REVERSING THE FRENCH GAZE: FOUR VIETNAMESE FRANCOPHONE WOMEN WRITERS FROM 1910S TO 2000S—MARGUERITE TRIAIRE, TRINH THUC OANH, LY THU HO, AND LINDA LÊ

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation shows how Marguerite Triaire, Trinh Thuc Oanh, Ly Thu Ho and Linda Lê, four women writers of French expression, counter the Orientalist stereotypes propagated in colonial literature and media, and produce knowledge about the Vietnamese Other in their works. Their work is part of what is known today as Vietnamese Francophone literature (originally known as Vietnamese literature of French expression during the colonial period).

My theoretical framework is necessarily hybrid, reflecting the syncretic nature of the Vietnamese Francophone literary production, Vietnamese and French. My work covers Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, the postcolonial feminism of Gayatri Spivak, Sara Suleri, Chandra Mohanty, and Rey Chow and the Western postcolonial theories of Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Homi Bhabha, as well as specialists in the field such as Jack Yeager, Nathalie Nguyen, Leslie Barnes, Tess Do, Eugène Pujarniscle and Louis Malleret. I also rely mostly on primary sources for the early women writers given the scarcity of secondary sources on their works.

In this dissertation *Orientalism* is deployed as a model in the study of Vietnam as the Other. Using Said’s definition of *Orientalism* from his groundbreaking book *Orientalism*, published in 1978 as i) a body of research on the Orient by the Occident, ii) a style of thought that differentiates the Orient and the Occident, and iii) a corporate institution that deals with the Orient by studying it, codifying it and governing it, I examine how the four women writers question the Western style for writing about the Orient, in this case, Vietnam.

This dissertation includes three main chapters, framed by an introductory and a concluding chapter. The introductory chapter is a review of past and recent scholarship on
the field of Vietnamese Francophone literature, and explains the theorists informing my work, and the rationale for the choice of the four female voices.

Chapter One treats the collaborative work, *En s’écartant des ancêtres* (1939) and its sequel, *La Réponse de l’Occident* (1941) by the first two female Vietnamese Francophone voices—Marguerite Triaire and Trinh Thuc Oanh. I examine how they use women to document change and challenge the Western received idea of the female Vietnamese Other. I show that they question the Orientalist discourse while being complicit with it. In their mission to redress the superficial Orientalist clichés propagated in colonial works, they explain and defend their customs, thus altering and idealizing their culture and overemphazing difference.

Chapter Two focuses on the trilogy—*Printemps inachevé* (1962), *Au milieu du carrefour* (1969), and *Le Mirage de la paix* (1986)—by Ly Thu Ho. I show that Ly Thu Ho’s goal is to question the Orientalist or reductive representation of her country as either anti-Communist or anti-American as disseminated by the French and American media. She participates in the construction of knowledge about the wars and women in her country through lengthy explanations of the complex political situation in Vietnam between 1935 and 1975. Secondly, I look at the roles of the different women in the three novels, and argue that despite their predominant role in the novels, they are imprisoned in the Orientalist myth of Vietnamese women as passive observers.

domination of the French literary establishment by declining the existing metropolitan Orientalist stereotypes about Vietnamese Francophone writers and the female Other.

The concluding chapter summarizes how all the writers mentioned in this dissertation participate in the construction of knowledge about their culture and the condition of women, question the fundamental assumptions of Western subjectivity, reverse the French gaze, reinvent their culture and values so as to reinscribe authority in Vietnam. In short, I show how the four women writers counter Karl Marx's famous statement about the Other "they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" which inaugurates Said's Orientalism.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation has not had an easy birth. I thank all the people (French and American) for making its completion possible. I would like to thank Dr. Nancy Blake and Dr. Jack Yeager as well as the members of my committee, Dr. Marcus Keller and Dr. Alain Fresco for the invaluable advice they have given me. A special word of thanks goes to my director of research, Dr. Yeager, who tirelessly edited my dissertation. Many thanks to my chair, Dr. Blake, without whose patience and guidance, this dissertation would not be in its present form. I thank my Dad for teaching me patience and perseverance and my Mom and brother for their love and support.
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Introduction

Sub-Saharan, Maghrebian, Caribbean and Québécois Francophone literatures have generated enormous interest in French departments at American universities and conferences since the 1980s. As recently as 2005, in their *Introduction to Postcolonial Theory and Francophone Literary Studies*, Anne Donadey and H. Adlai Murdoch wrote, “Francophone studies...represents a rapidly burgeoning academic field that came into its own in the 1990s and now encompasses the literary and cultural output of, inter alia, the geographical areas of the Caribbean, the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa, and Quebec” (3). Is it possible that the two authors refer to the Francophone literary production of Indochina with the term, *inter alia*? The failure to directly mention the countries comprising Indochina—Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos—and thus include them as a region of Francophone literary production attests to the obscure fate of Francophone Indochinese literature in French departments at American colleges and universities and French universities. The term *Francophone Indochinese literature* usually refers to Vietnamese literature of French expression which in turn relegates the literature of French expression from Cambodia and Laos to the position of other. For practical reasons, the author of this dissertation is equally guilty as this work deals exclusively with literature of French expression written by Vietnamese writers on Vietnamese soil and outside.

