“Wound That Can’t Be Bandaged”: The Imperfect Translation of Women’s Suffering in *The Tale of Kiều* and *The Sorrow of War*

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Introduction

Like all cultures around the world, Vietnamese literature has evolved in accordance with the progress of history, gaining significant achievements. Two of Vietnam's most important literary pieces have been translated into English, including *The Tale of Kiều* written by Nguyễn Du in early 19th century (translated by Huỳnh Sanh Thông) and *The Sorrow of War,* written by Bảo Ninh in 1987 (translated by Frank Palmos). Though separated by more than 150 years, both pieces examine the plight of women under the Confucian patriarchal society. Introduced into Vietnam as early as 1st century BC through the Western Han's colonization project, Confucianism gradually established its position as a crucial ideological framework for imperialism and began to have widespread influences during the reign of the Lý dynasty in the 11th century.

Confucianism emphasizes the cultivation of the self and the adherence to the social hierarchy, in which the ones in lower social positions are required to fulfill responsibilities towards those of higher statuses. Three most important higher-lower relationships are those of the emperor and his citizens, parents and children, and men and women. Just as there are codes of ethics for citizens and children expressed in terms of loyalty and filial piety respectively, there are ethical expectations for women consolidated in the Three Obediences and Four Virtues. A woman has to obey her father when at home, obey her husband when married and obey her son(s) in widowhood, while demonstrating female virtues in ethics, speech, visage, and works throughout her life. It can be inferred here that Confucianism gives complete social rights to men and treats women as men's servants; in other words, it designs a highly patriarchal society where women suffer layers of oppression and virtual, if not actual, imprisonment from birth to death.

Set in the 16th century under the Ming dynasty in China, *The Tale of Kiều* unpacks and criticizes the suppression of women in Confucian society. The tale is an adaptation of the original plot of *Jin Yun Qiao Chuan* by Qing Xin Cai Ren and written in Nôm characters, a Vietnamese appropriation of the Han characters, as well as in the six-eight poetic form in which a line of six words is followed by a line of eight. The 3254-line verse-novel revolves around Vương Thuý Kiều, a bright young women born into a wealthy family with a younger sister and a younger brother. At the beginning of the story, Kiều emerges as both exceedingly beautiful and talented in art, and emotionally and sexually forward as well. After falling in love with Kim Trọng, a friend of her brother, she takes the initiative to cross over to his house at night to confess her feelings and request Kim to make a vow for their relationship. Unfortunately, Kiều's family soon faces a series of mishaps that push Kiều to sell herself to Mã Giám Sinh in exchange for money to save her father and her brother. This marks the beginning of fifteen years of tragedy for Kiều, during which she is tricked and sold to brothels twice, tortured physically and mentally as a house servant, and even tries to commit suicide. Kiều finally reunites with her family and Kim Trọng, although their relationship is now limited to that of in-laws, as Kim has married her younger sister.

The female character Phương in *The Sorrow of War* shares uncanny characteristics and fates with Kiều. A seventeen-year-old crush of Kiên, the novel's protagonist, Phương is "the most radiant beauty in the entire Chu Van An school" who is well-versed in piano and guitar playing, singing, and painting (Palmos 131). Just as Kiều makes the first move in her relationship with Kim, Phương openly and repeatedly asks Kiên to have sex with her before he risks his life participating in the Anti-American War in the South of Vietnam. Kiên's fearful refusal means that Phương loses her virginity not to the man she loves, but to a gang of rapists on the

Southward train; yet what is more tragic is Kiên's own decision to abandon Phương after the assault. He goes to war with an obsession for the pure and untouched seventeen-year-old Phương (which he can now never have), and returns postwar to find that Phương has given up on herself by dashing in and out of fleeting relationships. Their reunion is brief and tormenting; Phương realizes that both of them, though still much in love with each other, are now too damaged to be together. She decides to leave.

In my thesis, I compare and contrast the two figures of Kiều and Phương to divulge the unchanging patriarchal oppression experienced by women in Vietnam in the course of one and a half centuries despite a radical change of societal discourse from imperialism to communism. Chapter one focuses on the shared beauty, talent, and audacity of the two women that render them hybrid figures who trangress the boundaries and culturally gendered roles between masculinity and femininity. I apply Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity in the colonial context as a theoretical framework; in essence, Bhabha maintains that the appropriation and mimicry of the colonizer's culture by the colonized creates a form of hybridity that eventually destabilizes and challenges the colonial power, an authority that is originally based on the process of othering. In the same manner, by demonstrating both feminine and masculine characteristics, Kiều and Phương become a threat to the stability of the patriarchal social order.

Chapter two argues that the tragedies experienced by Kiều and Phương (namely sexual assaults, desertion, social stigma and prostitution) are punishments imposed by the society for their hybridity. Several theories are helpful in understanding and dissecting different layers of male oppression, including Pierre Bordieu's principle of inferiority and the commodification and objectification of women, Jonathan Gottschall's biosocial theory in explaining wartime rape, and Susan Brownmiller's critique of prostitution as the monetization of female sexuality and

dehumanization of women. The chapter concludes by positing that the ultimate tragedy happens when the oppressed women cease to protest and internalize the patriarchal discourse by giving up on themselves.

In chapter three, I focus on a related aspect of colonizing patriarchal disempowerment, the issues of translation from Vietnamese to English in *The Sorrow of War*. Though first published in 1987, Bảo Ninh's novel immediately faced strict censorship and was not allowed to be circulated in Vietnam until 2005, eleven years after the publication of the English version by Frank Palmos in 1993. This means that the English version, which was rewritten by Palmos based on a rough translation by Phan Thanh Hảo, enjoys a certain sense of authority over the original Vietnamese. Palmos stays true to the sequence of the basic plot and successfully introduces the counter-narrative to the propaganda by both sides of the war, but fails to convey Bảo Ninh's comprehensive critique of the war through his distortion of Bảo Ninh's representations of women throughout the novel. By exposing and emphasizing women's bodies, and adding graphic, gratuitous violence to their scenes, Palmos feeds into the Orientalist imagination of the helpless and vulnerable Asian female body. In effect, Palmos' translation colonizes the original text. I base my arguments on Roman Jakobson's translation theories and Suzanne Keen's narrative empathy theories to point out that by intentionally shifting the reader's sympathetic gaze from the women towards the man Kiên, Palmos creates an inadequate intepretation and a disempowered translation of *The Sorrow of War*. I conclude, therefore, that we must demand a new English version that is faithful to Bảo Ninh's original text in order to give him credit for his critique of patriarchal Vietnamese culture, and his empathy for Vietnamese women.

Chapter One

Every society values beautiful women, yet Confucianism dictates that a woman's beauty need not exceed one man's desire to marry her. Similarly, a woman's talents should be restricted in household chores and male entertainment through art. In terms of characteristics, both Kiều and Phương possess beauty, talents, and audacity that defy social expectations.

Pretty Face, Sorry Fate

Kiều appears in the opening lines of *The Tale* with her younger sister Vân, both depicted as having bodies like "slim plum branches" and "snow-pure souls"—imageries that suggest beautiful appearances and admirable virtues (Huỳnh 17).

> In quiet grace Vân was beyond compare:
> her face a moon, her eyebrows two full curves;
> her smile a flower, her voice the song of jade;
> her hair the sheen of clouds, her skin white snow. (19-22)

Here the use of natural imageries implies that the beauty of Vân is natural and therefore admirable and acceptable. The English translation, however, fails to convey the humility of nature towards Vân's beauty. The original "Mây thua nước tóc, tuyết nhường màu da" contains "thua," meaning "lose to," and "nhường," meaning "yield to." Roughly translated, clouds lose to her hair and white snow yields to her skin. The missing words indicate that Vân's beauty surpasses the beauty of nature in a way that evokes nature's humility and modesty. Such understanding of the original version becomes vital when Kiều's portrait comes into play; she too has eyes like "autumn streams" and brows like "spring hills" (25), yet flowers "grudge[s] her glamour" and willows envy her "fresh hue" (26). Hers is also a beauty beyond nature, but compared to Vân she has a "keener, deeper charm" (23). With nature acting as the bottom line,

Vân's beauty surplus is within acceptable range, while Kiều's gap is so large that it kindles nature's jealousy and envy. Here nature can be read as society with authoritative codes and regulations, thus nature's attitudes towards the beauty of the two sisters reflect social evaluation and foreshadow the women's fates. On the one hand, Vân will lead a comfortable and serene life as her beauty and personality remain in harmony with nature and so are socially justifiable. On the other hand, Kiều will face numerous obstacles due to the discordance between her appearance and the social standard. "A glance or two from her" makes kingdoms rock and topples city walls, suggesting that her beauty is destructive not only to herself but also to the foundations of the patriarchal society that she lives in (27).

In fact, even before going into details of Kiều's beauty, the narrator has indicated that the tale will revolve around the suffering of a beautiful woman, signified by "rose" in "Blue Heaven's wont to strike a rose from spite" (6). Later Kiều herself acknowledges that since ages "harsh fate has cursed all women, sparing none" (108). It is important to note here that the original word Nguyễn Du uses is "hồng nhan," literally "rosy face," which more often than not specifies beautiful women than "all women" in general. "Hồng nhan bạc mệnh" is a Sino-Vietnamese phrase that has its root in the Chinese idiom 红颜薄命 (hóngyánbómìng), which essentially states that women's beauty is ill-fated. Kiều uses the phrase in her allusion to Đạm Tiên whose tomb she comes across on her way back from the spring festival because she is highly aware of their shared extraordinary beauty. As Kiều states, the belief that beauty is ill-fated has been continously upheld since "ages out of mind," and its prevalence continues way into the 20th century with the emergence of Phương in Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* (107).

A high school sweatheart of the protagonist Kiên, Phương at seventeen is "the most radiant beauty in the entire Chu Văn An school" (Palmos 131). Hers is a "burning, sensuous, and

conspicuous beauty" that she bears "confidently, even rashly," a manner that has "infuriated the authorities and her peers" (131). Already Phương shares with Kiều a physical attractiveness so outstanding that it is enviable and socially unacceptable. Note that it is her confident manner rather than her beauty itself that enrages her teachers and her peers; here both Kiều and Phương are highly aware of their inborn allure, yet while Kiều is self-conscious and depressed that her beauty will bring her harsh fate, Phương enjoys the attention she gets for her charm. It is not until Kiên's father points out how her beauty prophesizes her ill fate that Phương realizes the idea of "hồng nhan bạc mệnh" applies to her. He admits that Phương is "really beautiful," but notes that her beauty is abnormal—a remark omitted in the English translation (129). Here Kiên's father uses the words "lạc thời" and "lạc loài" as adjectives, the first meaning disjointed with the times and the second meaning singled out from the species. Phương's beauty is atypical in the sense that it is out of keeping with the times and the people; in other words, she is the blacksheep who does not belong to wartime. Later Phương reiterates these specific two words to describe herself, implicitly acknowledging Kiên's father's straightforward comment that her beauty "one day will cost [her] dearly" (129). She understands at this point that she is and will continue to be the blacksheep of the society because of her beauty and her character.

