁵ In Vietnamese, "Nhân" (仁) means loving people or compassion.

He believes that the tiger's heart is a sacred medicine and could cure the polio of the beautiful Pùa. Whoever possesses the heart would be lucky and wealthy for his entire life (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 108). Finally, the ugly man overcomes the tiger, a clever and dangerous animal that other hunters were never able to capture. However, like Santiago in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, Khó's triumph is empty. He never basks in the glory because an unknown figure steals the tiger's heart as soon as he kills the animal. The heart, which should have been the reward for the winner, disappears and Pùa is not cured. At the same time, shame, humiliation, anger, and bitterness overcome Khó and the other boys of Hua Tát. Although the hero participates in the hunt and kills the fierce animal, he still fails miserably. He wins by killing the big cat but loses to fellow humans. His victory and failure contain the value of awakening the community, because the more vital the achievement, the easier it is to steal. All glory is ephemeral, and may cause bitterness and ignominy.

This is also the painful lesson learned by the male character Chrong in "Con gái thủy thần" (The Water-Nymph's Daughter) as he participated in a wrestling competition. Chrong is a gentle rural man. Born in poverty, he lives in a challenging situation. During a village festival, he is suddenly pushed to the wrestling floor, and Chrong is unexpectedly engaged in a competition with members of the village of Đòai Hạ to "clean (the) disgrace" of his village. Chrong's hard-work gifted him with a powerful physique, so although he was not good at wrestling techniques, he still defeats all of his opponents, bringing glory to his teammates. Unfortunately, right after his victory, on his way back home, the losers took revenge on him with exceptional brutality. Chrong's mother is the one who illuminates the humiliation inherent in man's quest for glory: "Oh Chrong, my son! Why do you always have to outdo everyone else? Giving over your body for other's entertainment—aren't you embarrassed?" (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 295). From the beginning, Chrong was not an athlete in the competition. He was pushed into the game by accident. He was then agitated and instigated by the fans' excited cheers, and the clamor and vague humiliation of his fellow villagers plunged him deep into the fight.

Until Chương is violently beaten, he does not realize that his success was a disgraceful glory.

The glory-humiliation pair is also associated with Thiệp's masculine style in "Những người thợ xẻ" (The Woodcutters), a solid, cinematic short story about a young man named Bằng and a group of woodcutters who go to the Northwest to work for a deputy director of a forestry enterprise. Their timber sawmill is in the middle of the primeval forest. When these men are about to complete their mission, a bear suddenly attacks them. The team overcomes the huge animal. Meanwhile Bằng slits its neck to get the bile and wears the gallbladder as a trophy. The workers carry the dead bear to the house of a female teacher Thực, and the whole forestry team celebrates a crazy party with bear meat. Behind these men's victory, Thiệp alludes to the unforgettable experiences of those who are considered heroes right after their success: "After several last moves, the bear died. We were completely exhausted. Our hands and feet trembled. Bằng looked pale, his smile was like a cry. Later, I witnessed many victorious smiles in many different cases, and those smiles always looked like cries. I always felt frightened and moved by them" (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 352). Men take part in hunting to fight, win, and bring back glory. They are revered as heroes but immediately fall into a disgraceful state. With smiles like cries, frightened and moved, are they winners? Or does the glory belong to the noisy crowd of the forestry farm? The contemplation of failure and humiliation is quiet, sad, and numbing because it is always personal and private. As Hemingway nicely demonstrates in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," Thiệp's concept of glory and humiliation are companions. In every instance of victory, he does not forget to remind the man not to ignore the areas of gray shading to ignominy.

Noticeably, there is no sign of a woman in Thiệp's hunting games. No female characters accompany Diều ("Muối của rừng") or Khó ("Trái tim hổ"). If there are any women, they are usually obstacles to the game or are identified as prey, which is the position of some female characters, including An, Thắm, and the hunter's silent wife in the stories "Những người muôn năm cũ," "Chạy đi sông ơ" (Run River Run), and "Con thú lớn nhất" (The Largest

Animal). The heroines often do humble jobs such as digging roots, weaving fabrics, catching insects, cooking meals, washing dishes, and rowing boats. They wander around in small living spaces, such as kitchens, houses, gardens, fields, and villages. Once they leave the confines of their world and enter men's hunting space, they plunge into a forbidden realm where they are confused with prey or hunted animals. This confusion is evident in the case of the man in the short story "Con thú lớn nhất." The hunter fails on a long trip and must return home. When he sees the flickering blue fire in his house, however, the man immediately re-enters the forest, where tragedy strikes. The hunter's wife had gone to the forest's edge to wait for her husband. She holds a peacock feather in her hand, which confuses her husband, and he is unable to distinguish between animal and human. The hunter mistakenly thinks he has had a successful hunt, but he has shot and killed his wife.

