



Paradise of the Blind

D??ng Thu H??ng , Nina McPherson (Translator) , Phan Huy ???ng (Translator)

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Now, at last, comes the first Vietnamese novel ever translated and published in North America. Duong Thu Huong is Vietnam's most beloved and outspoken novelist. In Paradise of the Blind she has created a devastating portrait of three women fighting to maintain their dignity in a society that expects ever greater sacrifices from them. Paradise of the Blind is a rich, sensuous journey through a Vietnam never seen before. In images of astonishing grace and power, and through her unforgettable gallery of women, Duong Thu Huong dazzles the reader with her ability to evoke the colors, the foods, the smells, and the age-old rituals of her country. At the center of the novel is Hang, a young woman forced to grow up too fast in the slums of Hanoi and the turbulence of modern Vietnam. Duong Thu Huong brilliantly captures Hang's rebellion against her mother and the loneliness of her search for self. There is Hang's mother, who watches, powerless, as her life is shattered by a fanatical political campaign led by her own brother. And there is the mysterious Aunt Tam, who has accumulated wealth and bitterness in equal parts and seeks to pass on both to her niece, Hang. The intoxicating beauty of the Vietnamese countryside, the hunger, the pride, the endurance of ordinary Vietnamese people confronted with the hypocrisy and corruption that surround them - all are here in this moving and lyrical novel. With the publication of Paradise of the Blind comes the introduction of a world-class storyteller whose extraordinary sensitivity and courage have captivated a generation of Vietnamese readers.

Paradise of the Blind Details

Date : Published July 1st 1994 by Penguin Books (first published 1988)

ISBN : 9780140236200

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Format : Paperback 272 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Cultural, Asia

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From Reader Review Paradise of the Blind for online ebook

Aubrey says

So this was life, this strange muddle, this flower plucked from a swamp.

This book shows up on both the 500 GBBW and the 1001 BBYD lists: why, I do not know. Unlike the usual denizens of the latter, this is a little less white and male and self-titled as apolitical, and while the former was less boring, its collection of women of color in translation is minuscule, with this the most likely being its only representative from Vietnam. One must point out the fact that the 500 GBBW was compiled in '91 and Paradise of the Blind, the first novel from VIetnam to be published in the US as claimed by the cover, was published in 1988, and the slow pace of translations today doesn't bode well for the amount published in the US marketplace in those three years back then. I must also admit to having read a mere two pieces of Vietnamese lit including this one, both of which were by this author. As such, the usual tug of war between honest evaluation of quality literature and a rare breed mounted upon the establishment's wall is more overt here, as it is with its fellow lone representatives of time and place such as So Long a Letter and The Prostitute and Sultana's Dream. I personally like this work, but it's always good to bear in mind how the status quo fuels itself on the fresh blood of diversity while minimizing the reader's incentive to follow said criminally brief diversity off the beaten track.

I understand something, perhaps for the first time: In every life, there must come a moment when what is most sacred, most noble, in us evaporates into thin air. In a flash of lucidity, the values we have honored and cherished reveal themselves in all their poverty and vulgarity, as they had to this girl. From this moment, no one is spared.

A few of my students have a world history exam approaching, and one of them asked why communism was so vilified. In addition to discussion of various body counts (in case anyone was wondering, they are comparable, if not exceeded, by those amassed under capitalism in its various guises of colonialism, slavery, and the like), I gave her the example of a world where engineers and doctors made the same as teachers and sanitation workers, and asked her whether parents would be inclined to shell out as much as they do for corporate tutoring if there was no return investment. She said no, and that was that. Obviously this is a dangerous simplification, and PotB (ableist title that it is) is but one of many, if one of the more holistic, books and experiences one would have to engage with to get a grip on communism, socialism, and the capitalism I've been functioning obtusely under for the better part of a quarter of a century.

You say our dances are decadent. But haven't you done some dancing yourself? Invisible dances, infinitely more decadent than ours?...It's the dance of the overlords after they've finished laying out traps for their enemies, after they've pandered to the powers that be, as they near their prize: a job with power and all the perks. It's the night before they kill the fatted calf, when they sit sucking their water pipes, rolling cigarettes, waiting for daybreak. Waiting for their consecration. Their minds, undoubtedly, were dancing at the time.

While there are those who hate the idea of undermining of capitalism for the sake of keeping billions of dollars out of circulation so that others may starve, there is the simple fact that the social web keeps millions alive, and no movement can be considered a necessary revolution if any of those with disabilities or neuroatypicalities or economic disadvantages are viewed as a practical sacrifice for the fit and able when the system comes crashing down. Hang, the main character, benefits from communism defeating capitalism in the Vietnam war: haphazardly, ironically, and bitterly, every piece of riches accumulated through broken

hearts, abused traditions, and bourgeoisie materialism in the land ruled by the proletariat. Despite this, there is food, and culture, and friendship, and when all is said and done, a perfect socioeconomic system doesn't yet exist, which means work still needs to be done. If you take this novel as one that rejects communism wholesale, you've acquired the task of putting your money where your mouth is and setting fire to public schools, public libraries, public bathrooms, and any other place that does not exist merely to turn a profit. The revolution doesn't have a solutions manual, and the fact that it hasn't happened yet is no reason to bury one's head in the sand.

How intoxicating it can be, self-sacrifice.

This wasn't as powerful as *Novel Without a Name*, but as far as borderline conventional narratives go, it has enough sensory detail and tackling of the deeply difficult questions of life and how one must live it for me to rest content. The biographical note has informed me that this is one of a somewhat trilogy, so while I really do need to branch out from this single author Vietnamese lit show, I'll be keeping an eye out for "Beyond Illusions" and "Fragments of Lost Life". As said before, this work has broken into the status quo of the Neo-Euro estimation of lit enough for others to catch wind and follow their reading sensibilities to unfamiliar landscapes. For every ten that leave with their district socioeconomic gods outside of capitalism, one may leave with the questions of why and how and where do we go from here. Much to my chagrin, I still haven't lost my attraction to the Nobel Prize for Lit, so H??ng's name is one I'll be putting into the running.

Little Sister, you must understand, even if it hurts. Your uncle is like a lot of people I've known. They've worn themselves out trying to re-create heaven on earth. But their intelligence wasn't up to it. They don't know what their heaven is made of, let alone how to get there. When they woke up, they had just enough time to grab a few crumbs of real life, to scramble for it in the mud, to make a profit—at any price. They are their own tragedy. Ours as well.

Quân Khuê says

??c l?i mà nh? ??c l?n ??u, vì l?n ??u ??c khi còn quá nh?. Không nh? nhi?u cu?n khác ??c l?i vài trang ch? mu?n v?t, Nh?ng thi?n ???ng mù ??c l?i v?n hay. V?n ch? H??ng th?t s? r?t ??p.