Artistic Talents and Prophetic Abilities

Aside from blooming beauty, both Kiều and Phương are also exceptionally talented in arts. Born "blessed with wit" (Huỳnh 29), Kiều can "write verse and paint" and also "sing and chant" (30). In this sense, she is a perfect emblem of elite womanhood—she has excelled at all four skills required of an educated woman in imperial society including lute-playing, chess, poetry, and painting. As to music, she has "mastered all five tones" (31) in the pentatonic system and even "[plays] the lute far better than Ai Chang" (32). Huỳnh Sanh Thông notes in the

English translation of *The Tale* that Ai Chang is "a musician celebrated in a Han song" (170), yet more recent scholarship argues that Ai Chang is neither a historical nor a fictional figure, and that the term is an incorrect translation from the original version written in Nôm characters (Lê Văn Hoè 1953, Nguyễn Tuấn Cường 2010). A more popular and widely circulated version reads that Kiều has a special talent that surpasses everyone in lute-playing. An immediate evidence follows: she composes a song called "Cruel Fate" to "mourn all women in soul-rending strains" as if she knew she would be one among them (34). This scene also resonates with her identification with the ghost of Đạm Tiên and her comment that harsh fate spares no beautiful woman. Here it is suggested that an understanding of arts informs an insight into life—Kiều can realize and comprehend the idea of "hồng nhan bạc mệnh" only because of her mastery in arts. Compared to Vân, who readily dismisses Kiều as absurdly "lavishing tears on one long dead and gone" (106) when she pays tribute to Đạm Tiên, Kiều surpasses her sister "in talents" as much as "in looks" (24).

Similar to Kiều, Phương's piano talent is "natural" (Palmos 200). Her father is a pianist and her mother a music teacher, but Phương gradually grows tired of playing the piano and switches to guitar-playing and singing, a practice that terrifies her mother. Phương's mother refers to her as "a saint, or a fairy" because she "has their sort of perfection" (201). Here the English version skips a part in which the mother observes that Phương's artistry should only be reserved for high-class music—slipping out of the piano and her perfectionism and pure soul will plant a seed for disaster. Tragedy, at this point, is signified by not only beauty but talent as well. Earlier in the narrative Phương emerges as the only person who can understand the paintings and the art of Kiên's father in his later life. As the sole audience, she is the only one who knows "all about the cremation of the paintings" when Kiên's father is nearing his death (128). Contrary to

Kiên who is forever puzzled by his father's decision to burn his own works, Phương understands and agrees that "the burning had to take place"; additionally, she can see "a prophetic message of destruction" emerging out of the night (130). Her artistic appreciation grants her exclusive access to the cremation itself and consequently to Kiên's father's understanding of a gloomy future ahead.

Both Kiều and Phương are able to tell the future through their practice and understanding of arts; in other words, arts give them the power to foretell but not to control their fates. Nguyễn Du himself is highly concerned with talent, or "tài": at the beginning of *The Tale*, he states that "talent and destiny are apt to feud" (Huỳnh 2), and towards the end he claims that "In talent take no overweening pride, / for talent and disaster form a pair" (3247-48). In Vietnamese, the word for talent, "tài," has the same spelling and rhymes with the word for disaster, "tai," their only difference being the additional tone on the word for talent. By pointing out the similar structure of the two words, Nguyễn Du illustrates that in the case of the woman, disaster is inherent in talent. The same formula does not apply to men; take Kim Trọng, Kiều's love interest, as an example. A son of a noble and elite family, he is "[born] into wealth and talent" (149) and has "received / his wit from heaven" (150). Here it is crucial to point out that in order to demonstrate Kim Trọng's gifted and inborn wit, Nguyễn Du uses the phrase "thông minh tính trời," which is the same description as Kiều's "blessed with wit," or "*Thông minh* vốn sẵn *tính trời*" (29, my emphasis). This means that both Kim and Kiều are granted with the *same* level of intelligence quotient, yet their fates differ radically as a result of their gender differences. On the one hand, Kiều suffers fifteen years of turmoil and torture both mentally and physically. On the other hand, though Kim does endure some level of mental agony from being separated from his lover Kiều, he for the most part enjoys a comfortable and privileged life. With his talent, he easily passes the

imperial examination to be qualified as a government official, a status that gives him access to wealth and power. He goes on to marry Vân, Kiều's sister, who bears children for him after finding out that Kiều has gone; when re-united with Kiều fifteen years later he maintains a platonic relationship with her.

That being said, a man's talents are highly regarded and rewarding, yet a woman's are strongly resisted as they will manifest into disaster. This is not to say that women are discouraged to be talented in any aspect; in Vietnamese imperial society, elite women are encouraged to master the four artistic skills with the sole purpose of entertaining men. Kiều transgresses this threshold, however, by gaining knowledge of herself through the practice of the arts; she understands deeply the notion of "hồng nhan bạc mệnh" and so can see into the future. It is precisely this special ability to foretell rather than her artistic mastery that result in her disastrous life. Similarly, Phương's musical talent is warmly welcomed by the soldiers at Đồ Sơn where Phương and Kiên spend their vacation with the Chu Văn An's Youth Union. In this scene the motif of seeing re-emerges; Phương observes something "[frightening]" and "abnormal about the sea" and becomes "a little apprehensive," while Kiên "[notices] nothing unusual" (Palmos 174). This contrast between Phương's ability to see and Kiên's lack of such ability resonates with her exclusive access to Kiên's father's cremation that allows her to see a "prophetic message of destruction" (130). In both cases, what Phương apprehends is the war and its destructive rampage on their future, a reality that Kiên only realizes after years spent toiling in the frontline.

With their abilities to see into the future, both Phương and Kiều defy what Laura Mulvey refers to as the "to-be-looked-at-ness" traditionally assigned to women (62). According to Mulvey, the embedded sexual imbalance in the society results in the male gaze and the woman's

exhibitionist role, with the man "[projecting his] phantasy on to the female figure" and the woman "[holding] the look, [playing] to and [signifying] male desire" (62). This traditional and objectifying perspective means that the woman as a complicated human figure holds no weight whatsoever; she is rather an "erotic object" (Mulvey 62) that manifests and represents male sexual fantasy. In other words, men actively enjoy the pleasure in looking, while women passively bear the look. Kiều, however, cleverly switches roles in her art performance, moving from playing the lute to be looked at by men and to entertain men, to playing the lute to see into the future. Upon encountering the tomb of Đạm Tiên, Kiều instantly identifies with the beautiful and ill-fated singer, "[pulling] a pin out of her hair" and "[graving] / four lines of stop-short verse on a tree's bark" (Huỳnh 99-100). Note that there is a subtle tension between the feminine pin that adorns her hair and the masculine and determined engravement of the poem on the tree. While both Vân and Vương Quan—Kiều's younger brother dismiss her sorrow and her shedding tears for Đạm Tiên, protesting that "[dank] air hangs heavy there— / day's failing, and there's still a long way home" (113-114), Kiều persists that "In her, perhaps, I've found a kindred heart: / let's wait and soon enough she may appear" (117-118). What Quan sees as "dank air" Kiều sees as "a kindred heart," suggesting that the man can only decipher what is on the surface whereas the woman can see well into the spiritual realm.

Kiều's prophecy turns out to be true; a whirlwind "[rises] from nowhere" (120) and everyone sees "fresh footprints on the moss," a clear manifestation of the ghost of Đạm Tiên (124). The fact that not only Kiều but Vân and Quan can also see the ghost's trace, on the one hand, testifies what Kiều prophesizes earlier about Đạm Tiên's possible appearance. On the other hand, the collective gaze elevates Kiều's ability to see in the sense that she can both see by herself and allow others to see. Kiều is so touched by Đạm Tiên's appearance that she "[carves]

an old-style poem on the tree"—an art performance that reiterates the tight relationship between her artistic and prophetic ability (132). In fact, Kiều initiates the arrival of Đạm Tiên by writing a poem on a tree and sends her off with the same act. Unlike the English version which uses two different verbs, "grave" and "carve" for the two poems, Nguyễn Du in his original version uses the same verb "vạch," which means sketching, scribbling, and/or carving, drawing lines. It appears that Kiều carves the poems on the living tree with a clear intention: if she had wanted to dedicate the verses to the ghost Đạm Tiên, she could have recited them in front of the tomb or burnt the written poems in a ritual of sending goods and gifts to the dead. Hers is a public performance and a message for the living that caters for the collective gaze—Kiều confidently engraves her artistic marks and her spiritual experience on a tangible and living platform, allowing a wider public to see into the encounter between Đạm Tiên and her.

Such confidence is more frequently and clearly seen in the way Phương flaunts her beauty and her talents. Not only is she highly aware of her outstanding appearance and her artistic gift, but Phương also works them into her own advantage. During the encounter with the soldiers on Đồ Sơn beach, Phương resolves the built-up tension between the soldiers and Kiên around putting out the campfire by asking whether singing too is banned, "feigning innocence" (Palmos 174). Phương clearly understands that the fire has to be put out and she and Kiên have to leave the beach, yet she takes advantage of her innocent beauty at the age of sixteen and her sweet voice to keep the fire burning and remain with Kiên there. In this sense, she has flipped the table, moving from a lower to an upper position, from the ruled to the ruler. First the patrolmen sit down with her, an act that implies the shift from a higher and more powerful status to an equal one, then they sit silently, "moved to sadness" as Phương no longer "nervously" picks at the guitar but "[raises] her head and, as her shawl [falls] from her shoulders, [begins] to sing

sweetly" (175). Contrary to the English version which implies that the shawl naturally falls from Phương, the original version states that Phương "hất bỏ tấm khăn văn choàng trên vai"—that is, she flings away the shawl on her shoulders. The act of flinging away the shawl and exposing her shoulders is a bold performance of beauty and sexuality—Phương allows the men to look at her not as an erotic object but a controlling subject. Put it another way, Phương manipulates the gender binary and makes use of her beauty and her voice to take the lead and dominate the gathering, at the same time gaining from the soldiers "a secret" that the Americans have entered the war (175). This insight confirms her earlier anxiety that there is something "abnormal" and "frightening" about the sea (174); in fact, it is precisely the sea that "[roars] out the message [of war] in the small hours of 5 August 1964" (175).

This scene bears an uncanny resemblance to the meeting between Kiều and the ghost of Đạm Tiên in which an art performance goes along with the prophetic message, as if the prophecy can only come true when accompanied by the female prophet's art performance. Such artistic and prophetic abilities can be read as "spiritual and intellectual strength," assets that Pierre Bordieu argues to be traditionally associated with the male dominant in a patriarchal society (Rivkin and Ryan 342). Bordieu persuasively points out that by using categorical thinking and dichotomy discourse, the dominant class dismisses the physical strength and labor power that the dominated claim for themselves as brute strength and blind instinct, while asserts intellectual capabilities and self-control, "a strength of soul or spirit which allows them to conceive their relationship to the dominated…as that of the soul to the body, understanding to sensibility, culture to nature" (342). Viewed through the patriarchal lens, men assign corporeality and sentimentality to women and ascribe spirituality and intellectuality to themselves as a way to rationalize their dominant status. Once again, Kiều and Phương transgress the traditional

attributes given to and expected of women; by possessing beauty, artistic and prophetic abilities, they have access to the bodily, the spiritual and the intellectual realms. In other words, they are both the soul and the body, culture and nature.

Sexual Audacity and Hybridity

By occupying the roles of both men and women, Kiều and Phương constitute what Homi Bhabha refers to as "hybridity," the dominated's appropriation of the dominant's culture and practice (154). On the one hand, they both appear highly feminine in their beauty. On the other hand, they transcend mere bodily femininity by acquiring spiritual and intellectual knowledge. Though their mimicry and repetition of the authority—who in this case is the men—are not clear in the discussion of their beauty and talents, they become much more evident in the two women's audacity in expressing their feelings and taking initiatives.

