

# 'Homosapiens A' and 'homosapiens Z': love, resignation, and cultural disorientation in Phạm Thị Hoài's novel *Thiên sứ*

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Phạm Thị Hoài entered Vietnamese literature on the wings of *đổi mới* (renovation policy), and soon established herself as one of Vietnam's foremost contemporary writers. Her first novel, *Thiên sứ* (The messenger from heaven), marked her out as an artist who seeks originality and diversity. Renovation in Vietnam gave birth to wide-ranging discussion of many aspects of Vietnamese reality; in the literary sphere, it brought about variety and experimentation resulting from the rejection of the dictates of socialist realism. Phạm Thị Hoài's work is filled with descriptions of social dislocation, cultural disorientation, and the absurdities of post-war Vietnamese society. She refuses to fit into a mould but pushes creativity to its limits by experimenting with language and style. Her cool, detached narrative voice, with its sharp irony, is well suited to the images of alienation, confusion, and hopelessness she creates. This paper provides a commentary on the novel *Thiên sứ* (although other works are also considered) and examines her writing for what it reveals about post-war Vietnam and its values and attitudes to gender, setting her work in the broader political, social, and cultural context of modern Vietnamese literature.

## Introduction

Phạm Thị Hoài is one of the most original voices in contemporary Vietnamese literature. Along with the writings of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Dương Thu Hương, and Bảo Ninh, her work is among the most distinctive literature of the renovation period (*đổi mới*). In her novels, short stories, and essays, she succeeds in combining bold and uncompromising observations on life with an accomplished literary style, a style attuned to the complexities and paradoxes of the subjects she tackles. A modernist and an innovator, she is driven by fear of becoming complacent, of falling into the trap of blandness, predictability, superficiality, and uniformity,

in short, of living a half-baked existence. Outspoken and unrepentant, her writing has attracted many admirers as well as detractors.

Born in Hải Phòng in 1960 into a family of teachers, Phạm Thị Hoài (Phạm Thị Hoài Nam) is younger than her famous contemporaries, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp and Dương Thu Hương. At ten she became aware of her desire to write, but it was only when she was in her twenties that she began writing in earnest. Her first success, the novel *Thiên sứ* (The messenger from heaven), was published in 1988. It instantly caused a stir, catching the attention of the public and critics and, inevitably, the authorities. She followed that success with collections of short stories and essays, confirming her literary talent. In 1993 she decided to leave Vietnam and settle in Germany. In spite of her anxiety about how her self-imposed exile might affect her ability to write, she continues to be a productive author and has published, *inter alia*, a second novel.

### **The politico-literary context of contemporary Vietnamese literature**

Two great wars have passed and the medals now shine only during ceremonies. The great feats of the past have now been catalogued away in libraries where we can view them from a distance and in perspective. As doubt and boredom set in, our appetite for achieving heroic deeds has diminished and in this vacuum we now turn to half-baked entertainment instead. Money now holds the key to success and around me everyone dances around the money axis.

Phạm Thị Hoài: *Thiên sứ*<sup>1</sup>

It is with such images that Phạm Thị Hoài evokes the atmosphere of post-war Vietnam, with its doubts, boredom, emptiness, and obsession with money. Paradoxically, victory was not followed by jubilation, and wartime suffering was not rewarded by good fortune. The war-time unifying commitment to overcoming the enemy gave way to a post-war sense of emptiness and disorientation, which was exacerbated by harsh economic conditions. Phạm Thị Hoài was influenced more keenly by this sense of emptiness than were her peers. Hers is a generation which finds itself in a predicament, an unfortunate generation, unable to draw satisfaction from the heroism of the war years and the sacrifices made in the cause of national salvation. Her only recollection of war is of

<sup>1</sup> Phạm Thị Hoài, *The crystal messenger*. South Melbourne: Hyland House, 1997, p. 127. (All quotations from the novel *Thiên sứ* used in this article come from the English translation by Ton-That Quynh-Du.)

being evacuated, whereas the older Dương Thu Hương (born 1947) actively participated in the war, as did Lê Minh Khuê (born 1949) during four years on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and Bảo Ninh (born 1952) who watched his friends die one by one. Like the characters in her novel *Thiên sứ*, Phạm Thị Hoài belongs to a generation which lacks a mission, a greater goal, a generation deprived of the certainty of the rightness of a cause.

Phạm Thị Hoài's formative years were immediately after the war, during the 'vacuum times filled with boredom'. Her recollections of childhood and school point to the uninspiring environment of the time: 'Haphazard, just good enough to make people sloppy, stiff and superficial' is how she damns her education, and she is forthright in her condemnation of a society where even 'the honest ones are being honest in a mechanical way, the enthusiastic ones are enthusiastic in a childish manner, the romantic ones are romantic in a cheap way, the clever ones are being clever in a sly way and the stupid ones are cruel in their stupidity'.<sup>2</sup> Rather than being assuaged, these feelings grew yet more intense as she took up her first job as an archivist at the Hanoi Institute of Social Sciences (following her graduation in archival studies from Humboldt University in Berlin). Daily stereotypes suffocated her and she despised the monotonous 'happy and safe' life, which made her 'lifeless' and 'worn out'. With characteristic irony, she remarked that her job taught her how to 'attend meetings, fill in cards in the National Library, use visiting cards and contacts' but that, overall, it was a 'parasitic' and 'wasteful' existence.<sup>3</sup> The spiritual disillusionment and emasculation ubiquitous in Vietnam at that time have left an imprint on her work, in which the compulsion to escape from purposeless blandness is an important stimulant.

