

**HOW WOMEN REMEMBER: TWO ACCOUNTS OF THE
VIETNAM WAR BY DANG THUY TRAM AND DUONG
THU HUONG**

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The Vietnam War, which is often referred to as the “War of Resistance against American Aggression” (Hunt XX), is remarkable for having been won by a poor third world nation. The war that began in around 1955 and lasted till 1975, between north Vietnam, and American forces in the south of Vietnam, displayed the strength and resilience of the tiny nation that had managed to fight off the French imperialists and Chinese aggressors before the Americans arrived (Hunt 37-41). What is even more intriguing is the fact that women formed a formidable section of the Vietnamese forces, with Michael Hunt’s account pitting the number of female participation at 1.5 million (123). Turner and Thanh, in their collection of testimonies from female veterans, state, “Any accounting of the American War in Vietnam that leaves out Vietnamese women tell only half the story (19).” One can hardly look for an adequate and justifiable representation among the hordes of literature and art produced in America about their version of the Vietnam War, and yet, theirs is the image that dominates. Thus it becomes essential to investigate the narratives by the female participants of the war. For this purpose, I chose to read the diary by Dang Thuy Tram titled *Last Night I Dreamt of Peace* (2006), and a novel by Duong Thu Huong called *Novel Without a Name* (1995), in an effort to examine how women remember, recollect, and record their experience of the war. The larger aim will be to question official historiography and reading practices, through an exploration of the idea of a ‘personal’ as demarcated by these texts. As Dang’s work is a diary and Duong’s a novel, this paper will chart out the evolution of a ‘personal’ memory whose existence comes fraught with the challenges presented by the form of the diary and the novel.

Post War Vietnam and its Memorialisation Practices

Commemoration is an important word in the field of memory studies as attested by works like Paul Connerton’s iconic, *How Societies Remember* (1989). In the second chapter on “commemorative memory” Connerton explains how commemorative memory works through the re-enactment of rituals and myths on a periodic basis, which then becomes a means for the state to assert that “history is not a play of contingent forces” (42). If commemorative memory is deployed by the powers that

be, to create and sustain a certain favourable narrative, then what would be the place of a 'personal memory' within such a system? Of course, some like Halbwachs' would argue, that all memory is in fact social in nature. Halbwachs' whole thesis in *The Collective Memory* is premised on the notion that every memory is social, for our memories are not only supplemented by others, but their presence in a social setting guarantees their reliance on factors outside the individual (23). On the other hand, Paul Ricoeur's *Memory History and Forgetting*, makes a claim for the validity of personal memory. Ricoeur also engages with Halbwachs' idea of collective memory but soon claims that "The starting point of the entire analysis cannot be erased by its conclusion: it was in the personal act of recollection that the mark of the social was initially sought and then found. This act of recollection is in each case ours" (123). This primacy given to memory beyond the imagination, the narrative, even individual identities, for Ricoeur goes on to affirm that memory is most liable to be abused when it is connected with issues of identity, public commemoration and so on (43). If memory in the form of 'pure memory' is seen as something outside the scope of the imagination, outside even narrative, then one is led to ask as to what constitutes this 'pure memory.' Ricoeur claims that memory belongs to the "world of experience' in contrast to the 'worlds of fantasy,' of irreality" (49). Experience is what gives validity to the idea of a 'pure memory.' This experience is also something personal, as Ricoeur demonstrates through his studies of the tradition of inwardness from Augustine to Husserl (21-44). If there is something pure, personal, and sacred to oneself, then narrative (written or oral), containing both the inscribed and our methods of reading the inscribed, provides the only glimmer into the hitherto inaccessible of one's experiences. This paper aims to read Dang's diary and Duong's novel, with all their narrative inconsistencies and limitations, to reclaim the idea of a 'personal memory' which can stand as a site of resistance for the powers that be.