Nathan says

There's an axiom repeated in every school across the United States that goes something like: "communism works on paper, but not in reality", and although I've heard it repeated countless times, I've never heard any explanation beyond that single phrase. *Paradise of the Blind* shows clearly why such a statement can be so widely accepted as a truth. It's a novel filled with infringements on human rights, bureaucracy and partisan anger. It's often disorienting and strangely beautiful. It's a book that presents a lot of problems, but with no clear solution. Duong Thu Huong really has created something original here.

I have to imagine that Huong knew that this would be more read by an international audience than a Vietnamese one. Her work was already growing controversial and being banned, so it's striking that she chose to write about a relatively calm, frequently brushed over time, especially since Vietnamese history is so often turned into a series of wars and occupations. But it seems that the absence of war can hardly be

equated with real peace. As Hang's story progresses, a quiet sense of hopelessness begins to invade her voice. Because she comes from a family of landowners, because she is fatherless, and because she is a woman, Hang is constantly thought of as frail, mistreated and cast aside as something insignificant. She grows to feel that she cannot change the world she is in because of a series of rights that have not been afforded to her.

Make no mistake about it, this is a feminist novel. Under the traditional practices of Aunt Tam, Hang is supposed to be dainty and frail in hopes of attracting a man. Under Uncle Chinh's idea of communism, her place is to support her family's men as they work, or to take on a job that he deems acceptable for women. Que wants her daughter to bow to both sides, never to have a controversial idea and to always be pleasant. Under all these strong ideals, Hang feels like she cannot be her own woman. From the very beginning this conflict is clear, when Hang speaks of the place that sticks in her memory the strongest:

An ordinary pond, like the kind at home. A pond lost in some godforsaken village, a place where the honking of cars, and the whistling of trains is something mysterious, exotic. A place where young women bend like slaves at their husbands' feet. A place where a man whips his wife with a flail if she dares lend a few baskets of grain or a few bricks to relatives in need. A strip of land somewhere in my country, in the 1980s.

Perhaps the hopelessness is so potent in *Paradise of the Blind* because everyone has an unbending ideology. Tam with her ideas of dignity, Que with her sense of honor, and Chinh with his revolution all use their beliefs to be willfully blind to the humanity around them. Their hope of a legacy keeps them from opening their minds and allowing other voices to be heard over their own. For this reason, a James Baldwin quote kept ringing through my mind when I was reading this, which clearly portrays the struggle of the novel much more poignantly than I ever could. It reads:

Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death--ought to decide, indeed, to earn one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. One is responsible for life: It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return.

Karen says

I do not understand why this book was chosen to be in "1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die." Yes, the descriptions of the food and countryside are beautiful. Yes, we should know what life in Vietnam was like after the war. But there was no story of interest. I did want to know how the relationship between Hang and her uncle ended, but it took too long to get to Russia. And getting there was such a chore - with the author jumping back and forth in time with no reason that I could discern. I finally gave up; did not even skim to find out.

This story compared very unfavorably to "In the Shadow of the Banyan". Set in Cambodia during the regime

of Khmer Rouge, it also told how tough it was to survive as a child in a time of revolution and cruel leaders. I thought the writing was much better and the story moved faster.

Chinook says

I'm so glad that the 1001 list lead me to this book, since I was otherwise unaware of it.

The writing is wonderful. The author really drew me back to the sights, sounds and smells of Hanoi - I could at times powerfully recall my trip there.

This book covers not just the subject of the Vietnamese war and its aftermath, but also the export workers to Russia, a subject I know little about. I think in the West we are so used to the narrative of immigration to the West, especially to the US, and we tend not to be very aware of immigration to other places, so it was good to discover a novel that covers that ground.

But the strength of this book lies for me in the family relationships and particularly the look at what the loss of family members does to the relationships with the few still alive. Watching Aunt Tam and Hang's mother trying to hold close their remaining family in ways that pushed people away and wanting to hate Uncle Chinh but then being shown why he too was deserving of sympathy made this an exceptional read.

Rowland Pasaribu says

Paradise of the Blind, by Vietnamese novelist Duong Thu Huong, was first published in Vietnam in 1988 and translated into English in 1993. It was the first novel from Vietnam ever published in the United States and gave American readers authentic insight into the poverty and political corruption that characterized Vietnam under the communist government from the 1950s to the 1980s. Although to most Americans the name Vietnam conjures up images of the Vietnam War, the novel does not concern itself with what the Vietnamese call the American War. It begins in Russia in the 1980s, as Hang, a young Vietnamese woman, travels to Moscow to visit her uncle. As she travels, she recalls incidents from her childhood and adolescence in Hanoi and also tells of life in her mother's village during the communists' disastrous land reform program that took place in the mid-1950s. The novel, which was banned in Vietnam, is essentially the story of three women from two generations whose family is torn apart by a brother who insists on placing communist ideology above family loyalty. The exotic setting and descriptions of the lives of ordinary Vietnamese people in rural and urban areas, combined with the story of young Hang's struggle to forge her own path in life, make for a compelling story.

What sets in motion the multiple individual tragedies of the novel is the attempt by the victorious communists to impose the principles of Marxism on their society. According to Marxism, in every society there is a struggle between the exploiters, the landowners or factory owners (the bourgeoisie), and the exploited, the peasants and the working classes. The so-called land reform that the communists enact in the novel is a catastrophic failure and causes great injustice, "sowing only chaos and misery in its wake," as far as Que's village is concerned. In the village, anyone who owns even a tiny amount of land is declared to be an enemy of the peasantry, even though these small landowners have never exploited anyone. Nonetheless, their property is arbitrarily seized on the orders of Que's brother, Chinh, who thinks only in terms of rigid Marxist theory of class struggle. It is Chinh's adherence to this theory that creates and perpetuates injustice in

his own family. Putting ideology above family, he denounces Ton, his own brother-in-law, for the simple reason that Ton's family hired farm labor and, therefore, belong to the exploiting class. Chinh's ideological zeal leads to Ton's exile and death; Que's unhappiness; the lifetime enmity of Ton's sister, Tam; and Hang's loneliness as she grows up without a father.

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

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

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

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

Particularly evocative are the descriptions of the slum in Hanoi where Hang grew up. She recreates the sights, smells, sounds of her childhood in all their sensory details: the brick hut in which she lived, with its leaky roof; the sounds of the street vendors as they set up their stalls in the morning and their characteristic cries as they hawk their wares; the voice of the crippled man who always sings the same mournful song; the

sounds and smells of many families cooking. There are numerous descriptions of food in the novel; food is important to Hang because in her childhood she sometimes goes hungry, and even at the best of times her diet lacks variety. On occasions, too, her mother gets sick because of lack of adequate food. Therefore, as Hang grows up she always notices and records in great detail occasions when food is present in abundance and variety, such as the feasts put on by Aunt Tam. Such occasions, suggesting the resilience and goodness of life, act as a counterweight to the adversity that in general characterizes the lives of the Vietnamese people.