There are many reasons for the obscure fate of Vietnamese Francophone literature in American and French institutions of higher learning. This is mainly because most works published between 1920s and 1960s in Vietnam are now out of print. Also, it is because Vietnam knows a relatively short period of domination, ninety-six years under the French as
contrasted to one hundred years of colonization in Senegal, one hundred and thirty years in Algeria, two hundred years in Haiti, and over two hundred and fifty years in Quebec. Sadly, in Vietnam today, Vietnamese Francophone literature, associated with the language of the colonizer, is considered foreign and not counted as part of the national literature. Also, those who read French in Vietnam are more interested in French classics such as *La Princesse de Clèves*, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, and *Madame Bovary*. In France, Vietnamese Francophone literature is equally relegated to the position of other as France has an ambiguous relationship to the literatures of its former colonies. Vietnamese Francophone literature also evokes France’s colonial past which ended in the humiliating French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and is therefore best relegated to memory. The media coverage of the Algerian War and the Vietnam War in the 1960s eclipsed the French decolonization of Vietnam and is also responsible for the silence and neglect in which Vietnamese Francophone literature has fallen. In the last twenty years because of specialists such as Jack Yeager, Nathalie Nguyen, Leslie Barnes, Tess Do, and Jennifer Yee, there is a growing interest in the field of Vietnamese Francophone literature. It is the subject of numerous dissertations, journal articles, special journal issues, and conferences.

My goal in this dissertation is to show how Marguerite Triaire, Trinh Thuc Oanh, Ly Thu Ho and Linda Lê, four women writers of French expression, counter the Orientalist stereotypes propagated in colonial literature and print media and produce knowledge about the Vietnamese Other in their texts. Their work is part of what is known today as Vietnamese Francophone literature (originally known as Vietnamese literature of French expression during the colonial period). This is a body of literature that came into being as a result of French colonization. It includes prose novels, short stories, essays, plays, legends and
folktales written in French on Vietnamese soil and later on French soil by a small group of French-educated Vietnamese writers between the 1910s and the present. The scarcity of women writers and the paucity of scholarship on these authors led me to the choice of the four writers. I have decided to give voice to Marguerite Triaire, a French woman writer, and Trinh Thuc Oanh, a Vietnamese woman writer, because they are the first two women writers and the only ones from the French colonial period (1913-1954). Moreover, their novels—*En s’écartant des ancêtres* (1939) and its sequel, *La Réponse de l’Occident* (1941)—rarely studied, reflect quite accurately the customs, the changing mores and the emergent feminism of Vietnam of the 1920s and 1930s. I chose Ly Thu Ho because she is the only Vietnamese woman writer from the post-independence period (1954-1975), and because she is the only Vietnamese writer who is not afraid to document the effects of the Indochina War (1945-1954) and the Vietnam War (1954-1975) on the South Vietnamese in her trilogy—*Printemps inachevé* (1962), *Au milieu du carrefour* (1969), and *Le Mirage de la paix* (1986). Finally, I include Linda Lê as a contemporary counter-hegemonic voice from Paris (1975-present). I examine the following works—*Fuir* (1988), *Calomnies* (1993), *Les Evangiles du crime* (1992), *Les dits d’un idiot* (1995), and *Les Trois Parques* (1997)—for their veiled Vietnamese content.

A review of past and recent research on Vietnamese Francophone literature is in order here as it allows me to better situate the four women writers and understand the strengths and the weaknesses of the Vietnamese Francophone production. Two questions guide my review. First, to what extent are women authors studied in the articles and chapters in anthologies, books, as well as dissertations on Vietnamese Francophone literature? Do the scholars treat any of the four women writers examined in this dissertation? Second, do they
deploy Orientalism as a model in the study of Vietnam as the Other? In other words, do they question the construction of Vietnam in the works of the Vietnamese Francophone writers?

As a subject of research, Vietnamese Francophone literature has been a relatively unexplored area in both France and the U.S. French scholarship on this subject is lamentable, at best. In France, there has been no attempt to include Vietnamese Francophone authors in French anthologies and dictionaries on literature from Francophone countries—Les Littératures francophones depuis 1945 (1986), Encyclopaedia Universalis (1968), Dictionnaire universel des littératures (1994), and Le Nouveau dictionnaire des auteurs de tous les temps et de tous les pays (1994). The dictionary Le Petit Robert (1998) lists only two authors Pham Duy Khiem and Pham Van Ky, both male, but unfortunately wrongly attributes Frères de sang to Pham Duy Khiem, which in fact, was written by Pham Van Ky.