Phạm Thị Hoài's appearance on the Vietnamese literary scene coincided with *đổi mới* (renovation).<sup>4</sup> For many Vietnamese, renovation meant hope, a new beginning, a chance to fill the vacuum with something

<sup>2</sup> Phạm Thị Hoài, in Ngô Thảo and Lại Nguyên Ân, ed. *Nhà văn Việt Nam. Chân dung tự họa*. Hà Nội: NXB Văn học, 1995, p. 114.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> *Đổi mới* (renovation), the Vietnamese version of Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost*, was given approval at the sixth Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1986. Its implications for the arts were outlined in a special document in November 1987 known as Resolution No. 5 of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party, entitled 'Renovating and enhancing the leadership and management of literature, arts, and culture to a higher stage of development'. For an English translation of this document see 'BBC Summary of World Broadcast', 16 December 1987.

meaningful. Phạm Thị Hoài, along with other writers, artists, and intellectuals, became caught up in this atmosphere, which she recalls as a time when everything was aflame; there was a kind of renaissance of Vietnamese literature, a wave of creative writing after decades in a literary wasteland barren of polemic. 'Something was always happening. When you went out of your house, you'd hear that someone was writing something. Then you'd jump on your bike, ride to their place, ask to see what they had written', she remembers.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to bear in mind the well-documented connection between the arts and politics in Vietnam, as explained by Marr, Jamieson, Huệ-Tâm Hồ Tài, among others.<sup>6</sup> In an introduction to a translation of a collection of short stories by another renovation writer, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Lockhart notes that in Vietnam 'literary production takes place in an environment where its capacity to intervene in the political process is widely assumed'.<sup>7</sup> There are parallels between the situation of Vietnamese culture in the 1920s and the 1930s, and the late 1980s and early 1990s: both periods were times when society (and culture) was searching for ways to advance, and artists played a key role in motivating and inspiring people. In an analysis of the literature which emerged in the 1930s, Jamieson notes that 'this was a process of collective reorientation, a quest for a new and urgently needed sense of dignity and self worth'.<sup>8</sup> He continues:

This literature was written and read to help solve pressing intellectual and emotional problems. These people wrote to articulate their social and cultural dilemmas, to express powerful feelings, to give vent to the powerful desires that haunt them. They wrote to inculcate their own attitudes and values in others, to ridicule and browbeat those who opposed their ideas, to exhort those who agreed with them to greater enthusiasm and commitment. They wrote to transform Vietnamese society, to remake it in their own image.<sup>9</sup>

In the late 1980s Vietnamese literature once again assumed the role of

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in 'Fire's out but Hanoi still hot', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 October 1997(?).

<sup>6</sup> For example, see N. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993; D. G. Marr, *Vietnamese anticolonialism, 1885–1925*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971; D. G. Marr, *Vietnamese tradition on trial, 1920–1945*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981; Huệ-Tâm Hồ Tài, *Radicalism and the origins of the Vietnamese revolution*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> G. Lockhart, 'Introduction: Nguyễn Huy Thiệp and the faces of Vietnamese literature', in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *The general retires and other stories*. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, p. 103.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

an agent for change and a barometer of public opinion. Writers were among the first to refresh the memory of the nation by raising controversial issues from the past (for example, the various unsuccessful political campaigns including attempts at land reform) and to name the problems of the present (corruption, political manipulation, misuse of power, prostitution, and drug addiction).

Renovation saw Vietnamese literature (with the encouragement of some high-ranking politicians) begin to explore new paths and leave behind what Dương Thu Hương labelled 'servile' artists. It was a time for sobering reassessments. Pages of newspapers, magazines, and journals were taken up with critical articles, evaluating Vietnamese literature of the past and ruminating over the role of the writer in Vietnamese society. Nguyễn Minh Châu, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Dương Thu Hương, Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, Lê Minh Khuê, Lê Lưu, Nguyễn Duy, and many others cast off the constraints of socialist realism and challenged writers to discard propagandist work and reject what Nguyễn Minh Châu called 'illustrative art'.<sup>10</sup> After a long time, polemic resurfaced on the previously stagnant literary scene. There had been no place for artistic discussion in pre-1986 Vietnam;<sup>11</sup> political dictate across the arts and restrictions on freedom of expression, backed up by relentless censorship, had brought about a decline in creativity. The uniformity of society was reflected in the uniformity of literature. Any deviation from the norm, however slight, was regarded with suspicion, and provoked heightened attention from the authorities.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Nguyễn Minh Châu, 'Hãy đọc lời ai điếu cho một giai đoạn văn nghệ minh hoạ' (Let us mourn a period of illustrative arts and letters), *Văn nghệ*, 49–50, December 1987.

