

MIGRANT FARMERS: READING VIETNAMESE LITERATURE ON LABOUR EXPORT AFTER 1986

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of the migrant peasant in Vietnamese literature after the 1986 Renovation (Doi Moi), with a particular focus on the theme of labour export. From the perspectives of ecocriticism and cultural studies, the article argues that the peasant migration journey is not only a geographical shift for economic survival, but also a process of "uprooting" from the ecological and cultural environment, leading to profound identity crises, cultural collisions, and gendered traumas. By analysing representative works by Do Tien Thuy, Y Ban, Nguyen Ngoc Tu, Thao Trang, Thuan, and Doan Le, the article shows that contemporary literature has significantly reflected the complex consequences of neoliberal globalisation on rural Vietnam. This migration phenomenon, which is a concrete manifestation of the global trend of "de-peasantization", is portrayed through personal tragedies in literature, highlighting issues of ethnicity, gender and loss of identity.

Keywords: Migrant farmer; ecocriticism; labour export; gender; Vietnamese literature.

Introduction

Since the Doi Moi policy in 1986, Vietnamese society has undergone profound changes under the impacts of the market economy and the process of global integration. One of the most obvious consequences is the changes in the structure of the countryside and the fate of farmers. Pressure from new economic policies, market

competition and climate change has made traditional livelihoods based on agriculture precarious. Losing their fields, fish ponds and gardens, farmers are pushed into an insecure situation, forced to find new forms of livelihood, notably the wave of labour export (Hesse and Pham, 2024, p. 2).

This phenomenon is not unique to Vietnam but is part of a global trend called "de-agrarianization" and "de-peasantization" by political-economic researchers, which has been taking place strongly since the 1980s under the impact of neoliberalism. "De-agrarianization" is a change in economic structure, arising from the shrinking of the rural population whose main livelihood is agriculture (Bryceson, Kay and Mooji, 2000). Neo-liberalism, since the 1980s, with policies promoted by international financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, has accelerated both processes globally. Structural adjustment programs (SAPs) have forced governments in Africa, Asia, and Latin America to reduce agricultural subsidies, abolish protectionism, privatize state-owned enterprises, and liberalize markets. Simply put, it is a process by which the role of agriculture in the economy and rural populations has been reduced ((Bryceson, Kay, and Mooji, 2000). Across the continents of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, small-scale farmers have lost their livelihoods due to structural adjustment programs and competition from subsidized agricultural products from industrialized countries, forcing them to migrate.

In that context, contemporary Vietnamese literature has been quick to grasp and reflect this complex reality, creating a rich archive of the experiences of displacement, exile and adaptation of farmers. After 1975, Vietnam witnessed successive waves of migration: boat people leaving after the war; labour and study migration to Russia and Eastern Europe in the 1990s; and since the early 2000s, when many Asian countries faced population aging, the labour export movement (especially in the field of domestic work) and the trend of cross-border marriages of rural Vietnamese women have exploded strongly.

This article approaches these literary works from an interdisciplinary perspective. First of all, ecocriticism provides tools to analyse the close relationship between humans and their living environment (land, and village). Accordingly, leaving the land is not only a loss of means of production but also a separation from the "roots of the soul", from the ecological-cultural space that has shaped their identity, causing a feeling of "unsteadiness" and insecurity. Second, cultural studies and gender studies allow to decode cultural clashes, ethnic issues and gender pressures that weigh on migrant subjects, especially women, in a transnational environment. The combination of analysing the status of migrant peasant women in solidarity with issues of gender and ethnicity allows a deeper look into personal tragedies, instead of considering migration as a purely economic phenomenon.

Results and Discussion

1. Literary discourses on rural labour migration

a. *The dream of the West and the degenerate reality*

“Western” countries, the term used by Vietnamese people to refer to the United States and European countries with advanced economies and technocratic civilizations, have long been in the imagination of many immigrants as destinations that promised a life of freedom and prosperity. However, Vietnamese literature has exposed a completely opposite reality, “the West” has become a place where dreams are shattered and people have to face alienation, deadlocks and risks to their dignity.

The novel *Quyên* (2011) by Nguyen Van Tho mainly writes about Vietnamese intellectuals who went to Russia to trade and make a living, but at the end of the novel, the character Hue appears, a simple rural girl: “I was born in the village, all my life I only knew the fields” (Nguyen Van Tho, 2011). Following her husband to Russia, living here and there in the markets, then being infected with HIV AIDS, Hue appears among most of the characters in the novel who started as intellectuals as a very subtle prediction about the situation of farmers leaving their living space to marry foreigners and go to work abroad more and more in the future.

Thuan’s work, though primarily focused on intellectuals and urbanites, has sketched out the fate of farmers in the context of global migration. In *Letter to Mina* (2019), the image of a young woman from Nghe An fleeing across the border, being raped and eventually forced into prostitution in the red-light district of Saint-Denis is a tragic symbol of the vulnerability of migrant women. They are deprived of their autonomy and become victims of transnational criminal networks.