In unusual circumstances such as wars or instances where states are "without a king," the disguised and controlled exterior disturbs the inner world in Thiệp's writings. The situation causes men to lose their values. Characters' intellectual strength and analytical thinking are reduced or become useless. "Những người muôn năm cũ" describes the daily life of male teachers in a mountainous Northwest school. Because of his shortcomings, the character Mr. Doanh has been sent to the remote area as a form of discipline, while, in contrast, Ms. Xuân, the principal's daughter, has returned to the city to attend university. Doanh had a sharp ability to analyze society and people, but no one listens to him. The same goes for Đòai's astute, radical, merciless social and moral analyses in "Không có vua" (Without a King). Together with "Tướng về hưu" (The General Retires), "Không có vua" is one of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's best stories, which "confirm the talent of its controversial author" (Doan 2019: 67). The stories combine the techniques of fragmentation, dramatic dialogues, and unmoved narrations with many shocking details about social decay and ethical chaos. The most unforgettable character of the stories is Đòai, the pragmatic and mercenary expert at the Ministry of Education. He ruthlessly rejects contemporary morality. However, Đòai is also very attractive, and he is abominable because of his sensitive social intelligence and ability to understand

others' temperaments. Despite being an education official, Đòai is the villain of the story. He represents the corruption of the educated, which swirls violently in the whirlwind of the nascent market economy, an example of the irony of knowledge and morality that Nguyễn Huy Thiệp would like to incarnate.

This satire is born in the context of post-*Đổi mới* Vietnamese culture. Along with the renovation, the socialist-oriented market economy was also present, but this led to unforeseen consequences when the moral system was undermined by materialism. Both Doanh (“Những người muôn năm cũ”) and Đòai (“Không có vua”) have the power of reason but fail in terms of morality. In a society of ethical disorder, Đòai does not have enough rational will¹⁶ and efficiency to restrain himself. He thus lets his biological instincts to get out of control, while letting the irrational will¹⁷ do whatever it wants. The old father Kiên and his sons would undoubtedly be in “the cesspool” without Sinh, the woman who symbolizes negative chaos and the womb of a new life. While conquering, domesticating, and mastering nature, man is also deceived, resisted, and subdued by nature. It is both victory and defeat—the inevitable duality of the human condition.

III. The Rape of Women and the Degeneration of Masculinity

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp does not write about men conquering women in the manner that is elegant, romantic, or seductive. Nor does he portray femininity as a political tool of masculinity to improve symbolic and practical power. He primarily describes it through violence: men forcibly harassing and possessing women, while also

¹⁶ Rational will (理性意志) is a term from ethical literary criticism (文学伦理学批评), a school of literary criticism initiated by Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao (聂珍钊, 1952-) in 2004. Rational will is the core and exterior of humanity (人性因子); this will belongs to an ethics that uses good and evil as the standards for promoting the rational effect of controlling irrational desire (非理性意志) to make men rational. In certain circumstances, rational will is activated by religious beliefs, moral principles, ethical norms, and rational judgments.

¹⁷ Irrational will (非理性意志), another term from ethical literary criticism, refers to all the irrational impulses of emotion and action; it is thus opposed to rational will. It also belongs to ethics and always carries moral value judgments.

simultaneously presenting the opposite side of this masculine degeneration, their impotence. The relationships between male and female, strong and weak, glory and humiliation, emerge outstandingly in his writings.