Taking advantage of her family's trip to their hometown, Kiều stays at home alone and finds her way to Kim Trọng's place twice. The mere act of a woman taking initiatives to walk over a man's house is in itself a transgressive and audacious one, yet there are layers of femininity and masculinty being played out in Kiều's two visits. In the first attempt, Kiều "[bends] her nimble steps" (Huỳnh 378) towards the wall to find Kim "already there awaiting her," meaning that this meeting has been mutually agreed between the two (379). Kiều cuts short the encounter for fear that her family will come back soon, but decides to make another trip to Kim's when she finds out that nobody has returned yet. This time her arrival is unexpected; Kim is waken from his drowse by "[the] girl's soft footsteps" (437) and wonders if "he was dreaming now a spring night's dream?" (440). From the first to the second visit, Kiều has shifted from following and conforming to a mutual agreement to taking the initiative to lead and control the dynamics of the romance. It is worth noticing that the ways in which she gets into Kim's

apartment are different: on the first trip, she "[rolls] up sleeves, [unlocks] the fairy cave, / and [clears] through clouds to path to Paradise!" (391-92). The imagery of "the fairy cave," or "động đào," which literally means "the cave with the [flowering] peach trees," refers to an ancient Chinese tale written by T'ao Ch'ien (175)[1]. According to the story, a fisherman lose his way and accidentally discovers the fairyland in a cave filled with flowering peach trees, but is unable to locate the cave again after he reports his finding to other people. By describing Kiều's action as unlocking "the fairy cave" (391) and clearing through clouds "to path to Paradise" (392), Nguyễn Du implies that to Kiều the first visit is rather dream-like and unreal, as opposed to the sense of certainty observed in the waiting presence of Kim Trọng.

The second trip, however, is much more certain and solid to Kiều: she "[drops] silk curtains at the entrance door, / then [crosses] the garden in a dark night, alone" (431-32). Here "cross" is not the best translation of the verb "xăm xăm," which means going straight to somewhere in a quick and hasty manner with clear intent. Contrary to the cautious unlocking and hesistant clearing clouds in the first attempt, Kiều's walking straight past the garden in the second visit reveals her increased confidence and certainty. At this point the dichotomy between dream and reality is flipped, with Kim being the drowsy one. In other words, from the first visit to the second, Kiều has transformed from the controlled to the controlling, and Kim simultaneously changes from one in control to one under control.

> "Along a lonesome, darkened path," she said,
> "for love of you I found my way to you.
> Now we stand face to face—but who can tell
> we shan't wake up and learn it was a dream?" (441-44)

[1] Page 175 in the Notes section of *The Tale of Kiều*, as opposed to citation of poetic lines.

In addition, whereas Kim opens the conversation in Kiều's first visit with a complaint about her neglecting him and his affection, in the second visit Kiều is the one who raises her voice first to declare her intent. The fact that Kiều has a voice immediately suggests that she controls the narrative of the event, which in this case is the relationship. It is important to note that in the original version, Kiều does not explicitly state that "for love of you I found my way to you," but covers the idea under a metaphor "vì hoa nên phải đánh đường tìm hoa" which literally means "for flower I risk my way to find flower." Here I agree with the English translation that "hoa," or flower, alludes to both Kiều's love of Kim Trọng and Kim himself. Two points are worth consideration: first, though Lê Văn Hoè explains that the flower imagery refers to a beautiful person regardless of gender, such image is traditionally a highly feminine one (93). This further underscores the flipped binary between Kiều and Kim, with the woman being the active seeker and the man the sought flower. The word "đánh đường," which means taking risk to find ways, goes hand in hand with the imagery of "a lonesome, darkened path" and so further elaborates Kiều's eagerness and audacity in single-handedly pursuing her lover and her love. In this way, Kiều has become the one who looks and Kim the one to be looked at.

Yet at the same time the metaphor also tones down the bold declaration in a concealing manner. Kiều does not give an explicit statement but rather hints at it partly because she is a woman in a Confucian society, one who is expected to be bashful and timid. The English version, therefore, strips the remark of its subtle feminine touch by unpacking the metaphor and only gives readers its most basic meaning. This sense of feminine reserve is also seen in Kiều's reference to "dream," which not only responds to and reiterates Kim's drowsy and dreamy state in the second visit but also expresses her insecurity and foreshadows the evanescent relationship. Here Kiều demonstrates layers of Bhabha's hybridity in her navigation between determination

and uncertainty, audacity and reservation, masculinity and femininity. On the one hand, Kiều insists that they "stand face to face" and seizes the present moment to cherish their relationship, a demand highly daring and masculine under Confucianism. On the other hand, however, she admits her feminine anxiety and doubt about their future.

The boldness and determination to take the lead in the relationship are similarly, if not more clearly, found in Phương throughout her lifelong relationship with Kiên. During a game of hide-and-seek, she pulls Kiên to hide in one tram-car compartment where she "[embraces] him, kissing him on his cheeks and his eyes with childish, thirteen-year-old passion" (Palmos 158). The English version skips the part where Kiên, as opposed to the forward and unabashed Phương, turns cold, breathes, his heart racing. Such an erasure of details blurs the polarized dynamic between Phương and Kiên that has already been present in their early life, thus fails to illustrate its continuous trajectory into their later teens and adulthood. Already the reverse dichotomy between the forward and the timid, the controlling and the controlled, the woman and the man is established between Phương and Kiên. At seventeen, she persuades Kiên to cut class for a swim in the West Lake, having already "worn her skimpy swimsuit under her school uniform, right there in the school, as if for a dare" (118). The swimsuit not only exemplifies Phương's rebellious characteristics and her clear awareness of her beauty, but also hints at a daring performance and expression of sexuality. After the swim, she has for the first time used the pronoun "em" to tell him that she is exhausted, an expression whose undertones are insufficiently translated to English as "she [says] invitingly" (132). In Vietnamese, "em" is used when the speaker is talking to someone older than him/her, for example an elder brother or sister. By switching from a pronoun that connotes equal classmate relationship to a pronoun that signifies a lower social position, Phương intentionally provokes Kiên's sense of protective

masculinity. At the same time, "em" is usually used by the woman in a traditional heterosexual relationship regardless of age, which means that Phương's pronoun alteration also acts as an implicit confession of love and a sexual invitation.

On the verge of war, Phương intends to make the first move to consummate their relationship: after the swim, she "[moves] to embrace Kiên, pulling him close to her" (133) and continues to "[caress] his hair, pushing his face into her breasts" and "softly [kisses] his eyelids, then his lips" (136) after being rejected by Kiên in the first attempt. Just like Kiều, Phương makes two efforts to express her feelings, with the second time being bolder and more explicitly open about her intentions. Yet while Phương wishes to make love to Kiên, Kiều demands Kim to "[treat] not our love as just a game" and refuses his suggestion to consummate their relationship (Huỳnh 501).

> But you've named me your bride—to serve her man,
> she must place chastity above all else
> They play in mulberry groves along the P'u,
> but who would care for wenches of that ilk? (505-508)

Huỳnh notes that the direct translation of the phrase "you've named me your bride" should be "[you] have admitted [me] to the rank of [one who wears a skirt of] coarse cloth and a thorn [for a hairpin]," with the coarse cloth and the thorn being the Confucianist symbol of a virtuous woman (177). Additionally, "to serve her man" is an abbreviation of "[to perform her] duty of submission to [her] husband," one among the three codes of obedience that a woman is to follow under Confucianism: when at home stay obedient to her father, when married stay obedient to her husband, and when widowed stay obedient to her son (178). By referring to the Three Obediences and insisting that she "must place chastity above all else," Kiều takes up the role of

the ideal woman and condemns those who "play in the mulberry groves along the P'u." According to Huỳnh, couples in ancient China used to take the mulberry groves along the P'u river bank as a trysting place, and hence the allusion here implies moral decadence (178). Kiều suggests that those who are blinded by lust and consummate their relationship before marriage are "wenches" that nobody would care for or want to have. It is important to note that in the original version Nguyễn Du uses the word "con người," a general and neutral noun that refers to human beings without any specification of gender. As a result, the line should be read as "but who would want humans of that ilk." This means that Kiều denounces not only unchaste women but also lustful men, a move away from Confucianism's targeting solely at women. Here again Kiều emerges with complexity and hybridity: on the one hand, she strictly upholds the ideal of womanhood under Confucianism, yet on the other hand implicitly criticizes its failure to address men in pre-marital sex.

The reason Kiều gives for rejecting Kim's sexual endeavors is that "[while she is] alive, [Kim will] sometime get [his] due" (522). In other words, Kiều argues that since they have previously made vows towards one another, sooner or later they will get married and will then be able to legitimately consummate their relationship without shame. It is precisely at this point that Phương diverges from Kiều in her understanding of the unpredictable future: it is war, and therefore "there'll never be another time like now" (Palmos 133). She wants to make love to Kiên to at least mark their relationship in case war will tear them apart; contrary to the idealist seventeen-year-old Kiên who strongly believes in their happy reunion and their ability to "rebuild," Phương is highly aware of the harsh reality of war; she "can see what's going to happen. War, ruin, destruction" (134). The motif of seeing re-emerges here, and it is crucial to point out how Phương's ability to see differs from Kiều's. Kiều can see and can allow others to

form a collective gaze, yet her prophecy about her own future is vaguely limited to her ill fate without any specificity. Put it another way, Kiều knows that she will struggle, but knows not exactly when or how unfavorable incidents happen. This obscure vision leads to her naïve belief that she and Kim still have long days ahead to gradually enjoy and savour their love, a decision that she later regrets: "A rose divine lay fallen in vile hands, / once kept from sun or rain for someone's sake: / 'If only I had known I'd sink so low / I should have let my true love pluck my bud'" (Huỳnh 789-92). At the time she does not know, and later can only wish if only she had known.

Phương, on the contrary, sees and knows in clear details about the nature of the war that lies ahead. She repeatedly reiterates the idea that "there may be no other night like this, no time like the present" (Palmos 135) and "[there's] no other night like this" (136) to remind Kiên that once they enter the war, when Kiên has "gone [his] way," Phương will "go [her] own way too" (135). The war and the future that Phương sees "through the flames" of the cremation of Kiên's father's paintings hold in themselves neither glory nor heroism; in them Phương sees only separation, change, and death (134). Though she does not know the specific extent to which the war will destroy her life, she for the moment knows that both of them will regret in agony if they does not make love that night. Phương's ability to see more concretely than Kiều lies in the difference in their social contexts: whereas Kiều's family unexpectedly and suddenly receives wrong accusations that result in Kiều having to sell herself to redeem her father and her brother, the war against the Americans is apprehended and its nature predictable.

It is, therefore, an apprehension of war-time separation rather than a rebellion against the Confucian idea of chastity that motivates Phương to ask Kiên for sex. In fact, after Kiên's rejection in her first attempt, Phương pronounces herself to be Kiên's wife to legitimate their

sexual intercourse, which means that she associates sex with love and marriage rather than mere lust and adventure. She tries to alleviate Kiên's "fear" by assuring him that she will be his wife and that she will not be tainted or shamed because of their pre-marital sex (135). By alluding to the Confucian notion of virtue and chastity, Phương hints at the Three Obediences that render her social status much lower than Kiên's. Here again Phương's sexual eagerness along with her traditional womanhood aligns her in the grey space of hybridity and paradox: by offering sex, Phương becomes more masculine and more powerful than Kiên, yet in order to persuade him to conduct sexual intercourse, she resorts to returning to a weaker and more feminine personna. Phương fails nonetheless; even in her third attempt when they are on the Southward train, Kiên is still naïve and afraid, and "[dares] not to accept her challenge to make love to her" (137).