In *25 degrees below zero* (2024) by Thao Trang, the farmer becomes the central character. Inspired by the tragedy of 39 Vietnamese people who died in a container truck in England, the novel records the dangerous illegal border crossing journey of Lam, a rural young woman from the Central Region. Forced by her adoptive parents to go to England to improve her family's life, Lam had to embark on a life outside the law, lacking all basic social security conditions. The work emphasises that the issue of immigration is always linked to the issue of race. Asian migrants are often brutally treated and abandoned, and their lives are completely dependent on luck. They not only lose their connection with their homeland but also their status as people in a foreign land.

b. *Asia: labour markets and gender burden*

If the West is a symbol of the dream of changing one's life, then industrialized Asian countries such as China, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan appear as a giant labour market. The labour export movement in the Asian region is growing strongly in the context of the aging population in many countries. This process increases the demand for care services, especially jobs associated with meticulousness and thoughtfulness

that are associated with female workers, such as caring for the elderly or doing housework. Although this type of labour does not require too much physical strength or young age, it is essential for societies. In Vietnam, since the Renovation (Doi Moi) in 1986, the wave of exporting female workers to these markets to do housework and care has become a common phenomenon, reflecting both the needs of the regional market and the livelihood strategies of rural households. Post-1986 literature clearly reflects the “feminisation of migration”, when rural women are no longer dependent but become active agents in the process of leaving their hometown, taking on the role of economic pillars and nurturing the hope of changing the life of the whole family.

In Y Ban's *I am a Woman* (2019), the character Thi, a mountain woman, leaves her family to work as a maid in Taiwan. The work is a tense dialogue between “instinct” and “civilization”. The natural physiological instinct and the unselfish love of a rural woman from a mountainous region collide strongly with the cold, rule-bound urban world. When taking care of a paralysed man in a vegetative state, physical contact awakens her love and feminine instinct, however, they also push her into serious trouble: she is accused of sexual abuse by the wife and children of the man she cares for and taken to court. The character Thi becomes a symbol of the alienation of rural people when placed in an environment that is both artificial, mechanical, and full of prejudice.

The short story *Floating Fields* in the collection *Urban Wounds* (2017) by Do Tien Thuy depicts another tragedy, where the economic burden and gender responsibility weigh down on women in farming families who do not have enough land for production. Nen's family only has two small plots of land, and the high cost of fertiliser and seeds makes it even more difficult to maintain production. The income is not enough to feed four mouths, forcing the husband to go to the city to make a living. But urban life is full of uncertainty, cruelty, and competition. He had to struggle to earn money, eventually becoming addicted to drugs and becoming a drug dealer. He was stuck between two urban and rural worlds: he did not want to return to the fields, but being an urban resident made life precarious and unstable. Physically and mentally exhausted, he returned to his hometown, but could not bear the deadlocked life: struggling with addiction and the pressure of raising two children, he committed suicide with a knife. Nen, his wife, had to go to Taiwan to work as a maid to pay off her drug-addicted husband's debt. Here, women both actively go abroad to save their families and are pressured to “be wives and mothers” from afar, a dual responsibility that creates fierce erosion. The child's naive words “I will go abroad to work and earn a lot of money as a maid like my mother” show that the illusion of life change via labour export has been passed down as a sad legacy. The work acknowledges the proactive role of women but at the same time emphasizes their fragility and vulnerability to gender stereotypes and cultural clashes.

c. Cross-border marriage: illusions vs. reality

Besides labour export, marrying a foreigner is also a common migration route for rural women, who are often surrounded by the illusion of a prosperous life. However, literature has torn apart that velvet curtain to expose a painful reality. The “feminization of migration” shows that women have become active agents in the journey of leaving their homeland. They are strong, bear economic responsibilities, but are still surrounded by gender stereotypes, loneliness, and the risk of exploitation, abuse and suffering many injuries. Literature shows these paradoxes: women’s initiative and resilience go hand in hand with human tragedies, the instability of ecological-cultural identity.

In most cross-border marriages, women are the ones moving to their husbands’ homelands, reflecting patrilocal norms and an inherent power imbalance. Men are often the initiators of these flows, while women are often the “receivers.” However, women are not simply passive victims. Many actively seek and use marriage as a deliberate strategy for social, economic, and geographic mobility. They may act in accordance with or sometimes against their families’ wishes. Greater distance may mean greater vulnerability due to separation from their home communities, but it can also bring greater freedom and opportunity. Migration experiences are deeply shaped by the intersections of gender, class, ethnicity, and nationality. Studies of women’s migration in Eastern Europe and Africa show that women are no longer passive, dependent actors in the migration process. Instead, they are proactive, purposeful agents who make their own decisions to migrate through marriage or work to improve their lives, escape constraints at home, or support their families (Penttinen & Kynsilehto, 2017), (Passerini, Lyon, Capussotti, & Laliotou, 2007). This is also true for a segment of Vietnamese female migrants originating from rural areas: they also actively seek transnational marriages or go abroad for labour export. They migrate to escape the gender pressures of local patriarchy, to seek a more modern life, or to take on the role of economic breadwinner for their families. However, in these works of fiction, that initial initiative is gradually diminished or crushed in the migrant environment due to their level of education, the influence of the patriarchal culture that has ingrained itself in them and their husbands, or the prejudiced gaze of foreigners in richer Eastern European or Asian countries.