The topic of men harassing, abusing, and raping women is ubiquitous in modern Vietnamese literature, which can be seen in many works by famous authors, such as *Giông tố* (*Storm*, 1936) and *Số đỏ* (*A Nice Fortune*, 1936) by Vũ Trọng Phụng (1912–1939),¹⁸ *Tắt đèn* (*Turning off the Light*, 1937) by Ngô Tất Tố (1893–1954),¹⁹ “Chí Phèo” (1941) by Nam Cao (1915–1951),²⁰ and *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* (*The Sorrow of War*, 1990) by Bảo Ninh (1952–), among others. “Chí Phèo,” one of the classics of modern Vietnamese literature, portrays a beautiful scene: on an erotic moonlit night, on the bank of a calm, windy river, the drunken farmer Chí accidentally sees Thị Nở, a silly and ugly woman, sleeping in a very provocative pose. The natural setting, the man’s loss of rational control, and the girl’s nude body lead Chí Phèo to rape Thị Nở. Interestingly, the male character’s behavior almost received approval from many generations of Vietnamese readers until there was an objection: “Chí got drunk and then raped Thị Nở. In any society, the act is condemned” (Thành 7/12/2017, n.p.). Chí Phèo’s behavior is unacceptable because it makes the short story without educational significance and adversely affects students’ intellectual development. Before this objection was registered, the text was taught in Vietnamese high schools but did not include the passages about the rape. Local pedagogues also focused on analyzing the changes in the couple’s life after the event, not on the event itself. Phạm Xuân Nguyên, a local literary critic, admits that the scene between Chí Phèo and Thị Nở is rape, but suggests that the act awakened Chí Phèo’s human will and Thị Nở’s

¹⁸ Vũ Trọng Phụng was an eminent Vietnamese writer and journalist in the early 20th century. He left a remarkable literary legacy in many short stories, novels, reports, essays, plays, translations, criticism, and journal articles.

¹⁹ He was a writer, journalist, Confucianist, translator, and scholar with significant influence in Vietnam in the first half of the 20th century.

²⁰ His real name is Trần Hữu Tri, one of Vietnam’s most representative writers of the 20th century. Although he wrote poetry and newspaper articles, Nam Cao made many contributions to local short stories and novels in the first half of the 20th century.

female instincts (Nguyễn T. 7/12/2017, n.p.). In this debate, the critic considered Nam Cao's story as deplorable, while advocates praised the story's rape incident for awakening human dignity. The outstanding issue here is not how to interpret literature, but through this classic, readers have a clear distinction between Nam Cao and Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. The distinction lies in the message behind the rape: for the former, Chí Phèo violated Thị Nở as an act of "rape to save humanity," while for the latter, raping a woman humiliates the man.

In Thiệp's compositions, the motif of men sexually assaulting women is common. For example, Đoàn harasses and gropes his sister-in-law ("Không có vua"); Bường rapes Quy ("Những người thợ xé"); Hạnh assaults the old woman Thiều ("Huyền thoại phố phường" or Legends of the Streets); the narrator ravishes a Mường girl²¹ ("Thỏ cẩm" or Brocade); the narrator character touches a young woman named Hương ("Chút thoáng Xuân Hương" or A Little Glimpse of Xuân Hương); a young man sexually abuses the village girl Lược ("Những bài học nông thôn" or Lessons from the Countryside); and two male characters, Chiêu and Phong, cheat and rape many ladies ("Giọt máu" or A Drop of Blood). These examples show the various levels of inappropriate sexual behavior that male characters exhibit towards female ones in Thiệp's writings.

The motives for men's abuse are also very diverse, including teasing, voyeurism, sexual gratification, and material satisfaction. For instance, in "Huyền thoại phố phường," which intertextuality relates with Pushkin's "The Queen of Spades," a male character named Hạnh rapes an elderly woman named Thiều to exchange a lottery ticket with the potential to win the jackpot. Hạnh is a poor land boy who struggles to make a better living in the city. He craves the wealth of Mrs. Thiều's family, and he has discovered that they had the disease of boredom common urban rich people. He also detected signs of sexual desire in the old lady's eyes. As in "The Queen of Spades," Mrs. Thiều's house lacks the presence of a man. On that fateful night, her daughter was absent. When Hạnh

²¹ The Mường are an ethnic minority in Vietnam. They primarily live in the northern midland and mountainous areas of the country.

suddenly appears in her room, Thiều is wearing a thin and sexy shirt. The man flirts a bit, and the woman does not demur; on the contrary, she expresses her secret agreement. The rape thus took place unhampered because of the woman's complicity. Notably, both characters were quite confused: Thiều mistook Hạnh's actions for love or at least his lust for her body. When she realizes that Hạnh was only interested in the lottery ticket, she understands her tragic situation and feels embarrassed. Meanwhile, the man's desire to change his life via a lottery blinding him, and he defies morality to rape a woman. Ironically, the ticket he gave to the victim was the one that won the jackpot, and the one he stole from her did not win. This is the ultimate humiliation of the male character. He threw away all his ethical standards to violate a woman so he could become rich, but all Hạnh got in return was a bad ending: he went crazy. Hạnh's case is shameful, and the writer alludes to the death of morality, the alarming collapse of social values, and the breakdown of humanity before the power of money.