<sup>11</sup> The last time Vietnam experienced a critical wave against the politicizing of the arts was in the 1950s; it was centred around two journals, *Nhân văn* and *Giai phẩm*. This 'revolt' was suppressed and the participants punished.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Nguyễn Minh Châu, a soldier-writer, who belonged to a gallery of lauded and honoured, in other words 'safe' writers, attracted attention to himself at the beginning of the 1980s when he published a collection of short stories, *Người đàn bà trên chuyến tàu tốc hành* (A woman on an express train). A special forum was organized and many of his fellow writers expressed their concern at the changes in his work. For more detail, see Tôn Phương Lan and Lại Nguyễn Ân, ed., *Nguyễn Minh Châu, con người & tác phẩm*. Hà Nội: NXB Hội nhà văn, 1991, pp. 173–98. A similar fate befell Lê Minh Khuê. After the publication of her collection of short stories *Bí kịch nhỏ* (A small tragedy), she was accused of presenting a negative picture of Vietnamese society and of trying to 'smear the Vietnamese people, the Vietnamese nation, and certain revolutionary cadres (at high and very high levels) by portraying things in a very detailed and cynical manner, to paint a black picture of our society in the development of the revolution, to portray life as involving the pursuit of money (particularly dollars) and power.' The author sums up her work by

The altered political conditions and subsequent loosening of strict control over literature during renovation had a dual effect on artists: on the one hand, it allowed the possibility of creative experiment with content, form, and style, and on the other it led to stiffer examination of the creative abilities of individual writers. The standards for the evaluation of literary work changed, with political commitment no longer used as a principal yardstick in judging quality. A process of discussion was being initiated and, despite the anxiety of the authorities, pre-renovation parameters could not be reinstated. Even renovation, however, did not remove political control. The barriers were pushed back, yet they remained; any questioning of the leading role of the Communist Party, for example, remained off-limits for artists.

In these changing times, Phạm Thị Hoài was aware of the responsibilities of a writer and of the influence a writer can wield on the public. Dissatisfied with the 'flat landscape of literature' in her country, she emphasized that, although it had experienced many revolutions, Vietnam was a country which had never had a real 'aesthetic revolution' (*cách mạng thẩm mỹ*).<sup>13</sup> She recognized that Vietnamese literature was always primarily a weapon, a tool, and only secondarily an art; it always served some purpose, regardless of whether it promoted the ruling party or the opposition. She disliked the cautiousness of Vietnamese literature, its lack of freedom, its superficiality, its stereotypes and formulas. Equally, she held little respect for Vietnamese writers, accusing them of pomposity and ridiculing their self-importance.<sup>14</sup> In an essay on Vietnamese literature, she warned that 'if the writers are only going to be good citizens and bad writers, we are going to end up with bad literature

suggesting that 'she has given birth to a child with a puny spirit'. For more details, see 'Comments on the book 'A small tragedy' by Lê Minh Khuê, *Tạp chí cộng sản*, 1993, pp. 52–54.

<sup>13</sup> Phạm Thị Hoài, 'Văn học và xã hội Việt Nam', in Phạm Thị Hoài, *Từ Man Nương đến AK và những tiểu luận*. Hợp Lưu, 1993, p. 184.

<sup>14</sup> With typical irony, skilfully imitating the emptiness of political rhetoric, she remarked that many Vietnamese writers are so full of themselves that, before sitting down at their writing desk, they think the following: 'Tôi là nhà văn Việt Nam, thế hệ này thế hệ nọ, đã trải qua điều này điều kia, cuộc chiến tranh kia cuộc chiến tranh ấy, có trách nhiệm ấy có trách nhiệm à, có sứ mệnh này sứ mệnh khác vân vân.' (I am a Vietnamese writer, I belong to this and that generation, I have gone through this war and that war, I have this responsibility, that responsibility etc. It is virtually impossible to translate this text and faithfully reproduce the pompous style, yet similar phrases are found in abundance in the Vietnamese press.) Phạm Thị Hoài, 'Văn học và xã hội Việt Nam', in *Từ Man Nương đến AK và những tiểu luận*. Hợp Lưu, 1993, p. 188.

written by respectful citizens'.<sup>15</sup> These sentiments echo Hoài Thanh, who, reacting some 60 years earlier to the demands of a politically correct literature, remarked: 'You can have any kind of literature you like, but first it must be literature'.<sup>16</sup>

If renovation brought about much that was new and refreshing for Phạm Thị Hoài and her contemporaries, it also served to bring into sharper focus existing problems. Post-1986 Vietnam is confronted by confusion over ethical forms, something felt most intensely by the younger generation. The tension between the contradictory demands of more independence, on the one hand, and the traditional Confucian obligations of filial piety on the other, is often confusing. So too is the plethora of foreign influences and immersion in Western culture, which has generated all sorts of anxiety about threats to national identity. Greater economic success has only precipitated an escalation of the problems of consumerism.