The *Paradise of the Blind* depicts both the beauty and oppression of life permeated by culture and ideology and shows in its hopeful ending that it is possible for determined individuals to resist and transcend these powerful forces.

Corinne Edwards says

Raised in the slums of postwar Vietnam, Hang has lived a simple and hard life with her mother, who runs a tiny stall at a street market. While they find comfort in each other while Hang is young, the past slowly encroaches on them and Hang ends up in the center of a fierce feud between her mother and the sister of her father. Jealousy, family strife and her mother's strange way of satisfying her own need to be needed create havoc for Hang.

When I was trying to tell my husband about this novel, I was struck by the despair, the constant struggle of the Vietnamese peasants, both in the slums and in tiny remote villages. Events between the Communists and the people of Huang's mother's village would change all their lives forever - and everyone is searching for someone to blame. Huong's writing is so haunting, so precise, and it's very clear that she is writing from the perspective of one who has suffered at the hands of the communist party in Vietnam. I can see why this book was banned there - I would imagine that her portrayal of local Communist leaders is not the sort that would bring a government much pleasure.

I enjoyed this book for the flavors and smells - the rich picture it painted of a culture I knew virtually nothing about. It's politically charged, to be sure, and old and new ways often struggled to coexist. The narrative style made it a slow read for me, though, it jumped back and forth in time a lot. I think it could have been put together in a way that was easier for the reader, but I wonder if part of that is just a cultural preference. Read this book for a true sense of life in a Vietnam of not-so-long-ago, and brace yourself for a bitter but beautiful road.

Judy says

When one of the five reading groups I attend steers me to a great book I might otherwise not have discovered, I am happy. I forget about all the sappy or stupid books I have read for reading group discussions.

Paradise of the Blind is one of very few novels written by a Vietnamese writer and translated into English. Therefore this story, authored by a Vietnamese woman born in 1947, gives a little known view into life there. It begins when Hang is a ten-year-old girl living with her mother in the Hanoi slums, but goes back and forth in time as she grows to young womanhood and learns the history of her family.

The writing is achingly beautiful as she describes her surroundings both in Hanoi and in the tiny village from which her mother came. Thanks to a glossary of Vietnamese cultural and food items, the author initiates her readers into the spiritual and social rituals of her country. The result is a powerful but sad story of a culture in transition due to having achieved independence from the French and the chaos of creating a workable society along communist principles.

Hang, from her position of a child with a missing father, a grieving and confused mother, an insensitive uncle working for the party and a domineering paternal aunt, grows up with her own conclusions. While she pursues the love of her mother and some form of protection from her aunt, she is quite thoroughly disabused of the spiritual beliefs of her family and rejects the tradition of women who sacrifice themselves for family and particularly men.

Reading *Paradise of the Blind* made me think of Richard Wright's amazingly perceptive books *The Color Curtain* and *White Man, Listen*. Duong Thu Huong's novel reinforced my belief that women represent a force for intelligent and workable change on this mostly insane planet.

Huy says

Cu?n ??u tiên c?a D??ng Thu H??ng mình ??c và c?m th?y th?t s? b?t ng?, v?n th?t s? r?t ??p và u u?n. ?ây c?ng là l?n ??u tiên mình ??c m?t cu?n ti?u thuy?t vi?t v? cách m?ng ru?t ??t (kh?ng kh?c cách m?ng v?n hóa c?a Trung Qu?c là bao) n?n kh?ng ng?n ng?i cho 5 sao v? quá th?ch.

Emiley says

One of my all-time favorite books for its fantastic prose and masterful storytelling. When reading the book, I clearly felt the tension the author must have felt with regards to Vietnam--a deep love for its people and landscape, yet a sorrowful eye towards its history of corruption and deception. Ultimately, I was moved by her portrayal of a resilient student-turned-exported worker who found hope against a backdrop of national and familial turmoil.

James says

Banned in Vietnam *Paradise of the Blind* is an emotionally charged, elegant and fruitful novel. D??ng Thu H??ng charts the troubled life of Hang as she navigates her current life as a textile worker in a Russian factory with the disillusioned experiences of her childhood in Hanoi. D??ng's writing is spiritually evocative, filled with joy and rambling descriptions of rural Vietnam life, eschewing the focus away from fanatical politics [and thankfully, the Vietnam War] in favour for a quiet yet sophisticated meditation on culture. Culture through cuisine is the novel's main weapon: the memories of Hang come alive with street vendors clamouring to sell *che sweet pudding*, whilst the omnipresence of various meat *p?tés* remind us of the French culinary and colonial influence. D??ng provides a glossary filled mostly with indexes on food and spices, fitting for a novel which spends so many pages dedicated to the idea of food and consumption. On one level this national obsession with food - and at parts *Paradise of the Blind* does read a little like a cookbook - digs at a deeper level the various political implications of Confucianism, Communism and the land-reforms which wreak havoc upon the characters of the book.

'Along the roadside, purple and white bauhinia flowers spread like a quilt of blossoms over the peaks of the trees, as far as the eye could see. Once, I walked into this forest, plunging myself into its sea of purple flowers. At dusk it was a terrifying, unnerving beauty, like a revelation.'

I cannot help but wonder if readers vaguely exoticise D??ng's novel, the first Vietnamese novel translated into the US which offers a glimpse of a country that many people, me included, are relatively oblivious about. Vietnam is not such a paradise after all but both achingly wild and tender and, as D??ng builds up in a rather unsubtle manner, is capable of terrible tragedies. However wipe away D??ng's top layer of redolently sensuous language and the true heart of the novel reveals itself. Hang's life is not simply one of oppression, and nor is Communism the inherent evil, as some of the GR reviews seem to proclaim, but Hang is a victim of Vietnam's multiplicity. Hang grows up in an environment which is fiercely matriarchal, and she is caught between the affections of her mother and her Aunt Tam; both are at odds with each other but end up remarkably similar. It is Aunt Tam, a victim of the brutal land reforms, who in her rejection of what she supposes are old-fashioned traditions in favour for perspiration, who amasses a fortune of opulent excess, allowing her to dote upon Hang, essentially commodifying the last link in her blood-line. Blood runs thicker than water and *phó* in the novel and family-blood becomes the most valuable asset of all; only through Aunt Tam's double-edged generosity is Hang able to eat, to live and to study - in total, become a woman. Of course, in retaliation Hang's mother starts to buy her way into the even more austere lives of Hang's nieces. Thus D??ng presents a tragic cycle of sacrifice where each female figure sacrifices herself in favour for piety. Such dedication, D??ng portrays, is not merely integral to Vietnamese cultural - manifesting through food - but is as restrictive when paired alongside the Communist measures of the land reforms.