Sexual harassment and the rape of women make manifest men's bestiality based on humans' biological instincts. The instinct is natural, uncultured, uneducated, and unethical. In the works described above, it seems that males do not consider their actions a heinous crime; no matter what, they still covertly defend themselves and sympathize with each other for a straightforward reason: they have a phallus! The father Kiền ("Không có vua"), for instance, does not care about morality and peeks at his daughter-in-law bathing. His son Đoài catches him in this shameful behavior:

After emptying his cup, Old Kien said, "You're educated but still stupid. Now I'll talk to you man-to-man."

Doai said, "I won't forgive you."

Old Kien said, "I don't need your forgiveness. A man needn't be ashamed for having a prick."

Doai sat in silence, drank another cup of whiskey. After a while, he sighed. "True enough." (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 81).

As Kiền notes (and his son agrees), men have phalluses; they thus have a natural tendency to violate moral principles, and their

victims are women. This immoral and anti-female proposition is quite popular in the works of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. In “Những người thợ xé,” while not able to rape Quy, Bường told Ngọc that two men fighting over a woman are foolish: “Ngọc, don’t be so miserable. Do you know why the elders call that part of a woman a butterfly? Because it has wings that flutter. It’s Heaven’s blessing. Wherever it stops, that person can have it. Sometimes one even has to catch it” (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 349). Bường’s discourse is obviously demeaning. He considers a woman’s body a gift from heaven that men have the right to possess and chase. The male characters use this language to excuse their irrational thoughts and actions.

The short story “Chút thoáng Xuân Hương” draws this out in detail: the narrator gropes a girl on the ferry and is severely rejected by her. The narrator stammers, apologizing, and then suddenly becomes angry: “If you don’t forgive me, then who cares? What are we in this world? I will die sooner or later! You also die! Your pigs are all dead, too!”²² (Nguyễn T.H. 2021: 87). The speaker’s statement implies that because both will be dead anyway, the lady does not need to deny his rape. Meanwhile, the story “Thỏ cảm” describes a young man who rapes a Mường girl while on a national mission in the mountainous region. The poor girl later gives birth to a disabled son who dies a short time later. Thiệp’s readers can find an altruistic attitude toward men’s sins that are linked to their sexual gratification, especially when they admit their mistakes, take responsibility, and correct their faults. It is, however, quite unfair if the readers forget the victims, the pure and innocent ladies who have been raped.

Thiệp’s male characters in these sexual assault cases always find excuses for their sins. They try to seek a rationale based on a patriarchal, masculinity-centered ideology to protect themselves. However, in this gender conquest, all the men fail, being represented as impotent. These men “misread” women’s multidimensional body language. They impose their own views on feminine objects. Men’s prejudices create a mono-meaning signal that women approve of playing sex games with them. This game leads to orgasm, which for

²² Translated by Anh Dân Nguyễn.

men is associated with penetration. Women's emotional climax is polymorphic, and sometimes only requires flattery or cuddling.

In the events related to men groping, harassing, and raping ladies, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp seems to ignore the status of women as victims. He also rarely mentions woman's sexual infatuation after the tragedy. It cannot be denied that men sexually attacking women indicates the degeneration of masculinity, and this kind of depravity is especially harmful to women. This depravity regulates and maintains the permanent dependence and passivity of the female body before the man intends to possess it by force. Thiệp often writes about evil and is never cold-blooded about evil, but he emphasizes men forcibly possessing women based on a patriarchal logic. His male characters thus refuse to acknowledge a woman's rights to bodily integrity. By "having a prick" guys have their own set of ethical standards. The sexual motivation and possessive instincts (aggression) of male characters are implicitly viewed as natural. This leads readers to doubt the true connotation of femininity in Thiệp's writing (Phạm N.X. 2001: 16–20). For Thiệp, it seems that "femininity" is just a game for male characters to play, while it is also a disguised cover in the writer's narrative discourses.

IV. Phallic Narcissism and Impotence

The glorification of the phallus is an essential part of the myth about men as creators and enslaved people. Because of the penis, men have the right to be arrogant. Because they lack a penis, women carry a "castration complex" and are often considered of low status, and thus must accept being enslaved. The erect state of the phallus provides men with pride and power. Women's different genitals represent inferiority. In Thiệp's writings, heroines tend to "shrive!" in front of men's eyes. This is the case even with the most unmoved characters, as when the male teacher Triệu looks at Hiền in the story "Những bài học nông thôn." Meanwhile, in "Sang sông," the girl's joyful submission to the rough touches from her boyfriend's hands is a persuasive testimony to men's power over a woman's body. In other words, the female body itself is a sign of

submission and an arena for male domination. Nonetheless, as a cultural observer, Thiệp chooses this method to stand out for excessive masculinity. He extensively depicts phallic narcissism and the male characters' impotence to deconstruct the mythical power of those overconfident in their masculinity.