It is in this social and political context that Phạm Thị Hoài published her first novel, *Thiên sứ*.

## Thiên sứ

It was in 1988 that *Thiên sứ*, Phạm Thị Hoài's best-known work, appeared.<sup>17</sup> It is typical of much of the Vietnamese fiction of the renovation period in carrying a strong critical charge and capturing the disenchantment palpable in post-war Vietnam. What elevates it above the mainstream of the period is its literary mastery: in the words of a critic, it is a book of 'many accents' (*tiếng nhiều giọng*),<sup>18</sup> rich in form and construction. While the majority of renovation writers were driven by an urge to take advantage of the more liberal atmosphere in society to deal with previously forbidden aspects of Vietnamese reality, only a handful managed

<sup>15</sup> 'Một trò chơi vô tâm tích', in Phạm Thị Hoài, *Từ Man Nương đến AK và những tiểu luận*. Hợp Lưu, 1993, p. 183.

<sup>16</sup> Trang An, 13 March 1935; quoted in Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, p. 170.

<sup>17</sup> The novel has been translated into several foreign languages including English, French, and German. The author has also received several literary awards for it, for example the German LiBeraturpreis in 1993. Whilst foreigners seem to like her writing, the critical reception of her work in Vietnam is less clear-cut. Many acknowledge her literary talent, but others have been annoyed by the 'unfavourable' image of Vietnamese reality she presents. She was accused of trying to be innovative and shocking at any price, and was even branded a pornographer. The fact that she left Vietnam and settled abroad provided her opponents with further ammunition.

<sup>18</sup> Đỗ Đức Hiểu, *Đổi mới phê bình văn học*. Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học xã hội, NXB Mui Cà Mau, 1993, p. 286.

to deploy their critical barbs in combination with accomplished literary skills. Phạm Thị Hoài goes beyond simplistic descriptivism; perhaps only Nguyễn Huy Thiệp can match her multifaceted and textured style.

At the heart of the novel is the representation of an intensely experienced process of growing up. The book charts the pain connected with the loss of childhood innocence through confrontation with the realities of adult life, capturing the psychological wounds of adolescence and the dilemmas of sexual awakening. The uncertainties of reaching out to adulthood, with its painful construction of a code of values, mirror a society which is equally confused and convulsed by chaos and doubt; it is a world which offers no model but rather exacerbates the dilemmas of youth.

The plot of the novel unfolds against the backdrop of a post-1975 Vietnam tormented by paradoxes and crushed expectations. It is set in Hanoi (although there is a glimpse of life in Saigon). Vietnamese society is torn apart by the changes brought on by the advance of consumerism ('imported revolution') and the confrontation between traditional values and new values. Material yearning has overrun moral loyalties. The characters in the novel are passive and resigned; they have sunk into the grim banality of everyday existence, into a world of empty words, false values, the worship of money, greed, and careerism. They embody a generation slumped in a decaying existence. This world is viewed through the eyes of a young girl, Hoai, who is seen as a solitary outsider: from her room with its '400 brown tiles' she watches through the ever-changing 'magic window rotating like the Rubic cube', as life unfolds around her. From her vantage point elevated above others, she assumes the role of a 'quiet observer', 'a mute witness', 'the voluntary silent stenographer'.<sup>19</sup> The technique of double focus used by the writer allows for Hoai's simultaneous involvement in, and contemplative distance from, events: she both analyses and gives coherence to what takes place.

The reality beyond the window is juxtaposed with Hoai's inner world, and the story resonates with her awareness of her own disillusionment. Hoai is an 'ugly duckling' character, different from the people around her in her physical appearance (she has a stunted body), which places her as an outcast. But it is the different code of values to which she adheres which marks her out: 'I refuse to join any generation. I refuse to wear any uniform too tight or too loose. Let me be with my own naked, scrawny, stunted body'.<sup>20</sup> She will not chase after success or pursue

<sup>19</sup> Phạm Thị Hoài, *The crystal messenger*. South Melbourne: Hyland House, 1997, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

a career ('I refuse to climb any kind of ladder');<sup>21</sup> material things hold no attraction for her. It is her thirst for love which dominates the novel. She 'fills the span between birth and death with a constant search for tenderness'. 'What else' she wonders, 'can confirm that I have existed between birth and death?'<sup>22</sup> For Hoai, love is all-important, the crucial difference being between 'homosapiens A' (those with the capacity to love) and 'homosapiens Z' (those without).