Kiên's repeated rejection and fright of Phương's sexuality resonates with Quân's refusal to have sex with Viếng, the woman who buries soldier corpses in Dương Thu Hương's *Novel without a Name*, another fictional work written by a Vietnamese author about the Vietnam War. Quân's impression of her is undoubtedly a hybrid one: "She [combes] out her hair. Her caressing, feminine gestures [jar] with her hulking, wrestler's body" (Dương 42). On the one hand, carrying and wrestling with male corpses everyday give her n aot only muscular and masculine body but also an unfeminine "nauseating, sweaty odor" from the blood stain (40). On the other hand, however, her "caressing" action and her "soft, shiny black hair" are her outstanding traits of femininity (42). The mixture of gender identities are also evident in the power dynamics between the two: Quân constantly finds himself obeying her "mechanically" (41) and "like a child" (42), but at the same time she acts "just as a wife would do for her husband" (43). Here Viếng is both the parent and the wife, the controlling and the submissive, the authoritative and the obedient, the masculine and the feminine. Yet while Kim and Kiên find

their women's hybridity both attractive and intimidating, Quân finds the combination of masculinity and femininity in Viếng jarring—she fills him with "a mixture of horror, curiosity, and pity" (45).

Contrary to his initial exclaimation that "It's a woman!" (38), Quân feigns his sleep when she approaches and cannot make love to her despite his "fascinating desire" (46).

> Each feature of her crude face—her pug nose, her low forehead, her buck teeth—[looks] neglected, [pleads] for pleasure with an expectancy that [is] as much a female animal's as it [is] a woman's (47).

At this point, Viếng is both "a female animal" and "a woman," which means that she occupies the in-betweenness of the binaries between not only men and women but also human and animal. In this sense, she destablizes not one but two dichotomies. Though he is intimidated by her transgression of the man/woman threshold, it is precisely her crossing the border between humanity and animality that extinguishes Quân's desire. The "expectancy" hints at her awareness of her own hybridity, which explains how sex with another human is necessary for her to redeem herself from the grey space between a human and an animal. In other words, by "[pleading] for pleasure," Viếng asks Quân to pull her from the realm of animality back to the realm of humanity. Quân, however, refuses this request for the very reason: he is afraid that he will be lost in the process, that rather than being able to bring her back to humanity he will be pulled towards animality. He cannot have sex with her not "just because she [is] ugly," but more because "she [is] born of the war" (49). Viếng represents to Quân both the war's dehumanizing and destabilizing forces and its tight association with death. It is noticeable how her name speaks to her deadly presence, with "viếng" meaning paying visits and tribute to the dead. The act of having sex with her, therefore, would be Quân's own visitation to the land of the deceased, a

transgression so frightening that he dares not to make. In this case, the woman's hybridity is much more layered and complicated: she is both the man and the woman, the human and the animal, and life and death.

Chapter Two

In the first chapter, I have demonstrated that both Kiều and Phương defy social expectations and confinement through their hybrid identities. While their intellectual talents and straightforward audacity denote their masculinity, their beauty secure them neatly in the category of femininity. Such other-worldly beauty has pre-determined their destinies; according to the theory of "hồng nhan bạc mệnh" that I have discussed in the previous chapter, Kiều and Phương will experience ill fates because of their beauty. Two implications are at work in this theory: first, these women suffer on account of their feminine traits, and second, beauty is the sole factor in determining their lives. Kiều and Phương indeed endure traumatic plights: both are sexually assaulted and consequently made prostitutes. In this chapter, I will argue that these sufferings, rather than being fates pre-determined by beauty, are punishments that the Vietnamese patriarchal society impose on the two women for their hybridity.

Rape

After being sold to Mã Giám Sinh for a price of "four hundred and some liang" in exchange for the freedom of her brother and her father, Kiều officially becomes Mã's wife (Huỳnh 648). Even though the transaction is Kiều's idea, her motive is filial piety towards her father rather than romantic interest in Mã; for her, Kim Trọng has always been the sole subject of love. Despite having asked her sister Thuý Vân to "redeem [her] pledge [with Kim Trọng] for her," Kiều cannot cease to mourn for her disrupted relationship with Kim (732). She regrets having rejected his inquiry to consummate their relationship because her virginity will now have to be given to the lawful husband that she does not love. Here the translation slightly misinterpretes the original idea; "Nhị đào thà bẻ cho người tình chung" should mean "I should have plucked my bud for my true love," rather than "I should have let my true love pluck my

bud" (792). The inversion of active to passive form in the English translation removes a layer of Kiều's desperation—if she had known her misfortune, she would have offered Kim her virginity rather than waiting for Kim to make the first move. Under Confucianism, a woman proposing sexual intercourse to a man before marriage is unacceptable as chastity is one of the four codes of conduct for women. In other words, Kiều laments that she should have broken the codes for Kim when she had the chance as a single woman. The mere thought of breaking the rule itself is groundbreaking as impreaching could have resulted in severe and serious penalties. At this point, Kiều's wish underscores first her reluctance to marital sex, then her desolation at no longer having a chance with Kim Trọng now that she is married.

As expected, Mã readily consummates his marriage with Kiều:

"Oh, shame! A pure camellia had to let
the bee explore and probe all ins and outs.
A storm of lust broke forth—it would not spare
the flawless jade, respect the pristine scent.
All this spring night was one bad dream—she woke
to lie alone beneath the nuptial torch." (845-850)

Kiều is represented by the metaphors of "a pure camellia," "the flawless jade" and "the pristine scent," while "the bee" and "a storm of lust" embody Mã. The imageries not only allude to sexual intercourse, but also suggests violence imposed on the female body. Here I propose that the translation, by being too revealing in constructing the sexual allusions, loses the sophisticated layers of meanings in the original version. "Tiếc thay! Một đoá trà mi / Con ong đã tỏ đường đi lối về!" means "What a shame for the camellia! / The bee has known the way in and out!"; in other words, the camellia does not let the bee "explore and probe," it just knows the way. By

adding the adjective "pure" to the image of the camellia and re-constructing the sentence from the perfect tense to the simple tense, the translation takes the focus away from the result and towards the progress of the assault. The same method applies to the next sentence: "Một cơn mưa gió nặng nề / Thương gì đến ngọc tiếc gì đến hương" means "A heavy storm cares to spare neither the jade nor the scent." Again, adding the noun "lust" and the verb "break forth" shifts the focus back to the course of action and away from the result.

Though this translation choice can increase the impression of violence for readers, it risks losing the original implications. On the one hand, the imageries of the bee and the storm are honest natural depictions: any bee would know the way back and forth from its hive to the flower, and a heavy storm would spare nothing. By placing these images in the context of Kiều's wedding night, Nguyễn Du makes two points: first, the woman, by being the passive party who has no control whatsoever on the man, is objectified, and second, marital rape is as natural as a bee sucking a camellia's nectar or a heavy storm sweeping away everything. Here the word "nặng nề," or "heavy," points at the toll of trauma that Kiều has to suffer. On the other hand, by concentrating on the result rather than the progress, narrator Nguyễn Du offers a sympathetic gaze and thus lessens the shame for Kiều. What is important in this situation, according to the original version, is that readers know how the woman feels, not how the woman is assaulted.

That being said, my previous point about the naturalness of marital rape becomes Nguyễn Du's critique on the society's treatment towards women. Mã's objectification of Kiều is evident in three incidents: first, he "[haggles] hard and long" before finally agreeing upon a deal of slightly more than four hundred (647). Kiều is reduced to a commodity whose exchange price can be negotiated. Then, he comes on to her violently without caring about her feelings, as if she is a toy that only serves to satisfy his sexual desires. Lastly, he leaves her lying "alone beneath

the nuptial torch." The original word for "nuptial torch" is "đuốc hoa," meaning the candle lights in the room of the newly-weds (Lê 166). Orginally, "nuptial torch" is a symbol of wedding in the Roman Catholic tradition. The use of the phrase here, though close in meaning, might be misleading given the different cultural contexts. According to Lê Văn Hoè, "đuốc hoa" is normally used to suggest the intimate bond between the couple during and after their first sexual encounter, yet here it signifies an irony for Kiều. She is left alone in a setting that is supposed to be for a loving couple, an image that further emphasizes the role of a sexual object that Kiều holds for Mã Giám Sinh.

Similarly, Phương, on the Southward train with Kiên, is ripped off of her virginity in the most brutal way. As Kiên is flung away from Phương when the train is under attack by jet planes, he catches sight of her "lying prone on the floor, fighting a big man on top of her" (Palmos 179). Her hair is "flowing," her clothes are "being ripped from her," and her mouth is "covered by a massive, brutal hand as he [settles] over her in a rhythm" (179). The moment Phương is separated from Kiên's protection, she becomes vulnerable and falls prey to rape. This motif of female susceptibility outside male protection also emerges in *The Tale of Kiều:* had Kim not been away when Kiều's family suffers injustice, he would have been able to save her with his money. Along the same line, Kiên would have been able to protect Phương from gang rape if it had not been for the jet plane attack. Such motif not only dismisses female agency that Kiều and Phương used to have before the assaults, but also points to the core of the patriarchal society: a woman cannot live peacefully unless she has the protection of at least one male figure. Before the mishap, Kiều lives within the boundary of her family, hence under the care of her father, her brother and possibly her lover Kim Trọng. Later Kiều also enjoys a brief period of peace after Từ Hải saves her from the brothel and keeps her under his protection.

In Phương's case, even though Kiên has always been the passive party in his relationship with her, he still accompanies her as a man, thus protective figure. Recall the scene where Phương and Kiên hop off the truck from Hà Nội to catch a train to Vinh, the driver suggestively compliments Phương that she is "so sexy, so beautiful" and asks her to wait for him to drive her back to Hà Nội after two hours (170). The translation reads that the driver "[has] his strong arm around her waist, hugging her" as Phương tries to get down the truck with Kiên (170). The original version, however, does not contain this detail; Bảo Ninh writes that "Phải gần một phút nàng mới rời đệm xe," meaning that "It takes almost a minute for her to leave the car seat." Additionally, the driver does not "[whisper]" to Phương, but "gào lên át tiếng máy," or "screams to drown out the engine" (170). The sexual tension and intention are indeed existent in the driver's tone of voice, but it is crucial that he does nothing—not even hugging Phương—in Kiên's presence. His scream implies that the words are spoken after Phương gets off the truck, meaning that she is at a safe distance from the driver and that his flirt is not as intimidating as if he is closely whispering to her. The translators' intepretation of Phương's taking one minute to leave the car into the driver hugging her undermines the weight of Kiên's presence as a male protective figure for Phương, and thus implicitly neglecting the fact that Phương's life begins to dwindle the moment she is taken away from Kiên.