Phallic narcissism in women and the habit of penile display in men have been mentioned by psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, as well as the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and the zoologist Desmond Morris. Phallic narcissism encourages the display of the penis and refers to the imposition and submission of power and social status established by men. Penile display and phallic infatuation are sometimes overtly manifest in primitive cultures; in modern societies, however, most phenomena are symbolic, hidden in metaphors, subtle expressions, or physical representations, so it is not easy to recognize them (Morris 2011: 169–201). Thiệp's language contains a tendency to expose male genitalia regularly, as can be seen in an example from the short story "Những bài học nông thôn":

Lam's grandmother chimed in, "A long, long time ago, there was a Mr. Hai Chep, a ferryman who loved playing *tam cúc*²³ for money. At first he lost his money, then he lost his field, then he lost his house, and finally his wife left him. So when night came, he went out to his boat, sat, and cried. Angry at life, but wanting to redeem himself, Mr. Hai Chep took out his knife, cut off his two testicles and threw them into the river. But his wife didn't go back to him."

Lam's mother replied, "That's an unfaithful woman."

Lam's grandmother said, "Unfaithful? He only had those two testicles and now he'd lost those, too." (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 21).

In the Vietnamese language, "của quý" is a word that is only used for the male genitals, not for female genitalia. The phallic narcissism stated by a "philosopher" like Mrs. Lâm shows that the penis is a symbol affirming the value and domination of men in

²³ "Tam cúc" (三菊) is a popular folk card game in Northern Vietnam; tam cúc involves 32 cards, divided into two sides: red and black, 16 cards each. Card names in tam cúc are similar to Chinese chess (象棋). The rules of the game are simple, thus it attracts a large number of players, especially women.

rural society. One of the “rural lessons” that Hiếu learned was that the size of a man’s genitals determines a man’s position in the family. That is why the severest punishment to humiliate a man is castration. Historically, the author of the Chinese masterpiece *Records of the Grand Historian* (《史記》), Si Maqian (司馬遷), was a famous victim of this humiliation. In Thiệp’s short stories, the reader encounters this terrible punishment in “Phẩm tiết” (Chastity). When the character King Gia Long discovers that his servant Vũ Văn Hoàn wanted to take over his beauty Vinh Hoa, the king punishes Hoàn by castrating him.

Phallic narcissism is closely connected to penile display, which men use in various contexts to flaunt power, strength, and status. In Thiệp’s stories, penile infatuation appears in metaphorical forms. Male characters tend to love showing off phallic symbols and sexual behavior in “Muối của rừng,” “Chuyện tình kể trong đêm mưa” (Love Story Told on a Rainy Night), and “Những ngọn gió Hua Tát.” This metaphorical ostentation is apparent in the pounding of rice in “Những bài học nông thôn,” ploughing in “Con gái thủy thần,” and the wedding in “Không có vua.” Moreover, their penile flaunting reflects its complicity with profanity, swearing, and bawdiness in “Những người muôn năm cũ.” In Vietnamese folk culture, young men often secretly brag to each about “squeezing breasts” and “touching the butts” of women. They see such actions as an achievement to improve their position and strength in the group. Thiệp delightfully describes this behavior in the stories “Chút thoáng Xuân Hương” and “Đời thế mà vui” (Life’s So Fun). The youth of the village of Duệ Đông in “Những bài học nông thôn,” for example, are complicit in committing sexual harassment against the landgirls. They all share the same attitude. Ironically, for their collective consciousness, the display of erect penises, reckless aggression, and sexual attacks on women are seen as a natural right equal to political power. In another scene, Ms. Hiên’s laughter (“Những bài học nông thôn”), as well as the tolerant manner of the ferry lady Hương’s (“Chút thoáng Xuân Hương”) lead to the interpretation that women must submit to the men’s sexual whims.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp deconstructs male rights, however, by placing male characters in the transitional situation from a