Hoai is introspective. She seems to have accepted her position as a misfit and does not strive to be part of society. Her immunity to the mediocre values promoted by society places her at a moral advantage over others. By contrast, her brother Hung's 'middle class human concerns' are defined in an exact order as 'oil stove, salary rises, pilot projects, adding a mezzanine attic, children, learning a second foreign language, promotion, a fridge, the qualifying examination for research studentships, drinking beers with friends on Sundays'.<sup>23</sup> The degenerate state of society and the sense of hopelessness resonate in the words of the teacher-turned-racketeer, Hoang, in the prison scene. Hoang trusts only two things: violence and money. To Hoai's brother, Hac, and the poet, who share his prison cell, he predicts:

You will be released from jail and find a clean way of making a living, marry a good wife, have the regulation two children, and observe the responsibilities of a citizen. But it is your middle-class life that will propel you to me. It's the same with you, my poet. You must eat before you can write poetry. Even Buddha couldn't refuse a bowl of milk. I'll just sit here and wait for you to come and kneel down in front of me.<sup>24</sup>

The only hope for this society is to be found in love and childhood innocence which must be cherished and respected. The baby Hon (the angel, the messenger from heaven) constitutes the symbol of this innocence, of a purity unsoiled by life, with the authority to 'cause us to tiptoe, to talk in gentle tones and to regard each other in a kind and enlightened manner'.<sup>25</sup> The baby's smiles can deliver the humans 'whose vocal chords had seemed to know only how to emit aggressive grunting noises, whose faces had seemed forever engraved with life's harsh worry lines . . . back to their original innocence'.<sup>26</sup> She is the conscience of the

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

family and her death becomes a compelling metaphor for the defeat of good by bad in people: it testifies to the moral collapse of the family, which is too distracted to be capable of the simple emotion of love. After that, salvation becomes impossible.

The vanity and sterility of society are exemplified in the novel by many little details: even as banal an article as toilet paper offers a metaphor for distorted values. Hang's husband becomes a 'hoarder of toilet paper', which he values as a symbol of his affluence. Ironically, an item previously considered 'an immoral product of an ideology based on parasitic consumerism, not to mention its inhuman nature, given that there was not enough paper for children's schoolwork',<sup>27</sup> is suddenly promoted to the ultimate status symbol, and becomes 'a central part of his notion of human civilization and dignity'.<sup>28</sup> The fact that Hang's diary is written on toilet paper is also significant: it yet again elevates the paper to a special status while at the same time devalues what is written on it, Hang's story of her life. In her diary, Hang is honest, describing her true feelings and aspirations which force her to leave her husband. But not having enough courage to follow her dreams, a few days later she runs back to her husband, her ideals having proved as disposable and short-lived as the toilet paper on which they were recorded. Even social rituals (such as weddings and funerals), which should symbolize community and belonging, merely strengthen the image of isolation and the disintegration of personal relationships (they are referred to in the novel as 'the arts of deception of the adult world').<sup>29</sup> Hang has already succumbed to resignation (for example, the contest to select her husband being nothing more than a 'lottery'). The wedding reinforces her resignation; it is not a manifestation of love between two people, it is a ceremony filled with prejudice and falseness. The arguments and fight at the wedding reinforce the image of a chaotic world 'so formal and devoid of integrity and love, which denies people's most basic needs and primal yearnings'.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the funeral of the artist is full of pomposity and is, for many, an opportunity to show off, to be seen in the right place. This atmosphere forces Hoai to recollect the death of Hon, her baby sister, who longed only for 'understanding, gentleness, a soft, kind word each morning, a shared look, an encouraging smile, a caressing hand to help the flesh

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

drift into secure sleep', and she asks 'Is there a funeral fitting to those primal longings?'<sup>31</sup>

Phạm Thị Hoài resists simplistic judgement while portraying the complex tangles of life. In both theme and technique, she allows for many possibilities. *Thiên sử* comprises two layers: in addition to the linear one telling the story of a group of characters, there is embedded another, fluid, postmodernist layer, which releases into the story a flood of imagery and emotions. The book encapsulates a feeling of nihilistic meaninglessness, indifference to life, which is supported by the existential sense of disorder and the confusion of a paralysed society. Any attempt to impose order on this unstructured life fails. The characters move in an environment of complete annihilation of moral codes, where all positive aspects of the self are irrevocably lost and everyone is heading towards a void; there is a profound sense of resignation, with the protagonists no longer having any hope of improvement.

### Missing faces

Altered political and social circumstances in the renovation period contributed to an 'unmasking' of the individual, and permitted a move into the realm of the intimate and personal, in other words a shift from the general to specific, from collective to individual. Again, there is a clear parallel with 1930s Vietnamese literature. In a society founded on Marxism, the role of the individual was suppressed in favour of the collective interests of the masses. People in Vietnam were viewed primarily as citizens; they had a 'public face', whilst private lives were largely ignored. It is in the re-emergence of the individual (of the 'private face') that one of the most vital contributions of renovation literature lies.