In articles and chapters in anthologies, if Vietnamese Francophone authors are included, they are mentioned en bloc, and if women authors are mentioned at all, they are treated in passing. In their respective works, L'exotisme indochinois dans la littérature française depuis 1860 (1934) and Philoxène ou de la littérature coloniale (1931), Louis Malleret, archeologist and director of the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient from 1949 to 1956, and Eugène Pujarniscle, literary critic, include Vietnamese writers of French expression under the rubric of "la littérature dite indigène" or "la littérature asiatique" and briefly discuss their works in relation to the writers of "colonial literature." Writers of indigenous literature are criticized for being vague in their descriptions and also for idealizing and exoticizing their culture. Malleret and Pujarniscle point out that there are basically two types of literary production in colonial Vietnam—French and the indigenous. Indigenous literature refers to works written in French by Vietnamese and develops
contemporaneously with French colonial literature which refers to literature written by French authors in, or about, Vietnam. Writers of French colonial literature (1918 till the mid-fifties) included among their most famous Marguerite Triaire, Emile Nolly, Jules Boissière, Claude Farrère, Henri Daguercches, Roland Dorgelès, and Jean Hougren. They believed that their literature was a mirror of the colony and openly supported the French mission to civilize. Other French colonial critics and writers such as Marguerite Triaire, Raphaël Barquissau and Pierre Do Dinh also place the Vietnamese writers of French expression with the writers of colonial literature in their anthologies. Contrary to Malleret and Pujarniscle, their review is rather favorable. In his anthology, *L’Asie française et ses écrivains* (1947), Raphaël Barquissau includes a contribution by Vietnamese Francophone writers, all represented by masculine voices—Pham Quynh, Tran Van Tung, Hoang Xuan Nhi, Nguyen Tien Lang et Pham Van Ky. Barquissau equally only includes masculine Vietnamese Francophone voices in the general bibliography on French Indochina in the appendice. In the anthology, *L’Indochine à travers les textes*, its editor, Marguerite Triaire (1944), also a writer and teacher, includes the Vietnamese Francophone production, represented mostly by masculine voices—Tran Van Tung, Pham Quynh, Nguyen Van To, Nguyen Van Nho, Nguyen Van Huyen, Hoang Xuan Nhi, and Pham Duy Khiem. Fortunately, Triaire includes her female Vietnamese counterpart, Trinh Thuc Oanh with whom she collaborated on two novels, *En s’écartant des ancêtres* (1939) and *La réponse de l’Occident* (1941). In these two anthologies, the contribution by Vietnamese Francophone women is weak. In the anthology on literature from the Francophone world, *Les plus beaux écrits de l’Union Française et du Maghreb* (1947), Pierre Do Dinh, one of its editors (and author of the translation of *La porte étroite* by André Gide), devotes only two out of fifty-
seven pages to Vietnamese Francophone creation and does not mention any women writers in this section. Like Pujarniscle and Malleret, Do Dinh criticizes Vietnamese writers of French expression for exoticizing their culture. His criticism is useful in that it allows me to better understand the strengths and the weaknesses of the Vietnamese Francophone production.

Vietnamese specialists of French expression and French specialists of Indochina from the 1950s to the present such as Cung Giu Nguyen, Thai Van Kiem, Bui Xuan Bao, Nguyen Tran Huan, Pham Dan Binh, Auguste Viatte, and Alain Guillemin provide a rather positive overview of the Vietnamese Francophone production. In his article, “Aperçu sur la littérature du Viet-nam” published in *Symposium* (1952), Cung Giu Nguyen, a writer of Vietnamese Francophone literature himself, devotes thirty-one pages to all the literatures of Vietnam—oral literature, literature in chữ nôm, literature in quốc ngữ, literature in French—but only three out of these thirty-one pages to the Vietnamese Francophone creation. He does not include any women writers. He rightly notes that literature of French expression which includes essays, short stories, translations and newspapers is ignored by historians of national literature in Vietnam. In his article, “Mes souvenirs avec quelques romanciers et poètes vietnamiens d’expression française” (1971), Thai Van Kiem includes several well-known writers of Vietnamese Francophone literature—Nguyen Tien Lang and Cung Giu Nguyen. Thai Van Khiem makes no mention of any women writers. In his chapter, “La littérature francophone d'Indochine: la révolte contre le mandarinat et le dialogue des cultures,” in the anthology, *Histoire comparée des littératures francophones* (1980), Auguste Viatte is silent on the contribution of Vietnamese Francophone writers in the revolt against the mandarinal system. The most important article
is by Bui Xuan Bao, the then Dean of Faculté des Lettres de Saigon. In his article, “Vietnam. Introduction historique,” in the anthology *Littératures de langue française hors de France* (1976), he gives a clear delineation of the four periods of Vietnamese literature of French expression, still used by scholars today. He includes all the three women writers from the colonial period—Ly Thu Ho, Marguerite Triaire and Trinh Thuc Oanh. He rightly notes the interdependence of national literature (in quốc ngữ) and Vietnamese Francophone literature. During the colonial period, national literature developed in tandem with Vietnamese Francophone literature. Affirmation and defense of the native customs are the priorities of both literatures. Nguyen Tran Huan presents an overview of all works of French expression that encompass novels, short stories, essays, scientific documents, historical and sociological pieces and includes the three women writers from the colonial period in his article, “La littérature vietnamienne de langue française” in *Comptes-rendus trimestriels des séances de l’Académie des sciences d’outre-mer* (1974). Importantly, Nguyen Tran Huan puts Vietnamese Francophone literature on the same level as other Francophone literatures such as Canadian, Belgian and Swiss literatures of French expression. Another article of import is “Ecrivains vietnamiens de langue française: création et créativité” (1994-1995) by Pham Dan Binh. He also traces the development of Vietnamese Francophone literature and includes Ly Thu Ho, Linda Lê (her early works) and Kim Lefèvre.