subsidized economy (kinh tế bao cấp) to a market economy. The era 10 years after the Vietnam War (1975) and before Vietnam officially implemented the *Đổi mới* policy in 1986 is called the subsidized period (thời bao cấp), and the country's economy at this stage was a subsidized economy. The state undertook economic activities during the period, and private economy was abolished. The central government focused on developing collective and state business. Subsidized economy contains five essential characteristics: (i) goods on the market are distributed according to vouchers (tem phiếu) issued by the state; (ii) exchange, trade, and transportation of goods are limited; (iii) cash transactions are limited; (iv) food is distributed per person in each family; and (v) the state regulates the amount of rice and items each family is allowed to buy. The period was light, spare, and saw deceptively simple accounts of the “extraordinary everyday” (Collins 2016: 83). It witnessed the worship of money. The traditional cultural order was broken, there were many ethical dilemmas,²⁴ and the status of men in the family and in society was challenged.

In this context, culturally expected masculinity was endless, multi-directional, and uncertain. Efforts to fill it up thus created a helpless feeling in characters with nothing but knowledge. In some places, knowledge can be power, but in the circumstances of *Đoài* (“Không có vua”) and *Doanh* (“Những người muôn năm cũ”), however, it is only frivolous. Thiệp was obsessed with connecting reality with the business of raising dogs, birds, and trading gold. At that time, if men's honor, which is symbolic property, is drastically depreciated, money, which is genderless and does not need honor, becomes “king.” A man can become a raffish person (*Hạnh*, “Huyền thoại phố phường”), a thief (*Khiêm*, “Không có vua”), or a prostitute (*Chuong*, “Con gái thủy thần”) as long as he gets money. In Thiệp's stories, men's feeling of impotence originates primarily from their unsuccessful experiences in sex and career, not from failed

²⁴ Ethical dilemma (伦理两难) is a term from ethical literary criticism; an ethical dilemma is made up of two moral propositions: if the chooser makes a separate moral judgment regarding each proposition, then each choice is correct and consistent with broad moral principles. However, once the chooser chooses between two propositions, it leads to a choice against morality and contrary to common moral principles.

experiences in the market. The cultural situation led men to face and fall into a sense of impotence, and they feel superfluous or useless in relation to everything that seems abstract, ideal, or purely spiritual such as interest in philosophy literature, and art (“Không có vua” and “Huyền thoại phố phường”). People turn away from the abstract world of morality to enter the real world, where gold is the symbol of success. This world is ideally suited for women who “need understanding and caresses, and they need help with money” (“Những bài học nông thôn”) (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 28).

The writer reveals a stupefied sorrow in his description of masculine impotence in the face of feminine expectations. The writer agonizes over the humiliation and vileness of Chuong, a rural young man who leaves the village to find the Water-Nymph’s daughter in the work of the same name. Exhausted and dazzled by the landlord Phuong, Chuong is powerless. He is no longer a man in front of Mây, a pretty girl who willingly offers her virginity to him. The village man is impotent and cannot participate in love and sexual games.

May pulled away from me in dismay. “Chuong! You’re impotent?” I buried my face and cried noiselessly in shame. She stood up and said, “I understand. Such is my fate. Don’t be sad. Don’t cry anymore. Those people in the house up there, they always have it all. Chuong, I’m asking you to take it easy on yourself, if only to relieve me of my misery.”

She slipped away and ran out to the courtyard. I felt the roof above me collapse onto my head, the very heavens collapse upon my head. All was destroyed, left in ruins. (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 325).

Chuong spent his entire youth searching for the girl of his fanciful dreams, the daughter of the Water Nymph. Mây is most likely the girl he has long been looking for. She is just a maid and is tempted by the vast amount her master would pay her. She therefore agrees to sleep with him. Mây takes pride in her virginity and wants to give it to Chuong before she selling it to her boss. The maid takes the initiative by appearing naked before the guest, and when he sees her naked back, Chuong immediately thinks of the legendary lady he has been looking for. His heart burn with pain

and sorrow. Chương's impotence is subject to further humiliation by Mây's comforting words, thus becoming even more tragic as he shows his helplessness in front of the girl he desires.

Thiệp delves into the profound pain of his male character because sexual impotence is a man's own bodily experience, just as menstruation, loss of virginity, and childbirth are women's experiences. For Gia Long, the protagonist in the story "Vàng lửa" ("Fired Gold"), his sexual incapability as an emperor living in a palace full of beautiful young ladies is closely intertwined with his political helplessness in the face of the poor and depressed state of the Vietnamese people.