The re-creation of faces and identification of 'facelessness' is important in *Thiên sử*. One whole chapter is devoted to 'the faces'. Phạm Thị Hoài creates an image of a society 'where humans are as nameless as the air . . . dissolved and dispersed'; they have been 'erased', 'taking away all those elements that constitute the face of an individual human', they are just 'merging into the crowds, into the street dust, into contemporary novels and stage plays'.<sup>32</sup> This 'erased' individual is 'representative of a pitiful and terrible incognito tribe'.<sup>33</sup> Inevitably, by pulling people in from an incognito existence, from the safety of the crowd, the novel

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

raises the question of the freedom of the individual, and puts a value on the courage demanded to travel the road to freedom. The treatment of faces in the novel becomes a powerful metaphor and an instrument of criticism of social and moral collapse. It is not only the reconstruction of faces which needs to be pointed out. Watching the faces presenting themselves under her window, Hoai makes the following observation:

There are those who carried with them a stack of faces, truthful and false, noisily clashing with one another. And those who wore a series of faces showing one at a time, the principle of modern television, each day presenting a different one to the idle public. And there are those who always wore a mask, immovable masks like limpets on ship hulls.<sup>34</sup>

The suggestion of a ‘changing face’ implies confusion, instability, and unreliability, while the idea of a ‘mask’ reinforces the feeling of falseness, pretence, and cowardice.

### **Phạm Thị Hoài’s themes, style, and language**

The writings of Phạm Thị Hoài present a commentary on modern Vietnam. Her themes are expansive, taking in society, politics, moral standards and values, family, love, and sexuality, enabling her to expose the anguish of the human condition with its aspirations, hopes, suffering, and despair. She seeks to portray life in its full complexity. Well-read and skilled in translating, she has absorbed many influences; her writing is rich in allusions to a multitude of literary and philosophical sources. Her observations on human nature seem to be influenced by the teaching of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and she loves Kafka, Ionesco, Beckett, and Proust. There is also in Phạm Thị Hoài’s writing a baffling mixture of the normal and the fantastic. For example, her stories ‘Tiệm may Sài Gòn’ (The Saigon tailor’s shop) and ‘Thực đơn chủ nhật’ (The Sunday menu) balance between reality and the surreal. Unsurprisingly, some critics have labelled her work ‘fables’.

More specifically, the effectiveness of Phạm Thị Hoài’s writing is secured by her assured use of literary devices. For her, the process of literary creativity is a process of constant change. Reading through her work, the reader cannot fail to notice that she can switch styles with ease, moving from cool realism, irony, and cynicism to a sensitive, melancholic, and poetic style. This is apparent in her novels and even more in her short stories. Short story writing has a long tradition in

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

Vietnam and enjoys enormous popularity among both writers and the reading public. Phạm Thị Hoài uses the short story form to comment on certain aspects of life; although often simple, her stories reveal a complexity of human psychology, relationships, and emotions. She zooms in on individuals to capture a whole range of emotions and produce a complex portrait of society. Satire, sarcasm, and parody are other instruments frequently deployed by Phạm Thị Hoài. The ironic, detached, and unengaged stance increases the impact of her observations, and the contrast between the lightness of her tone and the seriousness of the underlying reality envelops much of her writing with a tragic-comic veil. The impact of her writing is increased by frequent changes in the narrator's voice, the use of diaries, dramatic screenplay, and speeches. She often obscures the boundaries between dreams and reality, and juxtaposes contrasting environments to exaggerate the differences between them. For example, in the story 'Nền cộng hoà của các nhà thơ' (The republic of poets), the crude and insipid language of politics is contrasted with poetic passages; even the title suggests a tension. In another story, 'Hành trình của những con số' (The journey of numbers), Phạm Thị Hoài places side by side as neighbours two people from different worlds – a diligent clerk who has been working with numbers for eleven years and an artist. The cold objectivity of one world is contrasted with the frivolity and aimlessness of the 'parasitic' world of the painter. As the story progresses, the 'man of numbers' is strongly pulled towards this unknown world, which he despises, yet secretly yearns for; a dramatic tension is created by this dichotomy, by this attraction of opposites. The loyal public servant is both tempted and repulsed by the artistic world; his responsible yet dull life is thrown into relief by the spontaneity of the other world, represented in the story by a woman friend of the painter.

Language is the basic tool of every writer. In the case of Phạm Thị Hoài, it is an important literary device employed not only to convey a message but also to act as a potent artistic agent for modernization. Whilst appreciative of Vietnamese language and literature, Phạm Thị Hoài nevertheless assaults their sterility. The modernist streak in her is manifested in her experiments with language. She refuses to worship her country's language and literature as something sacred and untouchable, refuses to treat them as a 'cultural heritage', and advocates innovation and contact with world literatures. Many traditionalists and purists were affronted by her liberal use of foreign expressions, which set her against long-established beliefs. Vietnam is, after all, a country

which has pursued campaigns to preserve the purity of its language, and scholars and politicians alike have tried to prove that Vietnamese is as rich and flexible as any other language.<sup>35</sup> The issue of purity of language has been traditionally linked in Vietnam to the broader issue of Vietnamese cultural identity, and is, as such, an extremely sensitive one. Wariness and the fear of foreign influences of any kind are illustrated by many events throughout the course of Vietnamese history. Phạm Thị Hoài's more recent works, including the novel *Marie Sến*, are overflowing with foreign words. She does this, it seems, for various reasons. Sometimes the foreign imports and grafts simply reflect the changing reality of alien influences on the language; the opening-up of Vietnam unleashed an influx of things foreign, and many foreign expressions became a part of everyday reality. After all, this is a time when the country hopes to enter the future through 'streamline English'. More often than not, however, a foreign word or phrase is used by the author to mock the snobism and elitism of a particular character. It is also possible to argue that Phạm Thị Hoài's use of foreign words is a means to convey the sense of alienation in a modern society caught up in consumer frustration.