In France, the most recent scholarship includes two articles by Alain Guillemin, a researcher in history and sociology at the Université de Provence. The first article is “Viêt-Nam,” published in *Littérature francophone: 1. Le roman* (1997), and the second, “La littérature vietnamienne francophone entre colonialisme et nationalisme,” in *Littératures et
temps colonial: Métamorphoses du regard sur la Méditerrannée et l’Afrique (1999). In these two articles Guillemin traces the evolution of Vietnamese Francophone literature from the 1890s to the present. He mentions all the four women writers treated in this dissertation. Earlier in 1990, Jean-Louis Joubert published an anthology on literatures from the Francophone world, Littératures francophones d’Asie et du Pacifique. He makes no mention of the three female voices from the colonial period but does, however, include Linda Lê. In 1999, specialists of Vietnamese Francophone literature—Bernard Hue, Henri Copin, Pham Dan Binh, Patrick Laude and Patrick Meadows—published the first comprehensive anthology on the Indochinese production of French expression, Littératures de la péninsule indochinoise. The anthology includes the literary production of both French and indigenous writers including all the women writers treated in this dissertation. The growing interest in the field is also shown by several dissertations on the subject. Susan Dixon defended hers, “De l’invention de la société: l’agent de l’état comme personnage et auteur de Roman français d’Indochine” at the Université 8 (Vincennes à Saint-Denis) in 2006; Julie Assier hers, “Des écrivaines en quête d’ancrage. Linda Lê, Kim Lefèvre et Anna Moï” at the Université de Cergy-Pontoise in 2013; and Nguyen Giang Huong hers, "La poétique du sujet multiculturel dans le roman vietnamien francophone à l'époque coloniale dans la première moitié du XXème siècle” at the Université Paris-Ouest Nanterre in 2015.

The most substantive research in the area of Vietnamese Francophone literature has been done by American and Australian scholars. Most of their scholarship relies on postcolonial theories. There are numerous books, dissertations, articles and book chapters written on the subject. The majority of the authors include some or all of the women writers from the colonial and post-colonial periods. Jack A. Yeager whose name is mentioned by
French and American scholars alike wrote the first groundbreaking book, *The Vietnamese Novel in French: A Literary Response to Colonialism*, on the subject in 1987. He provides an insightful study of Vietnamese Francophone novels from the 1900s to 1970s, including useful biographical information on the authors at the end of the book. Of import to my dissertation is his chapter on women. In it, he examines women characters in selected Vietnamese Francophone novels including *En s’écartant des ancêtres* (1939) and *La Réponse de l’Occident* (1941) by Marguerite Triaire and Trinh Thuc Oanh. He sees Vietnamese women characters as symbols of tradition and social change and Western women characters as symbols of the West. Yeager's voice continues to be heard in the growing field of Vietnamese Francophone literature with recent publications on Jean Hougron, Bach Mai, Kim Lefèvre, Linda Lê and Kim Doan.²

Besides Yeager, another specialist, Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen published a book, *Vietnamese Voices: Gender and Cultural Identity in the Vietnamese Francophone Novel*, in 2004. It is similar to Yeager's book in its scope, an in-depth study of twelve authors four of whom are female voices. Nguyen examines their works in light of themes she considers central to Vietnamese Francophone literature: the influence of the Vietnamese classic, *The Tale of Kiều*, on Vietnamese Francophone novels; the portrayal of women and the double colonization within a colonial and post-colonial context; interracial relationships; and alienation within the self and within one’s environment. An important theme Nguyen does not mention is that of the affirmation of Vietnamese culture and values for an implied French readership, a point central to my dissertation. Nguyen rightly argues that Vietnamese Francophone literature reflects the literary influence of both the Far East and the West. She is the only author who examines the influence of Vietnamese literary classics and the literary
traditions of China and Vietnam on the works of these Vietnamese Francophone authors in terms of language, structure and theme. Of relevance is her study on Marguerite Triaire and Trinh Thuc Oanh's *En s’écartant des ancêtres* and *La Réponse de l’Occident* and Ly Thu Ho’s trilogy. Nguyen also continues to contribute to the field with articles, books, and special collections on the South Vietnamese experience of the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese diaspora in Australia.9

In her 1993 dissertation, “Vietnamese Novels in French: Rewriting Self, Gender and Nation,” Sharon Julie Lim-Hing examines the themes of self, gender and nation in four novels by four different authors—Nguyen Phan Long, Nguyen Tien Lang, Jean-Michel Truong, and Linda Lê. Of relevance is her chapter on Linda Lê in which she studies *Les Evangiles du crime* (1992), a collection of four “nouvelles.” Lim-Hing shows how Lê transgresses the conventions of narration and provides a great overview of the body of Vietnamese Francophone literature.