The King is one colossal solitary mass. He performs his role in the imperial court with great skill. He moves, stands, exists, enters, issues orders, and receives homage from his clique of court officials. He is a stern father toward his selfish and dimwitted children. As a husband, he commands respect from his mediocre wives. He knows he is old, and with the young, beautiful concubines in his royal harem he is impotent. (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 205).

The King's impotence is shared between himself and his women, and readers can predict that Gia Long's illness will be a secret as no wife would be allowed to reveal it on pain of being beheaded. The King himself is, however, the one who feels the humiliation of his phallus the most.

The feeling of incapability arises from the experience of sexual failure, but more broadly and beyond sexuality, it indicates powerlessness in the face of life and great cultural expectations. The sense of humiliation, failure, and impotence, therefore, are profoundly expressed in stories "Không có vua," "Tuống về hưu," "Chút thoáng Xuân Hương," "Mưa Nhã Nam" (The Rain Nha Nam), "Phẩm tiết," and "Những người thợ xé." Readers can recognize that Thiệp's heroes such as Tổng Cốc, Nguyễn Trãi,²⁵ Nguyễn Huệ, Nguyễn Du,²⁶ Đề Thám, and General Thuận are powerless losers.

²⁵ Nguyễn Trãi (阮鵬) (1380–1442) was a great politician, writer, and cultural figure in Vietnam, whom UNESCO recognized as a world cultural celebrity.

²⁶ Nguyễn Du (阮攸) (1766–1820) was a great poet and cultural figure in Vietnamese

Nguyễn Huệ, for example, is diffident and ineffectual before an arranged fate (“Phẩm tiết”). Đê Thám’s helplessness is not in the face the enemy but rather in being confronted by all the social habits that overwhelm his life (“Mưa Nhã Nam”). General Thuần is old and powerless in the face of the chaos, anarchy, and vulgarity surrounding him and his relatives (“Trống về hưu”).

In most of Thiệp’s writings where the word “bất lực” (impotence) appears, it is usually accompanied by the loneliness, sadness, pain, indignity, grief, and diffidence of male characters. This impotence is extremely complex. It can include the narrator’s helplessness in the barbarous life of the minorities (“Tội ác và trừng phạt” or Crime and Punishment), the powerlessness before the vast and boundless mysterious power of nature (“Mưa Nhã Nam” and “Những người thợ xẻ”), and men’s incompetence before women’s nobility (“Chút thoáng Xuân Hương” and “Muối của rừng”). In Vietnamese literature, no one focuses on the impotence of words and forms of expressions with such bitterness, sorrow, and torment as Nguyễn Huy Thiệp does in the story “Thương nhớ đồng quê” (Remembrance of the Countryside):

I’m thinking
I’m thinking about the simplicity of words
Forms of expression are too powerless
While exhaustion fills the earth
Shameless injustice fills the earth
Desolate fates fill the earth
How many months and years pass by
How many lives pass by
No words has the skill to describe it. (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 268)

This sense of “bất lực” appears often in the work of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. It is a repetitive chorus. In “Giọt máu,” the character Phong says: “Good poetry is melancholy but impotent” (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 182). In “Bài học tiếng Việt” (“Vietnamese Lessons”), Vũ

feudal history. He was dubbed the “Great National Poet” by the Vietnamese people and has been honored by UNESCO as a world cultural celebrity. His poetic story, *Truyện Kiều* (*The Tale of Kieu*), is considered a masterpiece of medieval Vietnamese literature.

is impotent because he cannot always answer the question of what a person's soul is. Thiệp hopes to convey that writers are powerless because they are not always solid and honest in exploring life, themselves, and society.

Paying attention to the presentation of male characters' impotence is how the writer examines male identity in the contemporary context. In this environment, the prospect of material and physical success has pushed men back, giving away women's resourcefulness in a developing market economy. This is presented in a cold, sharp-witted style in "Tuống về hưu," which sounds "the alarm and confusion of a war hero faced with the chaotic reality of postwar society" (Nguyễn 2008: 199). Thuấn won in the war and the symbolic market, but in the new daily life and real market, he and the other men failed. General Thuấn was able to manage his family in a military barracks but could not keep them safe in contemporary social life, because he belonged to a class of people who did not know, like, or want to earn money.