Dang Thuy Tram was a twenty five year old female doctor from north Vietnam who went to serve in the war that sought to liberate the south of Vietnam from American control in 1968. While providing medical aid to the guerrilla forces, Dang maintains a diary, recording her day to day experiences. She dies in 1970, during the course of the war, while her diaries are recovered and published much later in 2005. The recovery of her diaries is a story of triumph in itself. They were discovered and translated by an erstwhile American soldier, Fred Whitehurst. They were published in Hanoi in 2005, becoming an instant bestseller, and even inspiring a documentary (FitzGerald 521-551). Frances FitzGerald explains the immense popularity of the diary in the "Introduction" to her diaries:

The diaries struck a particular chord among young readers. Two-thirds of all Vietnamese were born after 1975, and for them the war was ancient history, and a history that was taught in a dry, stylised fashion. Other war diaries had been published, but, like textbooks, they spoke mainly of heroism and great victories. Thuy's diaries broke the mould. Here was a brave, idealistic young woman, but one with vulnerabilities and self-doubts: a romantic in spite of all her discipline. (551)

If the diaries were able to attract the young, then the government was quick to appropriate the memory of Dang Thuy Tram, who had become something of a 'folk hero' in FitzGerald's word (560). Memorialisation requires a physical manifestation. Therefore, a hospital, a library, and a memorial were built in Tram's honour, so she could be celebrated as a Vietnamese icon. Moreover, the Vietnamese general, Vo Nguyen Giap, who led the resistance from 1940s till the fall of Saigon in 1975, and Prime Minister of the new regime like Phan van Khai, claimed to have read the diary (Mc Neill). On the other hand, female veterans who survived the war to interpret it, like Duong Thu Huong, through her work, *Novel Without a Name*, have been constantly hounded by the Communist regime for her criticism of the party and its revolutionary past, while her fiction faces strict censorship in Vietnam ("Duong Thu Huong- Viet Nam").

The answer for such differential treatment demands a foray into the post war economic reforms of the communist regime. On the face of it, Dang's diary, an account of a young doctor who dies for the sake of the cause, provides a life and death narrative that fits easily into the sacrificial rhetoric of a revolutionary past endorsed by the state. This revolutionary past harps on the strength of the Vietnamese nation that was able to defeat not only the French colonialists, but also the mighty American imperialists. Sections of Dang's account is laced with such charged party propaganda, "I must mend all the wounds of our nation. The Americans are upon us like blood -thirsty devils, stealthily sinking their fangs into our bodies. Only when we have chased them all out of Vietnam will our blood stop pouring into the earth" (Dang 47-48).

Hue-Tam Ho Tai provides an explanation for the need of the state to engage in such valorisation of the past. He claims that the Doi Moi economic reforms which opened the country for free trade and the engagement in global economy "seemed to undermine the very rationale for war and revolution" (Hue-Tam 180). This, supplemented with the lack of effective rehabilitation of the veterans by the state, added to the feeling of betrayal. A post war perspective of disillusionment emerged

which went on to breed anti-war sentiments, as explicated in Huang's novel.

Is There Anything Personal about a Dairy?

To the Vietnamese readers of Dang's life, the story did not end with the last chapter of her diary, where Dang expresses disappointment at being betrayed by her comrades. She believes they have left her to die. In reality, Dang was not betrayed by her comrades. They did return with supplies, and Dang was killed by the American troops (FitzGerald 515-516). So in order to 'know' about the person of Dang, the diary had to be read along with the events from her real life, in a continuation of sorts. Such a reading practice instantly created a public persona for Dang as the sacrificial war heroine. If the diary is 'public' in the manner in which Dang's story has been appropriated, then what is the nature of the 'personal' that it carves out for itself.

Taking cue from Ricouer, "personal memory," implies an individual's "world of experience" (*Memory History Forgetting* 49). The form of a dairy happens to be an elaboration on the idea of a personal memory. Does personal memory have to do with a narration of one's own selfhood? Does recounting personal memory also have to do with recounting and fashioning one's own self? Traditional western theories like George Gusford's seminal essay, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" locates the autobiography at a particular moment in the history of European civilisation, when the curiosity set out by the Copernican revolution regarding the outside world, was also extended to man's inner being. So autobiography becomes nothing, but the individual seen "in his inner privacy, not as he was, not as he is, but as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been" (Gusford 44). On the other hand, a critique of Gusford, from feminist and post colonial quarters, makes the claim, that a self is always to be understood in relation to others. Susan Stanford Friedman, and Mary G Mason in their respective works, describe how lives are relational and interconnected, which is what women's autobiographies expound. Sweet Wong's study of Native American autobiographies reflects upon how their lives are connected to a sense of community.