The short story *Sadness on Puvan Peak* in the collection *Single Wind and 9 Other Stories* (2009) by Nguyen Ngoc Tu tells the story of Diu, a girl who went to Taiwan to work. She was raped by her boss and had to return home in humiliation. Her life thereafter became adrift and miserable, proving that abandoning the “security of the land” makes women “unstable” and most vulnerable to the vortex of globalization. Nguyen Ngoc Tu’s view of the close relationship and similarity between women and nature in this work is quite consistent with her other works (not about migrant women). For example, in *Endless Field* and *Magnificent Sky Smoke*, she shows a profound similarity between the fate of women and nature in the Southern region. The female characters often have to endure physical and emotional abuse in a patriarchal society. Their resilience is likened to the vitality of natural systems. As nature gradually disappears due to human exploitation, some female characters also choose to retreat

into the wilderness as a form of resistance and self-protection (Cao, 2024). The migratory environment has broken that traditional connection with the land of Vietnamese farmers in general and rural women in particular, causing them to lose the ability to reposition and heal themselves through their traditional cultural and ecological identity.

Meanwhile, the short story *Virginity of the Pagoda Hamlet* (2011) by Doan Le reflected the current situation of migration via cross-border marriage in rural Vietnam: many peasant women became lazy and tried every way to marry foreigners, but then became victims of transnational prostitution organisations. Ms. Lay Lay married a foreigner to change her life, but became a henchman in the chain of human trafficking rings. Miserable because of the poverty and deadlock in the countryside, choosing international marriage is also a desperate attempt by the women to seek a better life and change their position in the family. The reason may not only be economic, but also the expectation of a more “modern”, “advanced” husband, and the change in their economic status and influence in the family in Vietnam. However, they were disillusioned when their expectations clashed with reality: either they were deceived, became victims of women trafficking, like the women in *Virginity of the Pagoda Hamlet* or were disappointed by their patriarchal European-Vietnamese husbands. Those husbands, when returning to Vietnam to find a wife, expected to find a “traditional” wife with a lower economic status and education, who was obedient, submissive and faithful. That is the case of Hue, a rural young woman who migrated to Eastern Europe to marry in the novel *Quyên* (2011) by Nguyen Van Tho. Her husband was not only a patriarchal man, often beating his wife brutally, but also unfaithful. Hue left and later contracted HIV-AIDS from another man during her wandering journey in the foreign land.

2. Diaspora depression and ecological identity crisis

From an ecocritical perspective, the above works all raise a warning voice about rootlessness. For farmers, land is not only a means of production but also a living space, a place that contains collective memory, cultural identity and spiritual values. Being “uprooted” from that space makes them lose their place of belonging, fall into a state of insecurity and easily become corrupted.

Huynh Nhu Phuong once compared the previous generation's worries about the “wave of modernisation” with today's reality, when “many girls leave their villages to marry Taiwanese, Korean men... and bring back children of mixed blood” (Huynh, 2016). This is not only a change in demographics but also a rupture in cultural and ecological identity. These analyses place Vietnamese literature within the global flow of migration, while revealing the intertwining of the gender, ethnic, and ecological issues in the phenomenon of Vietnamese peasant migration.

Conclusion

Vietnamese literature after 1986 has created a powerful and multidimensional discourse on the phenomenon of peasant migration for labour export. Through the interdisciplinary lens of ecocriticism, cultural studies, and gender studies, it can be seen that the works do not simply record migration stories but also perform a deep surgery on social wounds. They show that the process of neoliberal globalization, while opening up economic opportunities, simultaneously creates deep cultural, social, and psychological fractures.

The journey of the peasants leaving their land is the journey of losing their roots, the source of the insecurities and identity crises in the contemporary era. In this process, women stand out as central subjects, demonstrating both initiative and strong vitality, and clearly exposing the tragedies of prejudice and exploitation.

This article on the one hand recreates the wave of migration of Vietnamese farmers in the opening period with its chaos, complexity and instability. At the same time, it shows the depression of exile, loss and separation from the space of belonging. The article especially emphasizes the status of migrant women farmers in solidarity with the issues of gender and ethnicity. By raising the voice of the vulnerable, literature has performed the role of social criticism, warning about the costs of development and integration, and affirming the importance of the connection between people, places and gender in maintaining a full life.

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