In Emily Vaughan Roberts’ 2000 dissertation, “Identity and the Colonial Encounter: the French Indochinese Novel in the Twentieth century,” the chapter that is of import here is the one on Marguerite Triaire and Trinh Thuc Oanh's *La Réponse de l’Occident*. Also pertinent is the chapter on "contemporary French Indochinese novels" from 1985 to 1997. Roberts includes Linda Lê and reads her texts as parables of the human condition. She contends that Lê bypasses Vietnam’s colonial past and “moves toward a more universalist interpretation of the Franco-Vietnamese relationship” (327), a point with which I agree.


Lisa Lowe and Karl Ashoka Britto's works deserve closer examination. Lowe's analysis of the conception of Orientalism in her book, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (1991), is compelling. She does not see Orientalism as a master narrative that defines the Orient as the binary opposite or the Other of the Occident and argues for a conception of Orientalism as heterogenous and unstable. Her work, therefore, helps to clarify the theoretical framework of this dissertation. Karl Ashoka Britto investigates the problems raised by “interculturality” in the novels of four authors in his book, *Disorientation: France, Vietnam, and the Ambivalence of Interculturality* (2004). In her 2004 doctoral thesis, “Alter/Native: Imagining and Performing the Native Woman in Francophone and Vietnamese Literature,” Lily Chiu examines the various figurations of the native woman in the works of contemporary Vietnamese women writers—those who write in
French and Vietnamese. Of use is her analysis of the element of melancholia in the work of Lê. In her book, *Le roman vietnamien francophone: Orientalisme, occidentalisme et hybridité* (2011), Ching Selao examines several Vietnamese Francophone writers through the prism of orientalism, occidentalism, and hybrid discourses. She also provides a superb review of scholarship on Vietnamese Francophone literature and theorists informing her study. Her definition of Orientalism as a discourse that creates the Oriental is useful to my study. Her chapter on Lê is equally useful in that she contends that Lê challenges binary thinking that subtends orientalism and occidentalism.

Jane Bradley Winston and Leakthinga Chau Pech Ollier (*Of Vietnam: Identities in Dialogue*, 2001), Panivong Norindr (*Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature*, 1996), Nicola Cooper (*France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters*, 2001), and Kathryn Robson and Jennifer Yee (*France and “Indochina”: Critical Representations*, 2005) have all contributed articles or written books on contemporary Vietnamese Francophone writers. Insofar as their works interrogate the representation of French Indochina, they are useful to my study. They all argue in the same vein as Edward Said, proposing that France constructed its Other, Indochina, as an object of knowledge to support its ambitions.

Michèle Bacholle-Bošković, Leslie Barnes, Tess Do, Sabine Loucif, and Jennifer Yee also contribute regularly to the growing body of work on contemporary Vietnamese Francophone writers. All these scholars deal with Linda Lê and their scholarship is of use to my work. In her book, *Linda Lê: L’écriture du manque* (2006), Bacholle-Bošković performs a psychoanalytical and deconstructionist reading of Linda Lê's works. Her work is the only book-length study on Lê. In *Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature*
Leslie Barnes examines Lê’s concept of "displaced literature," useful to my study of Lê. Barnes' interpretation of the "Organization" that pursues the narrator in Voix as the postcolonial literary market that sets the rules for consumption and representation including editors, critics and the press is equally of use ("Linda Lê's Voix" 130). In her work Sabine Loucif points out that Lê uses myths and dreams to universalize her immigrant tale of exile while Tess Do treats the theme of incest and food in Lê’s works.

As shown, scholarship on the subject of Vietnamese Francophone production and its counterpart by women authors is growing. Vietnamese Francophone literary production by women authors is treated in articles (Yeager, Bacholle-Bošković, Barnes, Chiu, Delvaux, Do, Kelly, Julie Lim-Hing, Ollier), dissertations (Nguyen, Lim-Hing, Britto, Roberts, Pears, Kelly, Dixon, Chiu, Barnes, Ching, Assier), book chapters and books (Yeager, Bradley Winston, Ollier, Cooper, Robson, Bacholle-Bošković, Yee, Nguyen, Barnes). However, with the exception of Yeager, Nguyen, Pears, and Roberts, very few scholars have engaged Marguerite Triaire, Trinh Thuc Oanh and Ly Thu Ho in an analytical manner. There is ample scholarship on Lê (Yeager, Barnes, Chiu, Do, Bacholle-Bošković, Delvaux, Fauvel, Lim-Hing, Kelly, Pears, Fauvel, Ollier, Ching, Assier), especially her themes of exile and melancholia. However, none of the scholars has deployed Orientalism as a model in the study of Vietnam as the Other in the works of these four authors. No scholar has shown to the extent I have how these four women writers challenge the establishment (colonial literature, media, press, editors)’s will to represent, control and contain Vietnam and the Vietnamese community.

My goal is to show how Marguerite Triaire, Trinh Thuc Oanh, Ly Thu Ho and Linda Lê counter the Orientalist stereotypes propagated in colonial literature and media
(press, critics, editors), interrogate the “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (Orientalism 3) and produce knowledge about the Vietnamese Other in their works. The scarcity of women writers and the paucity of scholarship on these authors led me to the choice of the four writers.