At the end of the day, both ideologies are various forms of charity. The characters within *Paradise of the Blind* all act as tradesmen, either literally as vendors and smugglers, or as metaphysical businessmen in the act of bartering cultural value. Such value D??ng explicitly projects through the novel itself in its exuberantly colourful descriptions of Hanoi's various markets and banquets; she places a value on the reading experience, allowing us to buy into the book's exotic nature in the same way Hang buys herself into a stable class structure. However, the book towards the end tears down the illusion of idealised romanticism: beauty, D??ng suggests, only exists from a certain vantage-point of safety. In her youth, Hang finds herself enraptured by the duckweed floating on a pond whilst by the rocks a woman is washing her dirty, worn feet in the waters, and asks Hang what is so special about duckweed. Such significance, especially cultural, becomes in the end criticised and exploited by D??ng. Hang in realising this must ask why she must follow tradition [and give up her education to become an 'exported worker']? To what extent is one's identity tied up to culture and home? The bloodlines which connect Hang travel through time. *Paradise of the Blind* is set in Hang's twenties as a series of reminiscences and flashbacks as she takes a train to Moscow; it is her anchoring of the past which haunts her now. Hang is not the only character indebted to the past: Aunt Tam, although outwardly an independent woman, is a slave to the patriarchal memory of her dead brother, a legacy which she tries to live through via Hang. Through her job as the storyteller - regaling her hardships - she forces those stories upon Hang, stories which are laced with judgement, morality and eventually become a form of punishment and commodification. The historical link to the land reforms, to the struggles of the characters, act as bonds [both economical and metaphysical] within the story in order to tie together the narrative. At first mildly disconcerting D??ng weaves an excellent job of placing stories within stories, seamlessly shifting from the present to the past, if perhaps a little repetitively.

However the novel is not merely a dreamy recollection of reconciling the past and present, but a journey through literal distances too. Hang's predicament and immigration to Russia is unique in its story-telling, and historically significant, but not much touched upon by D??ng, acting instead only as a gateway to the juicier narrative of Hanoi. It is the tension between Hang in Moscow which becomes one of the few highlights of the novel: in Moscow the environment is the complete antithesis to Hanoi in its cold masculinity and plain

weather. The dorm-room which Hang visits, populated by vaguely menacing male students, drives the message home quite literally about Hang's education which was once in her grasp but is now momentarily lost. Hope, as always, is present and she returns to Vietnam one last time to bury the dual shackles which have so far oppressed her; the novel's conclusion reads a little artificial and mawkish but there could be no other end for a novel about empowerment. Alluring prose finds itself on every page, however it should be read bittersweetly in favour against the wider problems the novel drops in on. Thus *Paradise of the Blind* comes full circle, with neither Moscow nor Hanoi as the paradises which they so seemed, and Hang dreaming of a vague and uncertain future, but one blinded with hope regardless.

Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says

Vietnam's "Clear Light of Day" (Anita Desai, India). This book, however, was banned in Vietnam. And it made me hungry.

Like "Clear Light of Day", this novel is a family drama which women writers, like Duong Thu Huong and Anita Desai, seem to write exceptionally well. But what is more remarkable here is that Duong Thu Huong isn't really a novelist. She is a professional screenwriter. She said she never intended to write novels. "It just happened, because of the pain," she said in an interview.

The pain, indeed. Hang (most likely the author writing here semi-autobiographically), a young woman in her early 20's, never knew her father Ton. He died when she was just a baby.

Ton belonged to a landed family at the time Vietnam became communist. The brother of Hang's mother, her Uncle Chinh, was a petty, local communist tyrant who had a myopic view of the Vietnamese society: the good guys are the proletariat and those who own lands or have servants are the enemies of the people. He persecuted Ton's family despite his (Ton's) marriage with his own sister. Shamed, Ton fled and met an untimely death. He left a sister--Hang's Aunt Tam--who suffered a lot too. She viewed Chinh as an assassin and responsible for all their sufferings.

Eventually, some of the "errors" of the communist rule were "rectified." Aunt Tam was given back her family's properties. She prospered. She loved Hang dearly because Hang looked exactly like her deceased brother and, being unmarried herself, she considered Hang as the perpetuation of her family's blood and memory. She never forgave Chinh, however, for her brother's death and their family's suffering. Hang's mother, on the other hand, never ceased to love her only brother Chinh despite what the latter did to her husband Ton who was her great and only romantic love (she never remarried). Hang hates her Uncle Chinh but tries to show him respect, even outward affection, for the sake of her mother whom she loves above all others. Her mother does not hate her Aunt Tam (with whom Hang had grown attached) but resents the latter's hatred for her brother Chinh. This strange mixture of love, hate, respect, contempt, reverence, tragedy and triumph made for an exciting read.

Why the hunger? Because the Vietnamese have this reverence for food. They sometimes express their emotions through food. Here, all throughout the varied dramatic moments there are always passages about food, glorious Vietnamese food (Anthony Bourdain, once asked what cuisine he remembers most and looks forward returning to, said "Vietnamese"). Food here is either being sold, cooked, prepared, eaten or just plainly lying there, exuding its aroma (which you can smell while reading, I swear!). At around page 100 of the novel I could not control myself anymore and had to eat three dishes at the Pho Bac, a popular Vietnamese restaurant in a nearby mall. Cost me a fortune, maybe the price of around six secondhand books,

but the urge proved irresistible.

Yummy!

Brina says

In my endless quest to read books by women from around the globe, I read *Paradise of the Blind* by Vietnamese author Duong Thu Huong. During the 1980s, Huong denounced the atrocities of the Vietnamese government in a trilogy of novels, *Paradise of the Blind* being her most famous. Huong does not label herself as anti communist but growing up in Vietnam she witnessed many violations of human dignities. Her books have been banned on occasion in Vietnam and she herself spent time in a prison. *Paradise of the Blind* is Huong's fictional biographical account of growing up in a Vietnam still rebuilding itself after the war.

Hang is the only child of Que, who was once a member of a peasant class in a small village. During the militant years Que's brother Chinh joined the military and fought ardently for the separation of classes. The bourgeoisie had property taken away from them, and Chinh desired the rise of the proletariat. A party loyalist, Chinh forbid Que to associate with Ton, the man she loved, because his family owned a few rice paddies. Ton's sister Tam never forgot this treatment of her family, and assisted Que in reuniting the couple. Although Ton later died in shame at the expense of Chinh, Que gave birth to Hang and raised her in poverty in Hanoi.

In Vietnam blood runs thicker than water. Even though Chinh indirectly killed Ton, Tam loves Hang with her whole heart because she is the family's lone descendant. She lives impoverished so that one day Hang can honor the family by attending university and eventually escaping from Hanoi altogether. As Tam would do anything for Hang, Que feels the same toward Chinh and his two children. In spite of living as proud communists by choice, Que feels it her duty to provide for his family. This loyalty creates conflict between her and Tam and Hang as well, resulting in Hang living a fractured childhood through adolescence.