That women are subject to violence and thus need to be protected by men boils down to the social definition of women as the inferior and the weak. According to Pierre Bordieu, such principle of inferiority is no different than the objectification of women, or the dissymmetry of "subject and object, agent and instrument…between men and women in the domain of symbolic exchanges," which is fundamental and foundational to the construction and operation of patriarchy (42). Bordieu argues that under male dominance, women can only act as "symbols

whose meaning is constituted outside of them and whose function is to contribute to the perpetuation or expansion of the symbolic capital held by men" (43). In other words, women are social goods and can be treated as goods—they can be protected or abused to their owners' will, sold to others or snatched away, kept or deserted. Kiều's case is not a symbolic exchange but a literal monetary transaction: with "four hundred and some liang," she moves from the ownership of her father to that of her so-called husband Mã Giám Sinh (Huỳnh 648). Phương, on the contrary, is stolen from Kiên. The act of sexual aggression, especially the crushing of virginity, is therefore an act of territorialization and denotation of male ownership over female bodies.

What differs Kiều from Phương is that while Kiều volunteers—much against her will—to give up her family's ownership/protection, Phương does not take the initiative to leave Kiên's side. In this way, Kiều recalls Hoà in *The Sorrow of War*, a female guide who works with Kiên during the retreat after the 1968 Tết Offensive. Her job is to navigate out of Ngọc Bơ Rẫy mountain where American troops are hunting them down in order to allow some fifteen wounded soldiers to escape. Encountered by a group of American soldiers near the Crocodile Lake where the wounded rest, Hoà steps forward and diverts their attention by shooting the German shepherd tracker dog and runs away in the opposite direction to the Crocodile Lake, all to Kiên's astonishment. Hoà readily forgoes Kiên's male protection so as to save the wounded soldiers. Her consequence is not surprising: the Americans catch her in no time, and "[without] losing their control or lifting their voices, they set about stripping Hoà and, the dog handler first, roughly fucking her" (Palmos 191). Meanwhile, other soldiers stay back "waiting their turn" (191). The gang rape not only marks the Americans' ownership of Hoà, hence their dominance over the nation of Vietnam, but also expresses their hatred towards women. According to Susan Brownmiller, war "provides men with the perfect psychologic backdrop to give vent to their

contempt for women" through rape (32). She specifically points to the all-male structure of the military as the main cause of men's dismissal of women as "peripheral, irrelevant to the world that counts, passive spectators to the action in the center ring" (Brownmiller 32). In Hoà's case, the American soldiers readily punish her to avenge a dog, rendering her life less relevant and valuable than that of an animal, let alone a man.

Here again the English translation falls into the trap of over-exaggeration in order to emphasize the violence. The Vietnamese version reads:

> Ngợp trước mắt anh…kín nghịt một đống kinh khủng đen ngòm, lấp loáng mồ hôi và phì phò hơi thở rốc. Không nghe thấy tiếng Hoà kêu, nhưng mà có thể cảm thấy tiếng kêu ấy. Bọn Mỹ dồn cục lại, nhưng chỉ có vài tên còn đang đứng và đều xây lưng lại phía Kiên. Chúng không hò hét, không rống cười, không quát tháo. Sự thể ghê rợn bày ra, quằn quại trong yên tĩnh man rợ. (Bảo 270-71);

which I translate to mean:

> In front of his eyes…crowded a horrible dark bunch with sparkling sweats and rapid breaths. He [Kiên] could not hear Hoà's voice, but he could feel her cry. The Americans clusterized, but only few remained standing and they all turned their backs against Kiên. They didn't shout, didn't laugh, didn't yell. The ghoulish scene unfolded, writhing in barbarous silence.

Bảo Ninh, rather than using direct and graphic images like the soldiers "stripping Hoà" and "roughly fucking her," implicitly refers to the sexual assault through sensual depictions such as "sparkling sweats" and "rapid breaths." Similar to the marital rape scene discussed earlier in *The Tale of Kiều,* here the translator also focuses too much on the process of sexual violence, hence dehumanizing the character, as if raping her all over again. Note how Bảo Ninh repeatedly uses

adjectives that reflect Kiên's feelings as the witness: "kinh khủng," or "horrible," "ghê rợn," or "ghoulish," and "man rợ," or "barbarous." Without resorting to crude vocabulary, the author demonstrates the brutality of gang rape through Kiên's interiority: he cannot catch Hoà's voice, but he can feel the cry. The deadly silence that overwhelms Hoà and prevents her from crying out symbolizes the male dominance over the woman and her body. Hoà is not only raped, but also muted. The silencing of the woman further embodies her lack of agency and consequently her social status as an instrument in male transaction.

What Kiều, Phương, and Hoà share is not only victimhood but also hybridity—that is, a mixture of femininity and masculinity. Just as Kiều and Hoà take the lead and assert their agency by volunteering to sacrifice for their family and their comrades, Phương drags Kiên into the war by actively hitchhiking a truck to catch up with the Southward train. In a sense, Phương also sacrifices her university education and the peace back home to accompany and encourage Kiên to the frontline. Yet while Phương can only vaguely imagine what hardship awaits her, Kiều and Hoà are fully aware that rape is the price they will have to pay—Kiều laments how she "should have let [her] true love pluck [her] bud" if she knew she would be married to Mã (Huỳnh 792). Sexual aggression is the punishment that the patriarchal society imposes on these women for taking a man's role and in so doing transgressing the threshold between men and women, active and passive, subject and instrument. In other words, men use rape to re-establish and reinforce the social order, and to "maintain dominance and control of women" (Ellis 11). In Kiều and Hoà's cases, Mã Giám Sinh and the American troop are less motivated by sexual gratification than territorialization; that is, they commit sexual crimes out of the desire to mark their ownership and power over the female bodies rather than the desire to have sex.

Phương's tragedy is a little more complicated. When she first steps on the train, a drunken voice shouts "A fucking girl!", implying that a girl does not belong to and is not supposed to appear in such place (Palmos 171). The original version writes that "[người] có giọng khàn khàn," or "a person with a hoarse voice," says "Ái chà! Một cô nàng!" which means "Oh wow! A girl!" Two shortcomings are evident in the English translation: first, the voice is not "drunken" but rather "hoarse," suggesting that the speaker is fully conscious and aware of the situation; and second, the exclamation is not a curse that discloses contempt towards women, but an expression that stresses on Phương's femininity and consequently vulnerability, as "cô nàng" is often used to describe a young, beautiful and highly feminine woman. Implicit in this word, therefore, are both the man's sarcastic affirmation of Phương's hybridity as a feminine woman who is assertively present in a densely masculine environment and sexual desires. On the one hand, her presence is a solid proof of her transgressing the patriarchal social order, an act that destabilizes male dominance and thus needs to be punished. As a result, the sexual violence that Phương suffers on the train is a form of penalty and an attempt to retain patriarchy.

On the other hand, what motivates the assault is not purely the desire for control, but also the desire for sex, which can be interpreted from the flirtatious tone of one of the rapists when he calls Phương "darlin" (206). Jonathan Gottschall advocates biosocial theory when it comes to explaining wartime rape, maintaining that both sociocultural and biological factors play an equally important part in wartime sexual aggression. While genetic consideration explains that men sexual psychology evolves in a way that increase their tendency to rape, and that men will commit sexual crime when benefits exceed costs, sociocultural perspective determines who rape and who don't. Both factors are helpful in understanding Phương's tragedy; first, the jet plane attack that leads to the compartment door being "jerked open with a crash" (178) and panic men

"jumping from the braking but still moving car" (179) signifies not only the brutality and violence of the war but also the breakdown of social regulations and ethical codes. It is precisely under this social rupture that male sexual assault escapes lawful punishment, that the perceived benefits for the rapists remarkably exceed the perceived costs, and that the crime upon Phương takes place. Additionally, the profile of one of the rapists also speak much to the underlying cause of the crime: the big man who is about thirty years old has "a large square face with a mornic forehead, a squat, fat nose, and a thick chin" and he smiles "with a cruel leer" (205-206). An important comment that the English translation misses is "chắc chắn đây là một tấm thân tàn bạo," meaning that "for sure this is a ruthless body." This comment asserts the man's violent tendency, and together with the previous description hints at his sociocultural background. As opposed to Kiên who belongs to the well-educated buorgeoisie class, the man appears to be of the working class who is used to affirming power through violence. Therefore, Phương's tragedy differs from Hoà and Kiều's cases in a sense that it entails male desire for both sexual gratification and domination over the female body.

Desertion

But what is even more tragic to these women than sexual harrassment is ignorance and desertion by the men who are supposed to protect them. Seventeen-year-old Kiên insists to bandage Phương upon seeing "blood [running] down her inner thighs to her knee" despite her desperate cry that "It's not a wound! It can't be bandaged!" (204). What Kiên mistakens to be a physical injury is to Phương a trauma and a serious self devaluation. Phương regards herself as "unclean" even if she "[peels her] entire skin away" (217), and she remarks to Kiên that "Now I'm like this, you go your way, I'll go mine" (218). That being said, the cry "It can't be bandaged!" is extremely painful and powerful in the sense that it underscores Kiên's failure to

understand how the wound reflects and reminds her that her virginity is irretrievably lost, her honor is forever detained, and more importantly, her pure relationship with Kiên is from that point on completely demolished. Simultaneously inherent in the cry is Phương's frustration with Kiên for not accepting her repeated request for sexual intercourse, which now leads to her chastity being robbed by a group of strangers. Kiên is ignorant not once, but twice, first to her urgent need to have him territorialize her as his woman through sex, and second to her multiple and complicated layers of agony. Phương is attacked the first time by the rapists, and the second time by Kiên's frustrating innocence—she fails to receive empathy, sympathy even, from the one she expects the most.

Kiên not only fails miserably to understand what Phương goes through, but he also internalizes the patriarchal discourse which dictates that Phương, by being a rape victim, is now no more than a whore. He readily believes the soldiers' joke that she is with the drivers in the truck who are "doing her over in the back" (220), mistakens her numbness and sarcasm for "unusual reserve of strength and resilience" (214), and observes that her putting on clothes is an act of "showing off to an unseen audience," that she seems to be "welcoming her new lifestyle, embracing it with a calm, carefree approach," and that she is now "a hardened experienced woman, indifferent to vulnerable emotions" (223). All of these evidences are to say that Kiên no longer perceives Phương as a victim of sexual crime, but rather as a criminal whose offence is enjoying sex and betraying him. In other words, he puts all the blame on her as a shortcut to account for his failure to understand her, an act highly characteristic of patriarchal oppression whose belief system is premised on the fact that women are always to blame.

Here the English version deviates from the original in an unforgiving manner, stating that:

> Perhaps it was all his fault… Perhaps she would forgive him. That was in her character. But since the train? With the driver? Was all that true? Could he ever forgive her, that was the question. Perhaps not. (223),

while in fact the Vietnamese version reads:

> Nỗi thất vọng đau đớn tràn ngập lòng anh. Kiên biết hai đứa sẽ không gặp được lại nhau nữa từ nay, bởi anh đã nhất quyết bỏ rơi nàng… Phương sẽ tha thứ hết, bởi bản tính nàng như vậy. Nhưng anh, anh sẽ không đời nào tha thứ cho Phương. (Bảo 327),

which should be translated as

> Painful disappointment filled his soul. Kiên knew they would from now never to meet again, because he was determined to abandon her… Phương would forgive all, because that was her character. But he, he would never forgive Phương.