Issues of gender and sexuality are of considerable importance in Phạm Thị Hoài's work. Modern Vietnamese society is full of unresolved socio-cultural anxieties regarding gender relations, sex, and female emancipation. Many of Phạm Thị Hoài's stories and novels draw attention to the changing role of women in Vietnam, and the shift in attitudes towards sexuality, by placing them in opposition to traditional Confucian morality. Her stories look back to the mythologies of the past: she examines traditional images of women, challenges the perception of prostitution as being a social evil, questions sexual double standards and the confusion of gender roles, and tackles the topic of sexual awakening and the need for, and right to, physical love. By way of example, the story 'Chín bỏ làm mười' (Nine down makes ten) has a strong feminist feel to it. In essence, it is a list of sexual partners provided by a self-assured woman, who rejects the chance of a comfortable married life by refusing one partner after another, finding faults with each of

<sup>35</sup> For example, Phạm Văn Đồng, in his speech in 1966 on 'Preserving the purity and clarity of the Vietnamese language' (giữ gìn sự trong sáng của tiếng Việt) assigns it a truly gigantic task: to serve the revolutionary struggle. He also warned against the use of foreign expressions, considering any borrowing as irresponsible; scholars were urged to find purely Vietnamese equivalents, otherwise Vietnamese was in danger of becoming dull and ambiguous. For the full text, see *Vietnamese Studies*, 40 (Linguistic essays), undated, pp. 29–47.

them. In a society where one of the most celebrated virtues any female can possess is chastity, this promiscuous life is a break with traditional morals, as is the implication that it is the woman who ultimately makes the choice. Another story, 'Man Nương', maps out an illicit love affair conducted in secret. The couple meet regularly to devote themselves to two hours of passion. The detailed chronology of events during each meeting and the systematic way in which the affair is conducted makes a bitter-sweet impact. The lovemaking of the couple is contrasted with the idealized sexual act as depicted in best-selling books. The 'shocking' description of the sexual act conducted purely for physical pleasure in the story 'Năm ngày' (Five days) upset many readers. The story chronicles the final five days of a collapsing marriage. The husband blames the confusion of values in a transitional society, which is 'half traditional, half modern', for the breakdown of the marriage. The wife is presented as partly traditional (she cooks, cleans, and looks after her husband) and partly modern (she is prepared to act on her sexual desire). But contrary to a traditional woman who 'pushes outside her ears anything she does not want to hear', the modern side to her means that she 'instantly offers opinion, sometimes agrees, sometimes disagrees, like in a conference'.<sup>36</sup> Pondering where his wife might go, the husband hopes that she will return to her parents' house because 'in this town, a woman living alone is an unimaginable thing'.<sup>37</sup> Despite the couple's indifference towards each other during the day, they make love at night, their lovemaking is a purely physical act, their relationship is dead, yet they cannot resist the physical contact.

Generally, love and personal relationships constitute an important theme in Phạm Thị Hoài's writing. She presents love in its multitude of forms, happy, passionate, cold and detached, illicit, unrequited, love with wings and love doomed, love physical and platonic. Her unconventional depictions of love and marriage have invited much criticism. She provoked even sharper reactions from many critics for her sexually explicit language and her description of physical relationships. Vietnamese literature

<sup>36</sup> 'Đàn bà hiện đại thì lập tức trình bày quan điểm, đồng ý chỗ này, không đồng ý chỗ kia, y như trong hội nghị.' This quotation comes from the Vietnamese original as it appears in the collection of short stories *Thực đơn chủ nhật* (The Sunday menu). Sydney: Brandl and Schlesinger, 1998, p. 97; the same text is printed in a collection of short stories by Vietnamese female writers, *Truyện ngắn chọn lọc* (Selected short stories). Hà Nội: NXB Hội nhà văn, 1995, pp. 83–90. The collection *Mê lộ* (Labyrinth). Hồng Lĩnh, 1992, also contains this story: however, this particular passage is omitted from that version.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

contains relatively little in terms of explicit description of sexual encounters; in a cultural environment with a strong Confucian heritage, love was always (with few rare exceptions, for example Hồ Xuân Hương, the nineteenth-century poetess, whose poetry is full of sexual undertones and candid language) a spiritual thing, and the physical side was only alluded to. Descriptions of physical beauty were veiled in symbols, images of nakedness were rare, and references to sexual acts oblique and metaphoric.