While writing of impoverished conditions in post war Vietnam, Huong provides luscious prose in her descriptions of the village where Tam lives as well as Hang's constant feelings of despair. In this country, however, food is the universal language and no matter how poor a family is, they still provide to feed their family. Huong describes all Vietnamese delicacies in detail down to the time and effort it takes to prepare the festive dishes. Whether for the Tet, a banquet, or an afternoon tea between neighbors, food plays a prominent role in Vietnamese' lives. Even when Hang has nothing and almost is forced to give up her studies, she still manages to eat scrumptious dishes as fried beef and cabbage or rice noodles and cauliflower. While reading these sections, I pained for Hang but knew she would survive because she would always have a hearty meal to eat.

Paradise of the Blind is the second book I read by a Vietnamese author this year but the first to take place in Vietnam. From the west we only learn of one side of the country's story, not necessarily the one that Huong paints in her novels. Through her use of vivid prose and adept translation by Nina McPherson, Duong Thu Huong has made her readers aware of the injustices that occur between classes in post war Vietnam. Although today the country may finally be on its feet, this was not the case for many years. Huong's novels are important reads, and I look forward to reading the other two books in her trilogy.

QuyAn says

Mình thích cách tác gi? c?u trúc câu chuy?n, b?t ??u và k?t thúc b?ng vi?c H?ng nh?n ???c tin ông c?u và k?t thúc b?ng vi?c cô ng?i trên chuy?n tàu ??n th?m ông. ?an xen trong s? ??u tranh t? t?ng c?a H?ng v? hành ??ng t?i th?m, v? tinh c?m v?i ông c?u, là câu chuy?n cu?c ??i cô, và hai ng??i ph? n? khác - m? và cô c?a H?ng. V? n?i dung thì có m?t ch? mình c?m th?y h?i khi?n c??ng là lúc b? H?ng b? ?i, mà m? H?ng hoàn toàn b? b? ngoài cu?c. Mình th?y b? c?a H?ng hi?n l?n v?a tr? con, l?i có ch?t hèn hèn, toàn b? bà cô gi?t dây ch? ch? có ch?nh ki?n g?i m?y. N?u mu?n n?ng t?m nh?ng ng??i ph? n? l?n, c?ng kh?ng nh?t thi?t ph?i ??y ng??i ?àn ông xu?ng s?u d? v?y.

David says

The Long-Suffering Wife (LSW) got a copy of this book after reading The Beauty of Humanity Movement by Camilla Gibb, who cited this book as an inspiration for her novel. LSW then read and loved it.

We North Americans (Gibb is Canadian) tend to bring a certain sunny optimism to all topics, motivated at least in part by the knowledge that, of the ever-shrinking pool of people who read, many feel their lives are sufficiently difficult without reading books that throw the less pleasant parts of life into higher relief. This novel was written by a Vietnamese (and later banned in Vietnam). Although I managed to live in Vietnam for two years without really understanding its inhabitants, I learned through hard experience that sunny optimism is *never* the default position for Vietnamese, so I was prepared for a readable and well-translated slog through needless suffering, spiteful family relationships, the relentless quest for material success (the only yardstick to measure one's worth both in this life and the next), and the constant rendering of loud and obvious judgment on everyone else one meets. That's what I got.

In short, not the sort of novel to take the edges off after a hard day in the cubicle, but still an accurate representation of a time (early 1980's) and place that were not known to many in the West at the time and are now receding into memory. If you are not reading books (at least sometimes) to know things like that, well, then, don't come sit by me.

Lisa says

Paradise seems to be something we are only able to see when we have lost it.

As long as we are in the garden Eden, we are blind, following dictated rules and repressive authority. Losing paradise makes us seeing, knowing, understanding human beings, but also lost souls, people on the run, disoriented and disintegrated.

Re-establishing paradise, however, means willingly blinding us. Is that a reasonable price to pay for "heavenly" unity and order?

"Paradise of the Blind" feels oddly familiar to me despite the exotic setting, in a Vietnam shaken by Communist reorganisations. It is a political tale of revolutionary zeal and its brutal effect on individual people and their hopes and dreams. At the same time, it is the story of a clash between tradition and modernity, and of human failure to adjust to changing times and mindsets.

The old way of worshipping ancestors and living for the honour and wealth of the family is put in contrast with the ideology of Moscow-ruled communism. As so often in history, the women who try to make the family survive are the self-sacrificial sufferers of the swinging political and social pendulum.

Hang, the young protagonist of the story, is stuck between warring factions of the family, representing different ways of interpreting a "good" life, but one thing is common for all her demanding relatives: they see her life and her choices as theirs, and she remains the property of the family regardless of whether she commits to the communist doctrine of her uncle or to the traditional family values of her aunt. Her life is owned by others, and she has to engage in what she herself sees as a kind of "grotesque hide-and-seek" to please others.

My relief was almost physical when I saw her walk away from the situation and escape her blind paradise in the end:

"I can't squander my life tending these faded flowers, these shadows, the legacy of past crimes."

By leaving the suffocatingly beautiful setting of her paradise of the blind behind, Hang completes her training as a seeing human being and is ready to enter the stage of the world. You can't sacrifice existence to honour the past, is her message.

And I could not agree more. Paradise is a prison. Let's break out and live!

Th?o says

L?n ??u tôi ??c v?n c?a D??ng Thu H??ng là khi ??c cu?n ??nh cao chói l?i. Thành th?c mà nói thì cu?n ??y r?t chán, ho?c là do bà vi?t thiên v? ám ch? chính tr? nhi?u quá, ho?c là tôi b? ám ?nh b?i nh?ng h?i kèn tr?ng oang oang m? ???ng cho cu?n sách ?y nhi?u quá. V?n ch??ng ??c mà s?c mùi chính tr? l? thiên thì r?t ?áng bu?n. R?i hôm nay, trong khi ng?i v? v?n ng??c nhìn lên xu?ng t? sách gia ?inh, m?t tôi ch?m ??n m?y t?a sách c?a D??ng Thu H??ng th?i còn ch?a b? c?m xu?t b?n ? Vi?t Nam và có l? do duyên ??n, tôi quy?t ??nh ??c Nh?ng thiên ???ng mù.

Nh?ng thiên ???ng mù k? v? cô gái tên H?ng xu?t kh?u lao ??ng sang Liên Xô ?ang trên ???ng ?i th?m ông c?u b? ?m ? Matxc?v?a. ???ng xa, tr?i l?nh l?i ?ang ?m, H?ng chìm vào nh?ng kí ?c xa x?a t? th?i b? m? c? b? chia lìa, r?i gia ?inh ông c?u, cô Tâm ch? c?a b?... Cu?n sách tái hi?n l?i c? m?t th?i kì t? làng quê ??n thành th?, t? s? ph?n ng??i nông dân b? ??u t? ??n anh tuyên hu?n có v? ch? h?c c?p 2 ?ã thao thao gi?ng v? tri?t h?c duy v?t.