These deviations are detrimental to the meaning of the original text by dwindling the guilt on Kiên. Firstly, by adding “Perhaps it was his fault” and removing “he was determined to abandon her,” the English version lessens the weight of Kiên’s abandonment. The truth is that Kiên never considers the tragedy to be his fault, and it is precisely because he believes the blame is on Phương that he is resolute to desert her. Secondly, the repetition of the word “perhaps” together with the addition of the questions in place of an assertive statement suggests Kiên’s uncertainty, which further plays down his wrongdoings towards Phương. Kiên is, again, never unsure about his decision; he is in fact very much “determined” to leave her. He neither bothers to question the incidents that cause him to lose trust in her nor considers whether or not he would forgive her, but downright proclaims that forgiveness is impossible. Whereas the English version gears the sympathetic gaze towards Kiên by portraying him as being uncertain about his decision to desert and forgive Phương, the original explicitly depicts and criticizes Kiên for his determination

about such decision. In this way, readers' sympathy is directed towards Phương the victim of rape and abandonment rather than Kiên the upholder of patriarchal discourse.

This understanding of Kiên's character also better explains his attitude towards Hoà as the witness of the gang rape. Rather than being "almost totally powerless" with only "a single hand grenade to fight with" as portrayed in the English version, Kiên obviously has a choice (Palmos 191). Without reasoning to himself how Hoà has "saved fifteen sick and wounded from certain death" and that Hoà "[gives] herself to save [him], too," he only quietly observes the barbarious scene and decides to "[ease] the grenade lever back to its safe position" (191). He could have killed the Americans to take revenge for Hoà, but he *chooses* not to. Again, the addition of Kiên's reasoning in the English version justifies his decision to not throw the grenade and invites readers to sympathize with his lack of choice. He, in fact, has taken her sacrifice for granted from the moment he witnesses the assault in the same resolute manner as he unquestioningly blames and abandons Phương. When he returns to the wounded soldiers, no one asks about Hoà either, as if it is natural to forget about her. Kiên does not "[find the silence] disagreeably strange" at first; he simply does not recount the story and also forgets about it eventually (192). Where the Vietnamese version criticizes Kiên and the patriarchal society for mistreating women and dismissing their sacrifice, the English translation sympathizes with them.

Kiên's decision to abandon Phương and Hoà in both occasions illustrates that he is a perfect representative of the patriarchal society in the sense that he objectifies the two women. On the one hand, he considers them as tainted goods that are not worth keeping after they have been raped. On the other hand, he implicitly agrees with the rule of ownership: once the women have been territorialized by other men through sexual aggression, they escape his protection, which means that there is no need for him to pay attention to them anymore. Yet note the

difference in the ways Kiên treats Phương and Hoà: in order to avenge Phương, he kills the muscular rapist without any hesitation despite his disadvantage in physique, yet chooses not to throw the grenade at the Americans. This distinction demonstrates that his emotional investment and attachment towards Phương is greater than towards Hoà, and that Phương, apart from being under his protection, is also tacitly under his ownership. The murder of the rapist, therefore, is Kiên's punishment to the rapist not only for harming his love but also for stealing the object that he owns.

As opposed to Kiên's impromptu desertions, Mã Giám Sinh's abandonment of Kiều is well-planned in advance. Having "always patronized the haunts of lust," Mã immediately devises a scheme to sell Kiều to a brothel upon receiving her as his lawful wife (Huỳnh 806). It becomes evident that in his monologue Mã considers Kiều purely in economic terms, such as "gold" (824), "pure gold" (826), "three hundred liang" (829), "net profit" (830), "money" (832), "not one penny less" (840). This further underscores Mã's objectification and commodification of Kiều observed earlier in the story when he haggles with the matchmaker over Kiều's price. He does not pay to take her as a wife, but from the very moment he arrives at Kiều's house for a transaction he has regarded her as a commodity whose ownership can be switched through monetary exchanges. Realizing that her value lies in her appearance as the "kingdom's queen of beauty," he plans to first enjoy his part by raping her, then faking her virginity in order to sell her at a higher price (825).

> A morsel daggles at my mouth—what God
> serves up I crave, yet money hate to lose.
> A heavenly peach within a mortal's grasp:
> I'll bend the branch, pick it, and quench my thirst.

How many flower-fanciers on earth

can really tell one flower from the next?

Juice from pomegranate skin and cockscomb blood

will heal it up and lend the virgin look.

In dim half-light some yokel will be fooled:

she'll fetch that much, not one penny less. (831-840)

It is worth pointing out that Mã constantly refers to Kiều as "what God serves up," "[a] heavenly peach" and having "[heaven's] scent" (825) while alluding to himself as a mortal "on earth." These metaphors demonstrate Mã's clear awareness of the difference in dignity and morale between Kiều and him, with Kiều having much more esteemed qualities. With such virtues, she is supposed to be in a "heavenly" environment yet unfortunately has fallen down to earth, where she does not belong and hence will encounter abuse and ill treatment.

Note that upon considering her in monetary terms, Mã is still divided between keeping her and selling her, craving "what God serves up" yet knowing that "money hate to lose." Only after he becomes aware of the difference between Kiều and the "flower-fanciers on earth," him included, that he conceives a plot that satisfies both demands. Here the Vietnamese version reads: "Mập mờ đánh lận con đen / Bao nhiêu cũng bấy nhiêu tiền mất chi?" which can be translated as "In dim half-light some yokel will be fooled / No matter how much (of a virgin she is), she'll fetch that much, how is that a loss?" Two points need to be made: first, Mã apparently understands that to the brothel dealers, the money Kiều will fetch depends not on her virginity as much as on her outward beauty, which makes it reasonable and profitable for him to take advantage of both her sexual and financial values. To the brothel customers, virginity can be easily faked using "[juice] from pomegranate skin and cockscomb blood." Second, the rhetorical

question of "how is that a loss?" which was missing from the English translation reveals the shift in Mã's attitude, from doubtful and hesistant to certain and resolute.

It can be seen that both Kiều and Phương are abandoned by their so-called husbands: whereas Kiều is legally married to Mã Giám Sinh, Phương pronounces herself Kiên's wife before they head to the frontline. The distinction lies in the way they are assaulted and deserted, with Kiều being raped and left by the same person. Kiên forsakes Phương only after she is violated on the train, unable to forgive her and see her as pure as before, while Mã already plans to give up Kiều even before he proceeds to sexual intercourse. In other words, Kiên is more emotionally damaged and suffers a loss from his decision, contrary to Mã who lightly and pleasantly asks himself how such a transaction can be a loss. Phương is objectified, yet Kiều is both objectified and commodified—the result of which is that Phương is inadvertently pushed into prostitution, whereas Kiều is directly sold to be a prostitute.

Prostitution

Susan Brownmiller argues that prostitution, rather than preventing men from raping women by providing a consensual alternative to satisfy male sexual impulse, further "institutionalizes the concept that it is man's monetary right, if not his divine right, to gain access to the female body, and that sex is a female service that should not be denied the civilized male" (392). Viewed in this light, female prostitution underscores Bordieu's notion of sexual relation as "a social relation of domination" in which male desire is "the desire for possession, eroticized domination" and female desire is "the desire for masculine domination" (Bordieu 21). In this sense, the monetization of female sexuality is another manifestation of male oppression through objectification of the female body and dehumanization of women.

Without ever explicitly mentioning that post-war Phương works as a prostitute, Kiên gives readers the impression of Phương's prostitution through "the noisy, festive atmosphere" (Palmos 142) and "[the] guests who so frequently [bustle] in" (143). It is easy to mistaken Kiên's understanding of Phương to simply be a party-girl through the translator's use of words such as "merriment" (142), "joy and laughter," and "partying and pleasures" (143) which describe upbeat emotions with positive connotations. The adjectives used in the original version are "ầm ĩ" and "tràn hoan lạc," which can be translated as "loud" and "lustful." In addition, the English version omits an important sentence that reads "Lạc thú nhớp nhơ, tả tơi, như giẻ rách và nghèo nàn không khác gì bát cơm manh áo," which can be translated as "Pleasures are filthy, tattered like rags and as destitute as the bare necessities." The sentence clarifies Kiên's regard of Phương as a prostitute and elicits his contemptuous attitude towards her job despite his urge to visit her on her birthday. Without this detail, the English version depicts Kiên as a submissive character who fully sympathizes with Phương's quietness and depression and "would rather stand by night after night listening to her lovers' noisy jokes than not have her there at all" (143). The Vietnamese version, in fact, reads:

> Nói chung không có gì đáng để vui, để hả lòng, trái lại những khi nàng lâm vào tình cảnh như thế, anh cảm thấy tâm trạng mình nặng nề hơn cả khi tối tối phải chịu đựng những gã bạn tình của nàng làm ầm ĩ lên đủ thứ chuyện bên phòng nàng. (Bảo 190-91),

which can be translated as:

> There was nothing to be happy about or satisfied of; in fact, whenever she plunged into such plight, he felt even heavier than having to bear her lovers making a fuss in her room every night.

It is evident that to Kiên, having to witness the men's appearance and having to bear Phương's silence are both sufferings, the only difference being that the latter exerts a heavier emotional toll. He is not simply depressed and heartbroken upon facing her prostitution reality; his sorrows first stem from his despise and detestation of such reality, and then from witnessing her own desperation and depression. In other words, Kiên's despair is not about Phương, but about Kiên himself. That being said, Kiên's decision to go out and buy her a bouquet of roses on her birthday is a way to release himself from the sufferings of Phương's reticence rather than to cheer her up and drag her out of her sadness. The birthday gift that Kiên knows Phương is unable to reciprocate renders her inferior to him—or him superior to her in terms of their social relation.

The roses, therefore, symbolize the love and even the virginity that Kiên the savior can grant Phương the wretch, as if they are the seventeen-self that Phương has lost since the sexual assault. This understanding is problematic as Phương refutes Kiên when he advises her not to run away with the old man in her room: "Old? I'm no spring chicken myself. You still think I'm seventeen, that's your problem. You've never adjusted" (Palmos 145). Here the English version has gone a bit too far—the original version only reads: "Già ư? Anh nghĩ xem em bao nhiêu tuổi, mười bảy như hồi đó chăng?" (194), which can be translated as "Old? How old do you think I am, seventeen like back then?" The tone of the rhetoric question is significantly more sarcastic and more accusatory than the assertion seen in the English version. Phương challenges not only the seventeen-year-old trap that Kiên sets up for both him and her, but the belief of prostitution that Kiên imposes on her as well.

Throughout the novel, Phương never confirms that she works as a prostitute, but such impression is repeatedly given by the men, first Kiên and then Hưng, a friend of Phương whom Kiên meets at the Balcony Café. In the English version, Hưng calls Phương "a fucking tramp,"

associates her with "cross-eyed ones," "greatest performers" and "real screamers" (155), and claims to have taught her "how to really enjoy screwing" (156). In the original one, however, he is not that explicit; rather than calling her a tramp and a real screamer, he only stops mid-sentence. The Vietnamese version reads:

> Những con đàn bà mắt hơi hiêng hiếng lại đong đưa tất tật đều là phường truỵ lạc nhất đời, dù cũng chẳng có cái giống gì đáng yêu hơn chúng… Nhưng đến cỡ như con Phương thì… (Bảo 213)

which can be translated as:

> All those sort of cross-eyed ones are the most lascivious, though none can be as lovely… But to that level of Phương, well…

What is left out in Hưng sentence is even more powerful than the derogatory terms used for him in the English version—not only does he portray her as much worse than the most lascivious ones, but he also indicates that her situation is not worth mentioning. In addition, that he does not explicitly call her a tramp brings in two important points: first, Hưng knows that Phương is *not* a prostitute in a sense that she offers sexual service for money, and second, he thinks that her having and sleeping with multiple lovers is even worse than paid sex work. She only dates men and even considers marriage with some of them, yet this practice is considered unacceptable and despicable by the men who uphold patriarchy. The layers of oppression are doubled: based on her diverse dating experience, Phương is first dehumanized as a prostitute by Kiên, and then dehumanized again by Hưng as something worse than sex workers.