My theoretical framework is necessarily hybrid, reflecting the syncretic cultural nature of the Vietnamese Francophone literary production, Vietnamese and French. My work covers Edward Said’s Orientalism, postcolonial feminism of Gayatri Spivak, Sara Suleri, Chandra Mohanty, and Rey Chow and the Western postcolonial theories of Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Homi Bhabha, as well as specialists in the field such as Jack Yeager, Nathalie Nguyen, Leslie Barnes, Tess Do, Eugène Pujarniscle and Louis Malleret. I also rely mostly on primary sources for the early women writers given the scarcity of secondary sources on their works.

In this dissertation Orientalism is deployed as a model in the study of Vietnam as the Other. Using Said’s definition of Orientalism in his groundbreaking book Orientalism, published in 1978 as i) a body of research on the Orient by the Occident, ii) a style of thought that differentiates the Orient and the Occident, and iii) a corporate institution that deals with the Orient by authorizing views of it, describing it, codifying it and governing it, I examine how the four women writers question the Western style for writing about the Orient, in this case, Vietnam. I show how these writers counter the Orientalist stereotypes propagated in colonial literature and media (press, critics, editors), and produce knowledge about the Vietnamese Other. This study of women writers is a corrective to Said’s Orientalism which ignores women as active participants in the construction of the Other. I also study the women not as metaphor for the political situation of Vietnam but as figures
that reflect the evolution of the Vietnamese society. I also show that the women in the works of these writers offer a corrective to the superficial Orientalist images of Vietnamese women as passive and inscrutable.

This dissertation includes three main chapters, framed by an introduction and a concluding chapter. Chapter One treats the collaborative work, _En s’écartant des ancêtres_ (1939) and its sequel, _La Réponse de l’Occident_ (1941) by the first two female Vietnamese Francophone voices—Marguerite Triaire and Trinh Thuc Oanh. I show that these two women writers call in question the Orientalist discourse while being complicit with it. Like early Vietnamese Francophone writers (1913-1940), in order to redress the superficial Orientalist clichés propagated in colonial works, the primary mission of these two writers is to explain and defend their customs and provide a faithful mirror of Vietnamese society. Unfortunately, they overemphasize difference, thus altering and idealizing their customs. They end up objectifying themselves in ethnographic descriptions intended for the French audience and seeing themselves through the French gaze. I also examine how these two writers use women to document change and challenge the Western received idea of the female Vietnamese Other.

Chapter Two focuses on the trilogy—_Printemps inachevé_ (1962), _Au milieu du carrefour_ (1969), and _Le Mirage de la paix_ (1986)—by Ly Thu Ho. I show that Ly Thu Ho’s goal is to question the Orientalist or reductive representation of her country as either anti-Communist or anti-American as disseminated by the French and American media. She participates in the construction of knowledge about the wars and women in her country through lengthy explanations of the complex political situation in Vietnam between 1935 and 1975. Secondly, I examine the roles of the different women in the three novels and argue
that despite their predominant role in the novels, they are imprisoned in the Orientalist myth of Vietnamese women as passive observers.

Chapter Three focuses on Linda Lê, a contemporary Vietnamese Francophone writer who lives in Paris. This chapter analyzes the novels—*Fuir* (1988), *Calomnies* (1993), *Les Evangiles du crime* (1992), *Les dits d’un idiot* (1995), and *Les Trois Parques* (1997)—for their more apparent Vietnamese content. This study examines how Lê challenges the ideological domination of the French literary establishment by declining the existing metropolitan Orientalist stereotypes about Vietnamese Francophone writers. I also show how Lê uses women to challenge the Western received idea of the female Other.

The concluding chapter looks at the treatment and evolution of the genre of the prose novel and the theme of affirmation of cultural difference by the four women writers. All the writers mentioned in this dissertation participate in the construction of knowledge about their culture and the condition of women, question the fundamental assumptions of Western subjectivity, reverse the French gaze, and reinvent their culture and values so as to reinscribe authority in Vietnam. In short, they challenge Orientalism as a body of knowledge about the Orient, as represented by the Vietnamese community, produced by and for the Occident.
Notes

1 French Indochina consisted of five regions—Cochin China, Annam, Tonkin, Laos and Cambodia. These five regions became known as French Indochina or l’Union indochinoise in 1887 and came under the control of the French Third Republic the same year.