Nh?ng thiên ???ng mù thông qua s? ph?n c?a ba ng??i ?àn bà ?? hàm ?n thông ?i?p c?a mình. ?y là cô Tâm, ng??i ph? n? xinh ??p có h?c b? ??u t? là con nhà ??a ch? r?i t? tay tr?ng g?y d?ng c? nghi?p, quên c? tu?i xuân ?? tr? thù, m?t lòng ch?m lo cho ??a cháu – h?u du? duy nh?t còn sót l?i c?a nh? h? Tr?n; ?y là bà Qu?, có ch?ng b? chính em v? ??u t? ph?i b? tr?n, sinh con mang ti?ng ch?a hoang, b? làng b? quê ?i m?u sinh, b? em trai h?t h?i xong l?i h?t lòng hi sinh ?? lo cho hai ??a cháu – h?u du? còn sót l?i c?a nh? h? ??; ?y là H?ng, t? bé ??n l?n s?ng trong s? b?o b?c c?a cô Tâm và m? Qu?, b? quá kh? vùi l?p trong muôn vàn kí ?c h? ?o và trách nhi?m n?ng n?. Tuy nhiên, c?n nói r?ng, xã h?i mà D??ng Thu H??ng tái hi?n l?i trong ti?u thuy?t c?a mình dù mang n?ng v? u ám c?a hi?n th?c nh?ng ?ó tr??c h?t là cái hi?n th?c ?ã l?c qua l?ng kính ch? quan c?a bà.

D??ng Thu H??ng ?ã nh?c ?i nh?c l?i trong tác ph?m c?a mình hình ?nh “thiên ???ng mù”. Thiên ???ng mù ?y là cái h?nh phúc t?m b? trong phút ch?c, là th? ?o v?ng bèo b?t ng?n ng?i mà ng? sâu xa. Ông c?u Chính x?y d?ng thiên ???ng mù trên cái tài ?ánh ti?t canh cho th? tr??ng ?? th?ng quan ti?n ch?c, c? Tâm x?y d?ng thiên ???ng mù b?ng v?t ch?t vòng vàng quanh ??a ch?u ?? tr? thù quá kh? bi ph?n, bà Qu? x?y d?ng thiên ???ng mù b?ng cách d?c thân c?m c?i ?? nuôi l?y mi?ng ?n trong gia ?ình em trai m?c cho m?i s? khinh khi. Tôi có c?m t??ng, D??ng Thu H??ng ?ã r?i ??y nh?ng thiên ???ng mù nh? th? kh?p các trang sách ?? d?ng n?n m?t th? kh?ng kh?i b?p b?nh, nh?n nh?n và bu?n hiu bu?n h?t nh? th??ng h?i l?y nh?ng ph?n ng??i trong gu?ng quay s?n si th? h?n.

Dù v?y, ?i?u ??ng l?i trong tôi sau khi ??c sách l?i không ph?i hình ?nh “thiên ??ng mù” ?y mà là câu bà Qu? nói v?i ch? ch?ng :

“Em xin ch?, em l?y ch?, oán thù ch? nêñ c?i ??ng nêñ bu?c...”

K?t truy?n, H?ng quy?t ??nh bán h?t gia s?n cô Tâm ?? l?i cho mình và d?t áo ra ?i. Cu?i cùng là hình ?nh phi tr??ng v?i nh?ng chuy?n bay c?t cánh và h? cánh. H?ng ?ã t? ch?i xây ti?p nh?ng vách thành c?a thi?n ???ng mÙ n?, cô ?ang c? l?n c?i t?ng nút th?t thít ch?t s? ph?n ?ã b?a vây mình. Nh?ng v?i m?t ?? dày và n?ng s? u ám nh? v?n ?ã lèn trong t?ng câu ch? su?t thi?n truy?n, th?c kh? ?? th?p l?n cái hi v?ng gi?i thoát vào giây ph?t t?n cùng. ?i?u n?y khi?n nh?ng hình ?nh cu?i, nh?ng t? t??ng cu?i tr? n?n k?ch và kh? l?ng thuy?t ph?c ng??i ??c tin vào t??ng lai h?a h?n c?a H?ng. C?ng có th?, cô nói v?y mà cu?i cùng kh?ng l?m ???c v?y, nh? m? Qu? c?a cô n?m x?a nói v? s? c?i b? oán thù mà r?t cu?c v?n b? nó vùi ch?t, th?m sâu ? qu?n n??c ven ???ng và tinh c?t nh?c ?ã hoen m? tr??c ánh sáng c?a m? ti?n xu b?c c?c...

Th?o D??ng/Chi?m Phong (<http://readingcafe.wordpress.com>)

David says

I love the way this moves between lyric beauty, melancholy, and the inherent suffering of life. A good amount of complexity for a work that still resonates a uniform note. Very impressive.

Linh ?an Nguy?n says

Hoài ni?m, m?c c?m và ??nh ki?n trong ‘Nh?ng thi?n ???ng mù’

??NG ANH ?ÀO

Có th? nói r?ng Nh?ng thi?n ???ng m?u là m?t câu chuy?n d?t b?ng nh?ng m?nh k?y ?c trên n?n h?i?n t?i.

Ch?a hoàn toàn là th?i gian ??ng hi?n - m?t k? thu?t du nh?p t? ph??ng Tây và s?n ph?m c?a th? k? ?i?n? nh - nh?ng k?t c?u truy?n là s? ?an c?i, song song c?a quá kh? và hi?n t?i, th?m chí hi?n t?i nhi?u k?i ch? là m?t cái c? ?? ký ?c tuôn ch?y. N?u tính s? l??ng trang gi?y thì nh?ng trang quá kh? dày h?n hi?n t?i. Cho ??n k?i v?i cái ch?t c?a ng??i c?o (dù ng??i m? v?n c?n) th? th?t l? lùng, d? v?ng ?ă ch?m d?t ?i v?i nh?n v?t ch?nh: “d? v?ng ch? là d? v?ng”, ký ?c c?a c?o g?i g?p g? hi?n t?i, và c?u chuy?n ???c ?óng l?i: l?n ??u ti?n h?nh ?nh c?a t??ng lai xu?t hi?n v?i nh?ng “gi?ng ???ng và phi tr??ng xa x?i” l?i c?ng ch?nh là l?c k?t th?c trang cu?i

cùng c?a Nh?ng thiên ???ng mù.