Surrender

The true tragedy, however, is that by dating and sleeping with multiple men, Phương does not exercise her freedom, but rather gives up on herself. Again, there are differences

between the English and Vietnamese version in the part where Phương speaks for herself. The English version reads:

> I won't tell you everything, but some of the things I had to do in the past just to keep afloat, well, at times I felt like an animal. I did a number of beastly things. I'm badly soiled, rotten through and through now. (Palmos 144)

By contrast, the Vietnamese version reads:

> Anh không biết được tất cả mọi điều đâu. Những điều mà một người đàn bà như em trải qua. Em đang phải trả giá cho những việc em đã làm. Em đã hư hỏng. (Bảo 193)

which can be translated as:

> You can't know everything. Things that a woman like me goes through. I'm having to pay for what I have done. I have been corrupt.

It is significant that Phương says that Kiên cannot know everything rather than that she would not tell him everything, because there are things that Kiên will not understand even if she tells him—things that a woman like her has to endure. Recall the scene on the military train where Kiên tries to bandage her and Phương cries that it is not a wound and thus cannot be bandaged—sexual assault, shame, victimization, self-loathe and self-destruction are among the things that Kiên cannot know and will not know no matter what Phương says and does not say. Her fleeting relationships with men, therefore, are not "things [she] had to do in the past just to keep afloat," but her desertion and disregard of her body and her self. Put another way, she is not a prostitute, but only a victim of sexual aggression who afterwards allows men to torture her body as a self-destructive punishment for her failure to protect her virginity. The English text's animalization of Phương is overdramatic and irrelevant; the point here is that Phương believes that Kiên's contempt for her is the price she has to pay for her corruption, and that she deserves it. At this

point, Phương no longer resists and challenges patriarchal constraints as she does in her seventeen-year-old self expression, but internalizes the law and imposes it upon herself. In the end, she still takes on all the sufferings for Kiên's comfort by leaving with a man she does not love so that Kiên does not have to recall wartime terrors each time he faces her.

While Phương's tragedy is cause solely by men, women play a major role in Kiều's mishap. The first time Kiều is sold into the brothel by Mã Giám Sinh, Dame Tú devises a scheme to force her into prostitution after Kiều resists and "[pulls] the knife out of her sleeve" to commit suicide (Huỳnh 982). She locks Kiều into the Crystal Tower and pays Sở Khanh "[some] thirty liang" (1163) to rescue her, only to "[arrive] in hot haste on the scene" (1133) and "[sweep] her up to drag her home forthwith" (1134). Kiều is not only mentally tortured by shame but also physically abused by Dame Tú to the point that she has to plead and bow with "her mangled back, her bloodied head" (1140). Like Phương, Kiều gives up on her body and her self after being thrown into sex work: "Over her flesh let them all rage and storm— / did she herself feel what they would call love?" (1238-39). Here the English version mistakenly changes an assertive statement into a question; the Vietnamese text reads "Những mình nào biết có xuân là gì!" which can be translated as "for her she doesn't know what spring is!" In this case, "spring" can be understood as love, but can also be interpreted as youth and youthful joy. The author does not question whether or not she feels love, but unequivocally asserts that she does not know and cannot feel the spring—that is, not only does she feel a void of love with those who "rage and storm" over her flesh, but her youth is also wasted away in the brothel.

In the second time, Kiều is not directly sold but tricked into the brothel by Dame Bạc and her so-called nephew Bạc Hạnh. Asked to provide a shelter for Kiều by nun Giác Duyên after being tortured by Miss Hoạn, Dame Bạc persuades her to get married to her nephew, only to

bring Kiều to her brothel—a scheme partly similar to Dame Tú's plot. One might wonder why a smart woman like Kiều would fall for the same ruse twice; the answer is that she does not really have a choice. In both cases, the madams lean on Kiều's need for male protection to lure her into their traps. Kiều can only choose between being locked away, being homeless and being protected by an unknown man, and so the latter choice is her best bet. Seeing the god "with hoary brows" and the "house of mirth," Kiều immediately understands her plight (2148). Unlike the previous time when she protests against Dame Tú, this time Kiều only moans for herself and accepts prostitution as a cruel fate imposed upon her by Heaven: "Since I cannot escape from Heaven's hand, / I'll brazen out the death of my spring days" (2163-64). Huỳnh Sang Thông explains in his end notes that the full translation is "[I'll] sacrifice [my] powdered face and get [my] green days over with" (198). It is evident that the idea of wasting away the "green days," or youth, comes back again without the idea of love. By this point, Kiều has given up even the thought of love which she thinks she does not deserve, and only grieves the meaningless days of youth that will pass by.

From the two incidents, Dame Tú and Dame Bạc emerge as "[colleagues]" who both run brothels and engage in sex business (2088). Women as they are, they willingly oppress other women like Kiều to satisfy male desire to monetize female body, and in turn become the useful agents of patriarchy. In other words, Dame Tú and Dame Bạc represent male oppression at its finest where women internalize the social structure and use it against each other for male interests. The tragedies of Kiều and Phương illuminate the way patriarchy works and how it continues to dominate the society over the centuries: it singles out women who dare to challenge the system and tortures them, both physically and mentally, until they themselves embody and incorporate its rationale into their mindsets. Phương ends up separated from Kiên and the only

love that she cherishes, while Kiều shares a platonic relationship with Kim Trọng upon reunion with him and her family after fifteen years of struggle. In either cases, their relationships with their loved ones are fractured and damaged just as their expressive and brave characteristics have been destroyed in the ultimate defeat to patriarchy.

Chapter Three

Kiều and Phương are representatives of beautiful, talented and assertive women who suffer injustice and male oppression in Vietnamese society, a reality that is carefully unraveled in the original versions of *The Tale of Kiều* and *The Sorrow of War;* yet the very characteristics that make these two characters so powerful are misleadingly demonstrated in the English translations. In this chapter, through a discussion of translation theory and affect theory, I point out the translation problem of *The Tale of Kiều* while commenting on the colonizing reading by Frank Palmos in the English rewriting of *The Sorrow of War*.

Roman Jakobson categorizes translation into three types, including intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic translation. All three kinds of translation, he argues, share the same central problem of having no equivalence to the original text; instead, the translation offers only "an adequate interpretation of an alien code unit" (Bassnett 26). This issue can be readily observed in Huỳnh Sanh Thông's translation of *The Tale of Kiều*; as I have pointed out in previous chapters, where author Nguyễn Du plays with words to evoke multiple meanings, translator Huỳnh only chooses to translate one interpretation and in so doing risks losing other complicated layers embedded in the cultural linguistic context. For example, towards the ending when prophetess Tam Hợp recounts and explains the fate of Kiều through the request of nun Giác Duyên, Huỳnh Sanh Thông's translates: "Kiều boasts a lavish share of charms and gifts, / and woe befalls a rose as her set lot. / Moreover, she has woven passion's web / wherein at pleasure she'll enmesh herself" (2659-62). The original version reads:

Thuý Kiều sắc sảo khôn ngoan

Vô duyên là phận hồng nhan đã đành!

Lại mang lấy một chữ tình

Khư khư mình buộc lấy mình vào trong.

Several key phrases in this passage are mistranslated. First, "vô duyên" can be understood as unfortunately, out of bad luck, while "đã đành" expresses a passive acknowledgement of the situation and a negative expectation of what comes next. In other words, the first two sentences realize that the woe that befalls Kiều is "her set lot," or what Heaven has dictated to be her fate, while the last two sentences add that Kiều and her personality also bear partial responsibility for her plight. Her fifteen years of hardship are not only out of bad luck that befalls her fate, but are also the result of her own response to such destiny.

Secondly, according to prophetess Tam Hợp , Kiều's attitude is wrapped up in one word "tình," which can be interpreted as emotion and sentiment. On the one hand, when faced with important and plot-changing decisions, Kiều never ponders to weigh up the pros and cons but always makes choices out of her emotional consideration. On the other hand, sentiment here can also mean that Kiều cares too much and hence is not brutal enough to gain benefits for herself before thinking about others, which is evident in her sacrifice of herself to save her family. This word is in opposition to the word "lý," which stands for the framework of ethical and appropriate social conducts. That Kiều transgresses the social expectations of a woman, the original author implies, has led to her atrocity. But by using only the simple phrase "passion's web" in place of the multi-layered portrait present in the original text, Huỳnh Sanh Thông's English translation not only deprives the concision inherent in Nguyễn Du's conclusion of Kiều's fate in one word, but also misleads the English reader's comprehension of the original text.

Thirdly, one can misunderstand "passion" to have sexual connotation, especially when coupled with the phrase "at pleasure." Here "khư khư" points to Kiều's obstinate and insistent clinging to her emotions and sentiments, which in turns becomes a trap wherein she enmeshes

herself. By contrast, “at pleasure” denotes Kiều’s complete agency over her disposition and suggests an expected, if not satisfactory, result from her actions. Tam Hợp’s comment, as translated by Huỳnh Sanh Thông, reads, “Moreover, she has woven passion’s web / wherein at pleasure she’ll enmesh herself “ now reads as a far-fetched misinterpretation and simplification of the word “khư khư,” resulting in the inversion of the tone from critical and negative to positive and even celebratory. In fact, a more careful translation that acknowledges the layers of complexity might be “Kiều boasts a lavish share of charms and gifts / and it can’t be helped that woe befalls a rose as her set lot. / Yet she carries the trap of sentiment / wherein she obstinately she enmeshes herself.” This allows readers to understand that rather than being the controlling subject of her fate as Huỳnh’s translation asserts, Kiều is a complex character who is a victim of her own personality.

Despite these issues, and though no standards for a proper literary translation have been established, on a whole, *The Tale of Kiều* translated by Huỳnh Sanh Thông is in my opinion an “adequate interpretation” of the Vietnamese version by Nguyễn Du. Unable to retain the six-eight poetic form in the original text because of the difference in the two languages, with Vietnamese being monosyllabic and English multisyllabic, Huỳnh renders his English translation iambic pentameter with slight variations. This formal translation is indeed a cultural one, because iambic pentameter is as familiar and popular to English readers as six-eight is to Vietnamese audience. At the same time, Huỳnh makes great effort to stay close to the poetic sequence and imagery in the original, only making alterations few and far between with careful notes and explanations. In poetry translation, especially with a piece rich in word-plays, literary references and imageries like *The Tale of Kiều*, it is understandable and acceptable to make interpretive mistakes like those that I have pointed out in all three chapters. Yet what can be extracted from

the aforementioned example is that a mistake in interpreting a minor word in a large body of text can lead to confusion and misunderstanding from readers, especially those from a radically different social and cultural background. In what follows, I will point out how the English rewriting of *The Sorrow of War* by Frank Palmos is not only an inadequate interpretation, but more importantly a serious distortion of the original text by portraying Kiên, a callous young man, as a sympathetic character while overdramatizing female characters with excessive violence.