2 A definition of Vietnamese Francophone literature is in order here as this dissertation treats four women writers issued from this body of work. Roughly speaking, Vietnamese Francophone literature, originally known as Vietnamese literature of French expression during the colonial period, is a body of literature that came into being as a result of French colonization. It includes prose novels, short stories, essays, plays, legends and folktales written in French on Vietnamese soil and later on French soil by a small group of French-educated Vietnamese writers between the 1910s and the present. This literature is divided into five periods and mirrors the political development of the country: i) The period between mid-nineteenth century and 1913 saw the introduction of the French language in Vietnam and the publication of the first creative works in French. In 1913, Nguyen Van Xiem published a collection of poetry, Mes heures perdues, and Le Van Phat published a collection of Vietnamese folktales, Contes et légendes du pays d’Annam. ii) The period between 1913 and 1940 saw the apogée of Vietnamese Francophone literature and the “defense and illustration” of Vietnamese customs. In 1920, Nguyen Van Nho published Souvenirs d’un étudiant, belonging to the genre of “confessions.” In 1921, Nguyen Phan Long published the first prose novel, Le roman de Mademoiselle Lys. The years 1939 and 1941 witnessed the first production by women writers, En s’écartant des ancêtres and La Réponse de l’Occident by Marguerite Triaire and Trinh Thuc Oanh. These two novels
document the evolution of the role of women in Vietnam in the 1930s. The year 1930 witnessed the publication of a collaborative work between a Frenchman and a Vietnamese, Bà-Đầm, by Albert de Teneuille and Truong Dinh Tri. Indochine la douce by Nguyen Tien Lang, published in 1935; Sourires et larmes d’une jeunesse by Nguyen Manh Tuong, published in 1937; and Vingt ans by Nguyen Duc Giang, published in 1940, complete the list of important creative works from the period. The mission of these writers is to defend and illustrate the Vietnamese culture, educate the French public about their culture, and prove to the French their ability to master the different genres of French literature. Hence, lengthy descriptions of Vietnamese festivals and customs are found in these prose novels.

iii) The period between 1940 and 1954 was marked by a decrease in literary production due to the wars: Second World War, Japanese occupation, wars of liberation. This period witnessed a nascent nationalism in literature marked by a desire to showcase the Vietnamese soul. Hence this period saw the publication of folktales and legends: La Tortue d’Or: Contes du pays d’Annam by Marguerite Triaire and Trinh Thuc Oanh, published in 1943; Légendes des terres sereines by Pham Duy Khiem, published in 1943; and L’Annam, pays du rêve et de la poésie by Tran Van Tung, published in 1945. Other works published during this period include L’homme de nulle part by Pham Van Ky, published in 1945; Les chemins de la révolte by Nguyen Tien Lang, published in 1953; Frères de sang by Pham Van Ky, published in 1947; Celui qui régnera also by Pham Van Ky, published in 1954; Le Coeur de diamant by Tran Van Tung, published in 1945, and Bach-Yên ou la fille au coeur fidèle also by Tran Van Tung, published in 1946. iv) The period between 1954 and 1975 was marked by the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu which ended the publication of Vietnamese Francophone literature on Vietnamese soil, and saw the beginning of the
production on French soil. Some of this literature espoused nationalist and universal themes.

In the south French was the second most important language after Vietnamese and continued to be the language of creation. Cung Giu Nguyen published Volontés d’existence in 1954. In France, Pham Van Ky published Les yeux courroucés in 1958, Les Contemporains in 1959, Perdre la demeure in 1961, and Des femmes assises ça et là in 1964. Cung Giu Nguyen published Le fils de la baleine in 1956, Le domaine maudit in 1961; Nguyen Tien Lang published Les chemins de la révolte in 1953; Pham Duy Khiem published Nam et Sylvie in 1957 and La place d’un homme: De Hanoi à la Courtine in 1958. Nguyen Huu Chau published Les reflets de nos jours in 1955. Ly Thu Ho, the only female Francophone voice of this period, published a trilogy on the effects of the Indochina Wars on the South Vietnamese bourgeoisie: Printemps inachevé in 1962; Au milieu du carrefour in 1969; and Le Mirage de la paix in 1986. v) The period between 1975 and the present was marked by the fall of Saigon in 1975 which brought a new wave of Vietnamese to French soil and ushered in what is called “Contemporary Vietnamese Francophone literature.” Kim Lefèvre, Linda Lê, Anna Moï and Kim Doan are some of these immigrant writers. Lefèvre, Moï and Doan base their novels on their experiences in colonial Vietnam. Lê, however, does not believe in representing the Vietnamese community. See Bui Xuan Bao, “Vietnam. Introduction historique”; Sharon Julie Lim-Hing, “Vietnamese Novels in French”; Nathalie Nguyen, Vietnamese Voices”; Karl Ashoka Britto, Disorientation: France, Vietnam, and the Ambivalence of Interculturality; Ching Selao, Le roman vietnamien francophone; Bac-Sy NguyenLeHieu, “On a Vietnamese Francophone Writer: Nguyen Manh Tuong”; Louis Malleret, L’exotisme indochinois dans la littérature française depuis 1860; Eugène Pujarniscle, Philoxène ou de la littérature coloniale; and Auguste
Viatte, “La littérature francophone d’Indochine: la révolte contre le mandarinat et le dialogue des cultures.”

3 In relation to Vietnamese Francophone literature, Cambodian and Laotian Francophone literature is relatively unknown. All the dissertations and books written and published on the Francophone production from the former French Indochina are mostly centered on Vietnamese Francophone authors.

4 Cung Giu Nguyen and Bac-Sy NguyenleHieu point out that literature of French expression which includes essays, short stories, translations and newspapers is ignored by historians of national literature in Vietnam in their respective works, “Aperçu sur la littérature du Viet Nam” and “On a Vietnamese Francophone Writer: Nguyen Manh Tuong.”