In summary, Phạm Thị Hoài refuses to be categorized; her style is constantly changing and she is forever searching for new ways of writing.

### **Observations on Vietnamese society**

The Vietnamese authorities were not pleased by Phạm Thị Hoài's work. *Thiên sứ*, in particular, but also many of her short stories and essays, conveyed the image of entrenched chaos in a society pervaded by distorted values. Such unfavourable depictions of Vietnamese reality were most often branded as a threat to socialism. The writer rejected such criticism by describing her writing as deeply personal, maintaining 'if others take it as a critique of society . . . that's their problem'. One can certainly understand the uneasiness with which the authorities viewed her writing. The story 'Cuộc đến thăm của ngài thanh tra chính phủ' (The visit of the government inspector) does not conceal its criticism of Vietnamese bureaucrats, parodying in equal measure the manipulative power of those who govern and the cowardice of those who, in the name of tradition, passively let themselves be governed and reject change. The villagers from village X prepare a triumphal arch to welcome an inspector. The government is something very far away and none of them knows where on earth it actually is. Visits by a government inspector are few and far between ('rarer than an earthquake') yet they always follow the same pattern: the inspector arrives, inquires about how the work in the field is going, reminds the villagers about paying their taxes, pats the children on the head, shakes hands with the older people, and gives a speech. The speech is a source of certainty in the lives of the villagers; it is always the same and many of them know the text by heart. A problem arises when, on this occasion, the inspector speaks differently from them, gets the name of the government wrong, and even calls on them to make changes. When he states that everything must change, it is the last straw: he must leave and the villagers set off

to find the 'government' to save it. The comparison with Gogol's *Revizor* offers itself far too readily: both stories share a satirical take on bureaucracy and officialdom; Phạm Thị Hoài's story places the emphasis on the cowardice of people, their fear of change, and passivity to initiate and accept change. The whole story is written in the style of official addresses, full of phrases about historical struggle, the revolutionary process, and close co-operation with the government. This is a style familiar to every Vietnamese. The peasants feel insulted, they are passive and would not dream of committing the crime of doubting. The reader cannot help connecting the story with the realities of contemporary Vietnam: the Party's absolute rule, the bureaucracy, as well as people's apprehension about change.

## Conclusion

The excitement and enthusiasm of Vietnamese writers so evident in the late 1980s and early 1990s have faded. Intimidation, harassment, and repression of some writers have created once again an atmosphere of cautiousness. The most outspoken writers have been branded dissidents. Many are no longer published in Vietnam and their older works remain unavailable to the Vietnamese public; others went into semi-retirement from artistic life and ceased to offer their works for publication, carefully balancing the pros and cons of artistic 'freedom' in Vietnam. Phạm Thị Hoài has escaped any serious persecution; her earlier books are not being reprinted in Vietnam and are not readily available on the market but some of her short stories occasionally appear in collections and compilations. In 1997 Phạm Thị Hoài left Vietnam for Germany where she now lives with her husband. Even though she remains a prolific writer, her latest books are published by foreign publishing houses and Vietnamese readers in Vietnam can no longer read them.

Her second novel, *Marie Sên*, was published in 1996 and affirms Phạm Thị Hoài's commitment to literary experiment and innovation. The novel focuses on the life of a prostitute and her partners-clients; even though it was the frank and explicit description of sexual liaisons which provided a touch of scandal, it is the constant observations on various aspects of Vietnamese reality that constitute its real core. Thoughts on Vietnamese culture and literature, the use of foreign words in Vietnam, the role of women, male-female relationships, love, renovation, are built into a highly cynical commentary on contemporary Vietnam. In 1998 Phạm Thị Hoài completed another book *Chuyện lão tượng phật Di Lặc*

và nàng *Nậm Mây* (A story of a statue of the Laughing Buddha and a carafe with clouds), a story presented as a journey through life of two antiques but in fact an allegory on changing social conditions and human values.

Phạm Thị Hoài also retains her interest in translating, both its theory and in practice, and publishes essays on various aspects of the creative process. Recently, she published an essay entitled 'Gốc' (Roots), which sets out her thoughts on her situation as a writer abroad, and at the same time responds to the concerns of others about writing in exile. She emphasizes that she does not feel threatened by her new status, and is not particularly concerned at the prospect of losing her roots, pointing out the vagueness of what it means to have roots and her uncertainty as to whether she ever had any. She stresses a certain 'universality' about the writer's profession which does not have to be confined to any specific cultural setting. As for the Vietnamese language, again she is not alarmed by the thought of losing it; in fact, she feels liberated by her current position, that of a Vietnamese writer abroad, which offers her freedom to explore new things, including new language:

I left Vietnam a few years ago. My work enabled me to meet a number of writers living 'wandering lives', and I have come to feel that this nomadic existence is one of many professional conditions of an ever-increasing number of writers. Their homeland is their journey. Only if they stayed in one place for too long would that be a betrayal of their homeland.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Phạm Thị Hoài, 'Gốc' (Roots), *Việt*, 1999, p. 77.

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