C? ba ng??i ?àn bà á?n ng? trong câu chuy?n - H?ng nh?n v?t ch?nh, m? H?ng và bà c?c tên là T?m xu?t hi?n qua l?i k? c?a H?ng - ??u mang n?ng k?y ?c. ??i l?p l?i là m?t s? nh?n v?t c?a truy?n: m? N?n, ng??i ?àn bà tham ?n kh?c th??ng nh? trong c? t?ch và ca dao, ho?c c?u Ch?nh, em trai c?a m? H?ng... Nh?ng ng??i n?y có th? có qu? kh? nh?ng kh?ng có k?y ?c, ho?i ni?m: m? N?n l?p t?c qu?n ngay nh?ng th? m? v?a ?n xong; c?n c?u Ch?nh th? d??ng nh? ch?ng nh? g?i v? kinh nghi?m c?a c?i cách ru?ng ??t khi tr? thành th? tr??ng c?a m?t c? quan tuy?n hu?n ? H? N?i và ?? r?i l?i qu?n h?t c?a hai th?i k? ?y khi th?i th?t và “cu?n nem tho?n tho?t”, n?u ?n thu? (?) cho m?t nh?m thanh ni?n t?i m?t c?i “?p” n?o ?ó ? Moskva nh?n d?p xu?t d??ng du h?c t?n tr??ng AON.

C?ng nh? t?t c? nh?ng ng??i ?àn bà, ?i?m s?ng quy t? nh?ng nh? nhung và ho?i ni?m ? H?ng và bà Qu? (m? H?ng) c?ng nh? c?c T?m, ?ó là t?nh y?u, là h?nh ?nh m?t ng??i ?àn ông ?ã tan bi?n. V? ?ây h? có chung m?t ?i?m s?ng, dù v?i m? là “m?t t?nh y?u kh?ng th? o ??m, kh?ng th? t?m ki?m l?i”; v?i H?ng ?ó là “b? t?i, m?t t?nh y?u ch?a k?p bi?t m?t ?ã ch?n v?i trong b?n ??t”; và v?i ng??i c?, ?ó kh?ng ch? là “ni?m tri?u m?n, t?nh y?u kh?c kho?i”, m?a là c? m?t d?ng m?u, “m?t phi?n b?n ?ã th?t l?c”, m?t qu? kh? v?nh vi?n tan bi?n m?a c? ?ang “x? xác m?nh ra” ?? ph?c h?i l?i cho ??a ch?u... Cho dù d??i m?t H?ng, ?ó ch? là m?t thi?n ???ng mù, m?t thi?n ???ng mu?n m?n, phung ph?i.

Trong ba ng??i ?àn bà, m? c?a H?ng ?ã t?m th?y m?t ph?n n?o qu? kh? trong hi?n t?i, dù kh?ng ph?i là s? ti?p n?i h?nh ?nh ng??i ch?ng d?ng h? ?? qua ng??i em trai là c?u Ch?nh và nh?ng ??a ch?u. B?i v?y k?y ?c c?a bà kh?ng d?y b?ng hai ng??i kia. C?n k?y ?c c?a c?c T?m có m?ng h?n H?ng, nh?n v?t ch?nh ??ng th?i là ng??i k? chuy?n xu?t hi?n ? ng?i th? nh?t - m?t l?i th? ?? k? l?i k?y ?c - nh?ng ? c?c T?m n?o có ph?n n?ng n? h?n, “k? b?” và l?nh l?o h?n. Qu? là b?n H?ng, ??n con ch?o gi? c?ng “ng?i th?y l? m? c?i m?i c?a qu? kh?”.

Nh?ng k?y ?c c?a H?ng kh?ng g?n li?n v?i m?t huy?t th?ng, m?t ý chí ph?c th?ù, m? ?ó là c? m?t th? gi?i phong ph?u m?u s?c, ?m ?i?u, m?i h?ng c?a tu?i ?u th? tr?n ng?p thi v? qu? h??ng, v? l?i kh?ng ho?n to?n là qu? kh?. ?i?u l? l?ng l? d??ng nh? hi?n t?i l?n ??u t?n tr?ng th?y nh?ng b?ng tuy?t, m?t kh?c h?t c?a Pugatrova, ho?c m?t ?ám ?ông d?n Nga “h?m ch?a c?i g?i ?ó tr? ??ng... m?t th? an b?nh c?a l?n n??c h? kh?ng gi?o b?o, kh?ng lu?n chuy?n”, l?i c?ng kh?ng ph?i là c?i g?i ho?n to?n m?i m?a c?ng ?ang bi?n th?nh nh?ng k?y ?ã g?i l?i qua nh?ng ao b?o, hay m?t kh?c h?t Vi?t Nam t?ng l?m c?c c?c g?i ?i lao ??ng ? x? ng??i g?o l?n v?i th??ng nh?. ?i?u ?áng ch?u ý n?a là k?i ???c g?p l?i h?nh ?nh c?a qu? kh? t?ng k?i n? H?ng kh?c k?o i?i th? n?i bu?n v?n kh?ng ch?m d?t: ? c? kh?ng bao gi? ??t t?i t?n tr?ng th?a m?n k?i n?m b?t ???c qu? kh? trong hi?n th?c. B?i th?, t?i t?m g?i ?ây là ho?i ni?m v? nh?ng thi?n ???ng ?ã m?t, có ngh?a là kh?ng h?n v? nh?ng g?i ?ã có trong th?c t?. B?i qu? kh? ?ây dù c?c t?i nh?ng m?nh c?a thi?n ???ng, th? v?n là thi?n ???ng mù, ?ó kh?ng ph?i là thi?n ???ng m? ??c. M?i th? ??u ?ã th?m th?a len l?i “??c t? c?a n?i s?u kh?ng th? c?t ngh?a”, c?a ??nh k?i?n, tr?i tr?. Tr?n s?ng x?a ?ã “kh?c k?o i?i t?ng k?u c?a l? chim di trú bay...”; m?i hoa nh?i t?a h?ng... b?n d?ng n??c t?i u n?ng n?c c?a ?ám ng??i say bia; khu v?n c?a thi?n ???ng tu?i tr? là m?t khu ???ng ??y c?, hoang d?i; ?m ?i?u ??u t?n v?ng v?o gi?c ng? ??a b? l? t?ng rao h?ng ?i ?i và c?u h?t g?o l?n c?a m?t k? t?n ph? t?t nguy?n, ?? tr?ng s?c, nh?ng b?ng tai c?a ??a b? g?i l?n 10 ?ã “l?nh l?o b?ng gi?i” nh? “hoa t?n r?i xu?ng n?m m? hoang”... V? ho?i ni?m á?m ?nh nh?t, than ôi, l?i là m?t ao b?o t?m ng?t hoa nh?ng ng?ng, m?t m?i, m?t th? n??c “l?m ch?t ng?t d? d?ng nh?ng k? kh?ng bi?t b?i”. V? “?nh m?t tr?i ch?i chang nh?t c?ng ch? h?m n?ng ???c l?n n??c m?ng b?n tr?n”.