Thiệp's male characters are powerless to realize their golden dreams and exalted ambition, and this is related to issues of male honor. Many men run away from home, looking for a way out in the outside world, but they are miserably unsuccessful and must return from whence they departed. Living in families with the wife's tenderness and the children's docility makes men like Phụng ("Thương nhớ đồng quê") and Hội ("Chăn trâu cắt cỏ" or Herding Buffalo and Cutting Grass) feel that their value is in decline, which leads to depression. The dream of consuming "Galant Tobacco,"²⁷ the dream of changing one's life with a lottery ticket, and the dream of marrying a rich wife become the ironic moral choices of men like General Thuấn ("Tuống về hưu"), Hạnh ("Huyền thoại phố phường"), and Đoài ("Không có vua"). In the new economic reality established after 1986, many local men, especially intellectuals, were twice as impotent. After the excessively favorable period of the Vietnam War, they passively dropped into the dark and chaotic womb of a new life. Stuck in the disordered negative world, bewildered by practical

²⁷ "Thuốc lá Ga-lăng" is an expensive brand of imported cigarettes; it symbolizes luxury and shows the class ranking of the rich people in urban Vietnam in the 1980s.

physical and financial demands, they submit to helplessness. Women's work, which men consider vile, shows unexpected economic effects. The principle of "eating first," which female characters like Thùy worship, challenges and overturns men's abstract illusions ("Trống về hưu"), as men possess "exalted ambitions" and try to seek honor in prestigious but useless jobs. Men, immersed in illusions, are lost in the real market that has never been a "battlefield," as in the works of some later Vietnamese writers. This is one of the causes of men's sense of social incompetence.

Relativizing the boundaries and status of masculinity and femininity by designating their weakness, helplessness, and humble status, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp softens the lines between male powerfulness/nobility and female feebleness/abjection. Barker (2005: 279–314) notes that sad, weak, lonely, helpless men turn out to be the kind characters who win the author's sympathy and the readers' love: "any person with a soul is fragile and conservative... he always doubts and are skeptical in their hearts"²⁸ ("Bài học tiếng Việt") (Nguyễn T.H. 2021: 419). As Bourdieu (2018: 50) argues, the socially recognized dignity of man is a leverage by which a woman can enhance her position. In the short story "Sang sông," the girl's proud attitude and long-term commitment to the boy's rough sexual touches is typical. This is probably Thiệp's romantic social solution. The masculinity in these writings, in other words, is the manifestation of masculinity linked to femininity in contemporary Vietnamese life, which has indeed become more complicated—but also more exciting—than traditional views.

V. Conclusion

In medieval Vietnamese literature, male and female characters are often presented according to gendered expectations: men are strong and dominant, while women are weak and subjected. In modern writings, women are pictured as victims of feudal patriarchy. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, however, realized the heavy burdens on the shoulders of both men and women. These tensions make them feel helpless,

²⁸ Translated by Anh Dân Nguyễn.

miserable, and unhappy. Consequently, he does not provide a dualistic, opposing view of men's and women's rights. He goes beyond the gender binary to concentrate on human identity and the right to a decent life among people in post-war Vietnam. One can see, however, that Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's heroes are regressing toward the negative, which is a passive, disappointed, and confused turn. In terms of today's audience, "the retired general" is an essential condition of *Đổi mới*, because the light and order commanded and controlled by General Thuận has dimmed and collapsed. Meanwhile, "without a king" is life's womb—a dark, slimy, and chaotic place, but still the source of new life. The world of "the accustomed people," or the old-fashioned generation, such as Thuận ("Tuống về hưu"), must descend to create conditions for another world. It is the world of a new generation like that of the daughter of Sinh ("Không có vua").

The writer's sophisticated and puzzling discursive strategies wrap an irreversible situation in a severe effect. He destabilizes the stereotypes of gender and power, and by relativizing male-female antagonism, the dichotomy of masculinity and femininity discourse, and blurring and reducing gender contradictions, Thiệp reveals his talent as a writer. In his stories, he illustrates complex aspects of masculinity in a unique way. Perhaps this is why local critics consider him to be standing out in contemporary Vietnamese literature (Vuong, Nguyễn, and Zinoma 2021: 119). Nguyễn Huy Thiệp delicately captures the deep and rich depths of the relationships between men and women. The masculinity of the characters in his works is multidimensional, and this appears in different ways in many of his short stories, where Thiệp's male protagonists demonstrate their sexual strength, seek glory, and maintain their dominant position in society by engaging in the game of hunt and conquering women. Due to complex changes in the social and moral context, however, gender expectations became multi-directional and polymorphic, and male figures in the new environment quickly entered the realm of prostitution, humiliation, helplessness, and failure. Ultimately, Thiệp eliminates gender misunderstandings and presents widespread and subtle manifestations of patriarchal consciousness in Vietnamese language and culture after 1975.

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