In the original Vietnamese, even though Kiên is the main male character of the novel, author Bảo Ninh does not necessarily sympathize with him, but rather criticizes him for his misogynistic outlook—a refreshing and unusual move for a male Vietnamese writer of any era. The translator, however, strips off this layer of cultural critique in his rewritten version—take the example that I have discussed in the second chapter where Kiên decides to abandon Phương after she is raped:

> Perhaps it was all his fault… Perhaps she would forgive him. That was in her character. But since the train? With the driver? Was all that true? Could he ever forgive her, that was the question. Perhaps not (Palmos 223).

The Vietnamese version, however, reads:

> Nỗi thất vọng đau đớn tràn ngập lòng anh. Kiên biết hai đứa sẽ không gặp được lại nhau nữa từ nay, bởi anh đã nhất quyết bỏ rơi nàng… Phương sẽ tha thứ hết, bởi bản tính nàng như vậy. Nhưng anh, anh sẽ không đời nào tha thứ cho Phương. (Bảo 327),

which should be more accurately translated as

> Painful disappointment filled his soul. Kiên knew they would from now never to meet again, because he was determined to abandon her… Phương would forgive all, because that was her character. But he, he would never forgive Phương.

In the original, Kiên never regards the sexual assault as possibly his fault, but rather puts all the blame on Phương. As a result, he assumes Phương "would forgive all"—the rapists, the train, the war, and maybe Kiên, but not only "him." In this way, Bảo Ninh portrays Kiên as a self-centered and misogynistic man who has internalized the patriarchal discourse in which the fault is always on the woman's side. Contrary to the repeated "perhaps" that Palmos uses in the English version, Bảo Ninh states outright that Kiên is "determined to abandon [Phương]," and that he does not question whether or not he can forgive Phương—he simply "would never forgive." The difference between the Vietnamese and English version is clear: in English, the repeated unaffirmative adverb combined with a series of self-questioning demonstrates not only Kiên's uncertainty but also attributes to him a sense of guilt towards Phương, while implying that he does at some point takes the blame for not being able to protect her from the violence. On the contrary, Bảo Ninh's original text is highly critical of Kiên's unwavering decision to blame it all on Phương and abandon her.

Here Palmos' translation uses what Suzanne Keen calls "strategic narrative empathy," specifically "broadcast strategic empathy" (Rivkin and Ryan 1300) to evoke sympathy from a wide range of readers by emphasizing "common human experiences, feelings, hopes, and vulnerabilities" (1301). The easily identifiable inner conflicts and vulnerabilities that are evoked from Kiên's self-questioning (as translated by Palmos) further frames that to him deserting Phương is a difficult decision, and that the war is more to blame than Kiên himself. By deviating

from the original text in this way, Palmos alters the narrative tone of voice from one that is critical of Kiên's personal weaknesses to one that is sympathetic to Kiên's dilemma.

At a translation conference in 2010, Palmos claimed that his translation methodology was to write the English version "along the FitzGerald translation school lines, where the intention is to use the second language to portray the pervading tones and moods intended in the original language" with only "brief passages where Bảo Ninh's cultural sensitivity restrained him from describing personal events that [Palmos] had to Westernize for broader, international audiences" (Arnall 38). Two points are worth pointing out here: first, by "cultural sensitivity," Palmos essentially suggested that Bảo Ninh is being too delicate to describe the so-called reality of war, and that he as a translator needs to rewrite these scenes for Western readers to have a better and more realistic experience of war.

Secondly, by "FitzGerald translation school lines," Palmos meant the translation methodology set forth by Edward FitzGerald whose English translation of the Persian text *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* was highly regarded and made its way into the English canon in the 19th century. Recent scholars, however, often assume that the translation—which draws little from the Persian original—is "an Orientalist text" (Drury 37). The term "Orientalist" here refers to Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, which is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient," or those belonging to the Eastern world (Said 10). While Edward Said refers to FitzGerald's poem as "a secondary tier of Orientalist writing" created by Orientalist enthusiasts, Iran B. Hassani Jewett attacks FitzGerald's British arrogance that "allowed him to think that his very limited knowledge of Persian would suffice for his translation project" (Drury 37). Therefore, by associating his English rewriting of *The Sorrow of War* with Edward FitzGerald's problematic translation style, Palmos made two

admissions (though he might not see it as such): that his rewriting is a free adaptation that has little input from the Vietnamese original, and that his text is an Orientalist one.

With FitzGerald's ideology in mind, Palmos' translation actually rewrites a number of scenes, especially those that concern female characters, to cater for the taste of a Western audience and feed into the Orientalist imagination of the Asian female body. Take the passage that describes the female character Hoà's gang rape as an example; Palmos' English version reads:

> Without losing their control or lifting their voices, they set about stripping Hoà and, the dog handler first, roughly fucking her. Some of them stayed back, but the way they had all come to a standstill, and with others waiting their turn, it appeared they would end their patrol with the rape. (Palmos 191)

while the original text reads:

> Ngợp trước mắt anh…kín nghịt một đống kinh khủng đen ngòm, lấp loáng mồ hôi và phì phò hơi thở rốc. Không nghe thấy tiếng Hoà kêu, nhưng mà có thể cảm thấy tiếng kêu ấy. Bọn Mỹ dồn cục lại, nhưng chỉ có vài tên còn đang đứng và đều xây lưng lại phía Kiên. Chúng không hò hét, không rống cười, không quát tháo. Sự thể ghê rợn bày ra, quằn quại trong yên tĩnh man rợ. (Bảo 270-71);

which I translate to mean:

> In front of his eyes…crowded a horrible dark bunch with sparkling sweat and rapid breaths. He [Kiên] could not hear Hoà's voice, but he could feel her cry. The Americans clustered around her, but only few remained standing and they all turned their backs against Kiên. They didn't shout, didn't laugh, didn't yell. The ghoulish scene unfolded, writhing in barbarous silence.

Palmos clearly rewrites this passage to a great extent, depicting the gang rape in graphic details and with strong language. If, according to Palmos, this passage is among those in need of Westernization for better comprehension from an international reader, then this alteration is both pedantic and destructive. On the one hand, this specific passage does not contain any peculiar cultural background that might prove challenging to a non-Vietnamese audience; in fact, the silencing of a female victim is a motif commonly seen in Western literature. Imageries such as sparkling drops of sweat and rapid breathing as well as adjectives like "ghoulish" and "barbarous" should be sufficient, even more effective, for a Western reader to visualize the violence imposed upon the woman. Palmos either thinks his international readers too senseless to understand the references, or believes that the author is too delicate for English readers to consume—the latter he states implicitly through the use of the term "cultural sensivity" in his 2010 speech. On the other hand, the veiled victim in the original text becomes largely exposed in the translation through the added image of the soldiers "stripping Hoà" and "roughly fucking her." Arguably, these graphic details frame Hoà neatly in the Western stereotype and Orientalist imagination of the exposed and vulnerable Asian female body through a voyeuristic or even near-pornographic portrayal.

In effect, Palmos' version of *The Sorrow of War* is what Atmane El Amri terms a disempowering translation or a colonial translation, one that "does not translate the text into another language, but rather it neglects the original, existing, defined text, veiling its characteristics and it blinds, mutes and darkens it completely in terms of representation" ("Translating Power in the Colonial Context"). Under the guise of making the novel accessible to non-Vietnamese readers, Palmos takes the novel out of its cultural context where, despite years under the influence of Confucianism, the exposure of the naked body regardless of gender is a

taboo and the concealment of the vulnerable female body is a gesture of respect. In *The Tale of Kiều,* for example, author Nguyễn Du also treats Kiều in the same manner as Bảo Ninh: not once does he expose her body in scenes of sexual assault.

What remains in the English version of *The Sorrow of War* is an incomplete and distorted narrative of the Vietnam War by a Northern Vietnamese soldier. The narrative is exactly what the defeated West wants to hear: a soldier from the winning side recounts *his* loss, sorrow, and suffering. It must have been both satisfactory and re-assuring for Western readers to know that their war machines were not completely useless, their presence in the East was impactful to some extent, and that the victorious and glorious Vietnam suffered as much as they did, if not more, because the country served as the battleground. In such a war narrative, men represent the nation, and so Kiên rather than Phương needs to be the central character that guides the outlook and emotions of readers. Palmos misreads *The Sorrow of War* to be merely the anguish of the winning side seen through the experience of one soldier, while the novel does not seek to associate Kiên's narrative with the nation. In fact, it portrays the damage of war on the individual level, which can most clearly be seen in the two-fold oppression of patriarchy and war imposed upon women like Hoà and Phương. The critique of the patriarchal society is overpowered by the critique of the war in the English version, which necessitates depictions of Vietnamese women disrespected and pornographized.

The translation project, therefore, becomes a colonial one where Western readers get to see what they want to see about Vietnam rather than a more nuanced, accurate depiction of reality. According to El Amri, colonial translation is violent because it modifies the original text conforming to Western ideologies and paradigms, and because it stifles the existence of the colonized under the assumption that they are things that must be given a name ("Translating

Power"). Palmos brutally pulls the text out of its cultural context and changes it to satisfy the Orientalist imagination of the weak and sorrowful East, which in turn disregards the multi-layered complexity of Vietnamese society before, during, and after the war. The Vietnamese original text was subjected to more than a decade of strict censorship in its home country after its first publication in 1987 due to its counter-propaganda sentiment. On the contrary, the English version enjoyed immediate and long-lasting attention since its publication in 1993, and served as a foundation for many translations in other European languages. There is a clear sense of colonial authority that the English text exerts on the original: English readers got access to the narrative before the majority of Vietnamese readers did, and so the English version dictated and still dictates what the text is about.

Vietnamese readers and English readers are reading two different books. That being said, we must demand a new English translation that stays close to the original as much as possible in order to return the power to the novel and its author Bảo Ninh. *The Sorrow of War* needs to be given credit for its honest depiction of war and the author's empathy towards women, rather than for its convenient fit into the Western narrative of the Vietnamese government's failure. After all, it is a story about Kiên's relationship with the war *and* the women in his life, on whom he repeatedly imposes his nostalgic memory of the seventeen-year-old Phương and with whom he fails miserably time after time. The war in Bảo Ninh's view is not about the clash between nations and political ideologies, but about the individual struggles—how different people reckon and deal with the everlasting sorrow that gradually erodes their lives.

Conclusion

Frank Palmos once claimed in his interview with Independent UK that the rough translation made by Phan Thanh Hảo "was unreadable," and that, according to the reporter, was a "tactful" statement (Guttridge, "The Independent Foreign Fiction Award: Hanoi, on a penny an hour: Peter Guttridge asks Frank Palmos about Bao Ninh"). Madame Hảo is said to have translated *The Sorrow of War* into "a kind of English" that was apparently so terrible that Palmos "quickly abandoned" her draft ("Peter Guttridge asks Frank Palmos"). Her work has of course never been publicized—I wonder if the kind of English that a Vietnamese woman translator produced was a honest translation that stays true to the original text. In order to give back the credit to Bảo Ninh and his novel and give back the respect that his female characters deserve, perhaps a woman translator who is well-versed in both Vietnamese and English needs to step in, and that person might well be me. I believe that any Vietnamese-English translator will do a better job than Palmos whose "real expertise is in Malaysian and Indonesian," yet with the advantage of being a native speaker in Vietnamese, majoring in English in college, and being a woman who cares deeply about female representation in literary works, I am confident of the possiblity of the project. What should be included in the new translation is annotations in places of words and phrases that are difficult to translate or have multiple layers of meanings. It is time the world saw Vietnam and Vietnamese literature differently, and this book might be the starting point.

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