B?i t?t c? nh?ng g?i ?ã ?è n?ng l?n m?nh trong qu? kh?, n?n k?i ti?p x?c v?i m?t c?i g?i kh?ng gi?ng v?i th? gi?i c?a m?nh, nh?ng m?c c?m xu?t hi?n ? H?ng. V? kh?ng ch? c?a ri?ng H?ng, c?a ri?ng nh?ng c?c g?i ngh?o, nh?ng c?nh ch?m di th?c, m? ?ây, ng?i b?t c?a D??ng Thu H??ng ?ã ?i?m ???c ph?n n?o n?t t?m tr?ng c?a n?i?u ng??i Vi?t Nam hi?n nay. V?n ?ã bao n?m t??ng m?nh h?n h?n v? m?i m?t - t?m l?y ??c bi?t c?a nh?ng ng??i t?i ???c ph?p ti?p x?c - nay c?c h?i so s?nh m?t tr?ng th?i ng??c l?i xu?t hi?n. M?c c?m t?

chi?u cao c?a mình, t? thân hình g?y còm, t? s? nghèo kh? âu lo, t?i nh?ng “cu?c chia ly nham nh?” ? sân bay N?i Bài... Ôi, n?i ?au c?a chúng ta! Còn c?u Chính có cái di?m phúc là bao gi? c?ng th?a m?n, g?n nh? kh?ng m?c c?m, có l? b?i chính ?i?u ?ó ?ã nói trên ? c?u, kh?ng có nhi?u ký ?c hoài ni?m.

Và trong Nh?ng thiên ???ng mù kh?ng ph?i ít ??nh ki?n. Riêng ? ?ây tôi mu?n phân bi?t ??nh ki?n c?a nh?n v?t H?ng v?i ??nh ki?n c?a D??ng Thu H??ng. ?ành r?ng nh?a v?n có quy?n x?y d?ng nh?ng nh?n v?t ??y ??nh ki?n. ?ành r?ng H?ng có quy?n nh?n c?u Chính và c?i cách ru?ng ??t t? góc ?? c?m nh?n ?y. V? ch?ng v?n ?? xung ??t gi?a các th? h? (??i di?n qua c?u Chính và H?ng) là v?n ?? n?ng h?i hi?n nay. C?ng kh?ng th? nói m?i sai l?m ?ã qua ??u là t?t y?u c?a l?ch s? - n?u v?y th? ta ?ã ch?ng nói ??n chuy?n “s?a sai” và vi?c nh?n l?i qu? kh? s? là th?a. V? n?u c? m?i ng??i t? th?y m?n, ?c bi?t là ng?n m?n, c? quan m?n, th? h? m?n v.v... l?i b? ch?m n?c m?i khi g?p ph?i nh?n v?t ph?n di?n (t??ng ?ng v?i các th? trên) trong tác ph?m th? th?t kh?n kh? cho nh?a v?n. Song th?t s? là ? tác ph?m n?y, tôi th?y tác gi? có ch? ??nh ki?n, “x?u chu?i”, ??n gi?n h?o. Có cái gi? ?ó khi?n c??ng, g?o ?p trong s? h? c?u, nh?ng nh?n v?t nguy?n phi?n, m?t chi?u nh? c?u Chính, m? Thành và hai n?ng d?n c?t c?n n?. Vô ph?c cho nh?ng ông gi?a, vô ph?c cho nh?ng k? “?ã n?g?n c?u xong ch? ngh?a M?c-L?n?n”, nh?ng k? m? vinh quang, qu? kh? ???c t?nh b?ng nh?ng ch?c n?m tu?i ??ng: h? kh?ng th? có m?t s? ph?n kh? h?n trong ti?u thuy?t n?y! Vô ph?c cho nh?ng k? ?ã ???c ??i c?i cách x?u chu?i! Nh?ng có l? ??nh ki?n ?ã kh?ng cho ph?p D??ng Thu H??ng th?y r?ng th?c t?, n?ng d?n kh?ng ph?i ho?n to?n b? d?t m?i b?i nh?ng con ng??i nh? c?u Chính, m? N?n, g? B?ch. Tôi ngh? r?ng hi?n t??ng ?y là s? th? hi?n m?t ph?n b?n th?n ng??i n?ng d?n, là cái ch?t c?a h?. M?t kh?c, trong cu?c ??i c?ng nh? trong tác ph?m, dù sao, v?n có nh?ng con ng??i x?u h?n c?u Chính, m? Thành... nhi?u. Cái ch?nh là tôi mong ???c th?y h? b?t c?ng ?? v? ph?i minh h?a cho m?t ác c?m c?a nh?a v?n và mong h? c?ng t? n?i nh? ph?a “b?n kia” c?a t?c gi? (nh? L?ng T?, nh? H?ng, nh? c?o T?m...).

C?m gi?c chung toát l?n t? cu?n ti?u thuy?t là m?t t?m h?n cu?ng nhi?t, s? nh?y b?n v?i nh?ng g?i ?ang di?n ra. S?c h?p d?n ?y ?ã bi?n h? m?t ph?n n?o cho nh?ng cái v?i v?a, thi?u th?n tr?ng c?a D??ng Thu H??ng.

??nh ki?n c?a t?c gi? có th? khi?n h? c?u n?n nh?ng nh?n v?t thi?u t? n?i nh?n, nguy?n phi?n. Song nh?ng ??nh ki?n c?a các nh?n v?t nh? c?o T?m và nh?t là H?ng và m?t s? thanh ni?n kh?c c?a c?u chuy?n kh?ng ph?i kh?ng ph?n ?nh m?t th?c tr?ng hi?n nay. ??c bi?t là nh?ng m?c c?m n?i s?u x?, hoài ni?m v? m?t x? s? c?i ngu?n, m?t thi?n ???ng ?ã m?t (v? ch?ng ?ã bao gi? th?c s? n?o t?n t?i?) b?ng b?c trong su?t t?c ph?m ni?m m? ??c v? nh?ng g?i t?t ??p x?ng ?áng h?n, ?ó ch?nh là nh?ng n?t t?m tr?ng r?t s?u s?c kh?ng ch? c?a nh?ng k? tha h??ng (? b?t k? ph??ng tr?i n?o) m? c?n c?a nhi?u ng??i d?n Vi?t Nam b?nh th??ng hi?n nay ?ang s?ng trên qu? h??ng m?n ??t n?i nh?n b?ng t?nh, ý th?c l?i v? m?n.

Tháng 4 - 1989

?A.?

(TCSH39/09&10-1989)

Andrew says

Like most dissident writers, Duong Thu Huong spends a lot of time on the day-to-day pettiness and miseries of the new regime. And yet it doesn't read as a political diatribe at all, largely thanks to the lyrical writing – elegant depictions of landscape and the scents of food set the tenor for the book rather than the humiliations and setbacks of the characters. And Hang, the focal point of the story, is a remarkable character, as she tries, simply, to make her own way amid the back alleys of Hanoi, and then in the grim dormitories of the USSR in the dark, leaden Brezhnev-Andropov years. Really, it has more in common with an old '50s existentialist novel than any of the normal range of exile and dissident literature (the Solzhenitsyns, the Bulgakovs, etc.).

Read this alongside Duong's Novel Without a Name-- that one for the large-scale scope, this one for the intimacies.