If personal memory is linked to an elaboration of selfhood, then Dang's diary engages with both ideas of the self— one formed through this performance of an exploration of interiority, and the other that believes in the interconnectedness of all lives. Therefore, Dang turns into a chronicler, a witness, providing a record of the lives of young men and women whom she encounters in the field. While the idea about interconnected lives seems to arrive as an antidote to the self centred

approach to writing and reading diaries, this interconnection brings in its own set of complications. It creates a deep rooted consciousness in Dang about her gendered identity of being a single woman at the war front. She hastily reverts to referring to her male patients as brothers, and writes about how they love her like a sister, while glorifying such a relationship, "It is strange, but there really is no other love like this affection, like the love between brother and sister, the true care in the family of the Revolution" (Dang 70). She writes about a young patient called Nghia, whose condition stirs her sympathy, "I wanted to hold him in my hands and touch him, but I could not because everyone would misunderstand our true emotions and regard for each other" (93).

Turner and Thanh's testimonial records provide an account of the gender dynamics in Vietnamese society before and after the war. They write about the tradition of warrior women in Vietnamese society which preceded the arrival of the Americans. During the war against the French, the legend of the Trung sisters and Lady Trieu, who incited resistance against Chinese authorities, was invoked. At the same time, new heroines were created like the peasant girl, Nguyen Thi Hung. They write about how these narratives were co-opted to fit into the patriarchal ideal. For instance, the resistance of the Trung sisters was seen as not out of their own will but in order to save their husband. They also mention the establishment of a Vietnamese statue of a woman with a gun over her soldier and a baby in her arms near Huan Kiem lake. Fighting women were no extraordinary creatures but they did have an extraordinary duty to perform. As they state, they had to be "tough as nails in war and gently maternal at home (Turner and Thanh 36, 26, 27, 28, 5)."

Dang is deeply conscious of her role as a doctor looking after the Vietcong troops, which fits her into the maternal ideal. She accepts this maternal role and even glorifies it by calling it the highest duty she can perform for the revolution. Moving beyond her professional role, the narrative is filled with Dang expressing her care and concern for the lives of the soldiers that she encounters. She writes about a young soldier called Thuan, and regrets the fact that he has no family to look after him. She proclaims, "When he comes home alone except for his shadow, I would like to warm his life with affection." At the same time she also sees herself as "a soldier in this struggle." She lives in foxholes, digs graves for the dead, and maintains a stoic resilience throughout the bombings, thus exclaiming, "I am the same as the young men leaving for the front lines of war who go through the explosive sounds of bomb and fire (Dang 15, 23, 94, 70)."

Dang's subscription to the "fighting mother" ideal exposes other identities that are submerged within the narrative. Hue-Tam Ho Tie states that the nature of guerrilla warfare is such that it blurs all distinctions between public and private, military and civilian, male and female (175). However Cynthia Enloe goes on to claim that there is no such thing as gender neutrality in the military, and the presence of women does not alter the masculinist code within which the military operates (qtd. in Joberg and Via 6). This seems to hold true even for guerrilla warfare as the women not only had to fight like men, but constantly subscribe to their patriarchal objectification.

This awareness of one's gendered position during the war, leads to Dang constantly reprimanding herself in the following fashion:

Why do I feel immensely sad when everybody departs?
I cannot say. In fact, I very much regret that I cannot
attend the meeting because I would have been able to
hear, understand, and see many precious things,
advantageous for my progress . . . Oh Thuy! Oh, this
girl full of affection. Your eyes should not fill with tears,
even if they are distilled from sadness. You should smile
as though you always had a smile on your lips. Don't let
someone find a sigh behind that smile. Twenty- five
years old already, be steady and mature with that age.
(Dang 66-68)

More than half of the diary is about Dang counselling herself in the following manner. Thus, even within the personal form of the diary, the personal is a space that needs to be contested for. Selfhood emerges as a contestation between the two selves of Dang— a public one that toes the party line, and a private one, who desires to express the feelings of hope, frustrations and disillusionments that she experiences at the front. This pattern, where she expresses her hopes, frustrations and disappointments, while quickly reprimanding herself for the same, makes her an ideal of Vietnamese womanhood for the communist regime who would encourage such reprimand, while exposing the constraints governing the lives of women at the front.

The Reality of Female Veterans in Post War Vietnam

Perhaps it became important to celebrate a dead female hero of the war, as post war Vietnam hardly had a place for these female veterans. Dang's diary already pre-empts this, as a large section of her account is devoted to the loneliness and longing she feels for her lover M, from whom she has been separated. The idea of lovers who have been separated by the war, establishes Dang as the perfect romantic

heroine, while also laying out the possibility that had she not succumbed to the war, then the love story would have probably have been successful. In reality, loneliness and social ostracism became the common fate for female veterans after the war. Turner and Thanh's account chronicles in elaborate details the lack of rehabilitation for female veterans in post war Vietnamese society. In a society celebrating the cult of motherhood, women were supposed to put down their weapons and get back to their traditional role of setting up families. However, many female veterans were unable to find husbands, had to marry old men, could not give birth or lived with fear of having deformed bodies. The pressure of motherhood led many women to have relationships that were termed as illicit in Vietnamese society, leading to their ostracism (Turner and Thanh 154–157).

Making the War Personal

In this context, it becomes essential to read the work of Duong Thu Huong, who was a war veteran herself. Duong's *Novel Without a Name*, though published in 1995, is based during the war when it is nearing its end in the 1970s. It is perhaps noteworthy that as a female veteran, Duong chooses to write a novel, and not the more popular form of the memoir. If the idea of fictionality provides a shield to Duong's interpretation of the war, then her background as a female veteran, serves to complicate matters. It chooses to read Duong's novel for its factual validity, leading to its censorship. The novel betrays a strong anti-war perspective which feels betrayed by the Communist regime and its post war policies. As Duong states, "They don't see the loss of human rights in daily life. The essential interest of Doi Moi is money; it is not the beginning of democratization (qtd in "Duong Thu Huong"). There is no glorious victory at the end, as the novel ends in the midst of war time itself. Duong focuses on the losses of the war as her narrator devotes large parts of the text to the relationships that have disintegrated due to the war. If her background as a female veteran is enough to censure Duong's novel, then it also indirectly grants it the legitimacy of history.

War is a public event that seeks consensus in our private spheres. War stories, as Lynne Hanley has asserted, traditionally render the exploits of men at the front as the only kind of narrative worth telling. Hanley is referring here to white male narratives. She calls for stories to be heard about the experience of women and civilians who are absent from these narratives even while being embroiled within it (Hanley 40).

The novel has traditionally been viewed as an exponent of the private sphere that nevertheless plays an important role in shaping up a

public sphere (Habermas 51). Habermas writes about the active creation of a bourgeois private sphere through the idea of a “patriarchal conjugal family” (46). In Duong’s novel, we see the impact of the war on its private sphere— family, and on the relationship between men and women. The relationship between men and women is depicted through three standard tropes— the comrade in arms, the sacrificial mother, and the lover. Women in combat do not inhabit much of the text but when they do appear, they find a distinct appearance. The narrative begins with Quan, a male narrator, witnessing a bunch of female corpses who have been raped and left to rot in the jungle. A matter of fact tone is adopted by Quan to describe the bodies. Although the narrative begins with this scene, but it doesn’t gain the importance of an event in Quan’s eyes, as he goes on to narrate the accidental killing of a fellow soldier by Luoy (Duong 24–25). The women’s corpses set the theme of death and decay that infiltrate the narrative. Women, valued as the giver of life in Vietnamese culture, now become emissaries of death, with their own death counting for nothing at all.

Soon after, Quan sets out on his mission to rescue Bien, his childhood friend and fellow soldier, and meets another female comrade whose job is to keep a record of the corpses and their belongings. She is described as a sexual predator who pounces on Quan at night as he seeks shelter under her roof. He is repulsed by her ugliness and rejects her by saying that he doesn’t want to add to her troubles by impregnating her in the middle of a jungle. She replies that she wouldn’t mind that ordeal too. This episode not only speaks of the solitude of women condemned to the war front, but the desire to mother a child even outside marriage, displays the plight of female veterans who had to resort to various means in order to fulfill their role of motherhood in post war Vietnam. Nevertheless she is no victim, but an assertive woman who mocks Quan as she tells him, “You call us she- soldiers, don’t you? What a bunch of bastards . . . (Duong 44).”

Female comrades do not mingle with the men and do not share any camaraderie with them in Duong’s novel. V. Spike Peterson writes about how the military operates on a strict code of hyper masculinity (23). This hyper masculinity is based on a strong adherence to the concept of hyper sexuality and heteronormativity. As one of the soldiers, Huc, tells him after a hunt, “Eat up. We have a rule here: During meals you only talk about food and sex. It’s forbidden to talk about anything else” (Duong 178). After a good meal procured from a hunt, Quan states, “After dinner we took turns telling dirty stories. If you couldn’t think of one, you’d get pummeled” (188). Duong’s narrative presents the stereotypical image of ‘men at war’ as Quan constantly recounts his

relationship with other male soldiers before and after the war. In this heteronormative space, the narrator informs us that the soldiers begin to tease Huc, a male soldier, for falling in love with Quan. However, the focus is on the affection and care demonstrated by the soldiers for one another which ascertains that it is the men who care for each other in the absence of the female, thus taking on the maternal role assigned to women.

The single women in Quan's village are depicted in terms of their relationship to the young soldier. They provide the means for male camaraderie and are portrayed by Quan as fitting into a nostalgic image of the pastoral. However this pastoral image soon gets disrupted as Quan exposes the gender constraints that infiltrate this society. He narrates his teenage love affair with a village girl called Hue, who awaits his return when Quan gets enlisted. When he does return from the front many years later, Hue has been ostracized from the community for getting pregnant before marriage. She lives on her own in the middle of a field on the outskirts of the village. Hue has been depicted as the ultimate victim in need of Quan's love and sympathy which he dutifully provides. The author makes it certain that her sympathies lie firmly with young Hue while she does not abstain from painting her male protagonist in a negative light when he feels the desire to strike her at one point.

While the novel depicts the private world of men and women in wartime Vietnam, it also envisions alternative systems for Vietnamese society. Quan writes elaborate eulogies to his long deceased mother. His mother is depicted as the perfect sacrificial victim who is ill treated by her husband once he returns from freeing the country against the French colonialists. Hue-Tam Ho Tie writes about the "cult of motherhood" in Vietnamese society and its endorsement by the government which passed a bill in 1994 to award the status of "heroic mother" to women who had lost at least three children in the war. He states that the father has always been an "unreliable" figure in Vietnamese society being away most of the time (Hue Tam 177). Duong too valorizes the ideal of motherhood by depicting Quan's mother as the sacrificial victim who succumbs to her husband's jealousy once he returns from the war against the French invaders. Though operating within the familiar mother-son trope, here it is the child who mourns for the mother. Quan feels that things would be otherwise if his mother were around for she would not have let his younger brother participate in the war, getting killed in combat. He blames his father for forcing the party rhetoric onto his poor brother. The mother, thus offers an alternative system for Quan.

Quan narrates the life of his friend Bien's parents which offer an alternative model of relationship between men and women. He states that the other village women are jealous of Madame Buu for she has been given great freedom and respect by her husband, "The fact that she was still there, drinking with her husband, while in every other house in the village a woman's place was in the kitchen. That alone was enough to feel resentment" (Duong 130). Quan does not feel resentment but he is amazed and intrigued by this relationship especially since it is contrary to the one he had seen in his own home.

Duong's use of a male narrator bonding with other male soldiers, mourning the loss of that camaraderie makes it seem as a traditional war narrative about the exploits of men at the front. However the concern of this male narrator is intimately related to relationships with his male comrades, to women, as he goes on to delve on the impact of the war on these individual lives. Quan provides care to his fellow comrades, becomes a witness to the women in the war zone, and demands sympathy for the plight of women back home. Therefore, the purpose of introducing this male narrator is not only to interrogate relationships, but also to mend them. Though pitted as an anti-war novel that mourns the loss of youth and its idealism, it also does an important work of asking the men to be sympathetic to the women folk.

Such engagement with the private sphere brings the private world of men and women to the forefront, opening it up for criticism that runs deep into the heart of Vietnamese society and its gender norms even before the war. Feelings of nostalgia, gloom, and desolation that mark the text, needed to be suppressed in the official memorialising of the war. Conversely, it is by not discounting Duong's own guerrilla past, by reading her life as a veteran into the novel, that we are able to extract the workings of personal memory in her novel. It is thus, that we see the full range of the evolution of the personal— a story that is not merely representative, but also utopic and enmeshed in the realm of emotions evoked by the war.

Conclusion

The personal emerges as a space that the women have to wrestle for. Suppressed in Dang's diary, a form that is ironically meant to indulge the personal, and finding free reign in Duong's novel, only to have the shield of functionality stripped away, due to a biographical reading, a cost that Duong has to pay for in her real life. Yet, this essay has tried to demonstrate how the diary of Dang and the novel of Duong, negotiate a 'personal,' which has the potential to challenge the myth of a single story,

thereby attuning to the polyphony of any historical event, including the war in Vietnam.

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