5 Throughout this dissertation I use the complete names of Vietnamese writers and critics. In Vietnamese, the last name in the group of names corresponds to the given name in the West. This makes it difficult to cite Vietnamese authors properly, and I have opted for the complete names to avoid any confusion.

6 For an explanation of French colonial literature see Pierre Mille, “La race supérieure”; Robert Barquissau, Le roman colonial français; Roland Lebel, Histoire de la littérature coloniale en France and Etudes de littérature coloniale; Marius-Ary Leblond, Après l’exotisme de Loti: le roman colonial; Louis Malleret, L’exotisme indochinois dans la littérature française depuis 1860; Eugène Pujarniscle, Philoxène; Henri Copin, L’Indochine dans la littérature française des années vingt à 1954; Alain Quella-Villéger, “Dire l’indicible Indochine”; Denys Lombard et al., eds., Rêver l’Asie; and David O’Connell and Phillip Crant, “French Novelists of Indochina in the Interwar Years.”

7 Alain Guillemin translated Nathalie Nguyen's Memory is Another Country: Women
of the Vietnamese Diaspora into French in 2013.

8 See bibliography for publications by Jack Yeager.

9 See bibliography for publications by Nathalie Nguyen.
Chapter 1

Figuring French Colonial Vietnam: Marguerite Triaire and Trinh Thuc Oanh's *En s’écartant des ancêtres* (1939), and *La Réponse de l’Occident* (1941)

This chapter treats Marguerite Triaire, a French woman writer, and Trinh Thuc Oanh, a Vietnamese woman writer, who both belong to the period spanning 1913 to 1940. In this chapter, my goal is twofold. First, I argue that in order to redress the superficial Orientalist clichés propagated in colonial works, the primary goal of the writers in the novels, *En s’écartant des ancêtres* (1939) and *La Réponse de l’Occident* (1941), is to provide a faithful mirror of Vietnamese society and its customs and affirm their cultural difference. I show that in their narratives of cultural activities written to inform the French audience of the richness of their culture, the authors overemphasize difference, thus altering and idealizing their customs. In this way they end up objectifying themselves in ethnographic descriptions intended for the French audience and seeing themselves through the French gaze. Secondly, I also examine how these two writers use women to document change and challenge the Western received idea of the female Vietnamese Other.

Little is known about the life of Marguerite Triaire and Trinh Thuc Oanh.¹ Triaire and Trinh were both authors and teachers. They collaborated on three works: *En s’écartant des ancêtres* (1939), *La Réponse de l’Occident* (1941), and a collection of folktales of Vietnam, *La Tortue d’or* (1940). Triaire also collaborated with Pierre Redan on *L’Etendard vert* (1926); wrote by herself one novel, *Et la lumière fut...* (1926) as well as a collection of short stories, *Contes à Jean-François* (1941); and edited an anthology of excerpts on Indochina from French and Vietnamese authors of French expression, *L’Indochine à travers les textes* (1944).

¹ Triaire and Trinh were both authors and teachers. They collaborated on three works: *En s’écartant des ancêtres* (1939), *La Réponse de l’Occident* (1941), and a collection of folktales of Vietnam, *La Tortue d’or* (1940). Triaire also collaborated with Pierre Redan on *L’Etendard vert* (1926); wrote by herself one novel, *Et la lumière fut...* (1926) as well as a collection of short stories, *Contes à Jean-François* (1941); and edited an anthology of excerpts on Indochina from French and Vietnamese authors of French expression, *L’Indochine à travers les textes* (1944).
En s’écartant des ancêtres and its sequel, La Réponse de l’Occident, are the first and only known literary collaborations between two women authors, one French, and the other Vietnamese. These two novels are written in the spirit of Franco-Vietnamese collaboration, advocated by French and moderate French-educated Vietnamese which explains the authors’ rather conservative approach to French colonization. Moreover, as the person responsible for “la [d]irection de l’[i]nstruction [p]ublique de l’Indochine,” which she indicates on the cover of L’Indochine à travers les textes, Triaire is the representative of the mission civilisatrice. Her goal is to inculcate French values as well as teach the Vietnamese about their culture.

To what extent is Triaire and Trinh’s objective depiction and defense of Vietnamese customs a refusal of the Orientalist images of Vietnam or French production of knowledge about its colonized Other? Do they translate Vietnamese culture for an unfamiliar French readership? Do they validate and affirm Vietnamese culture and people or do they reinscribe centuries of French perceptions of the Vietnamese in the construction of their self-image? How do these women authors construct their women characters in order to forge knowledge about the female Other and challenge the Orientalist images of Vietnamese women? These are some of the key questions in this chapter.

Figuring French Colonial Vietnam

In his seminal book, Orientalism (1978), Said defines Orientalism as “a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient [in this case, Vietnam]—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it (3). Since the late seventeenth century, the French have been surveying and gathering information on the Vietnamese Other, transforming the Vietnamese into the object of the
French gaze, and putting the French in a position of strength. Most of the writers openly supported the French mission to civilize in Vietnam and the Orientalist view of "an ontological and epistemological distinction … between ‘the Orient’ [the Vietnamese] and … ‘the Occident’ [the French] " (Said, Orientalism 2).

This notion of the opposition between the Orient and the Occident has its roots in the Hellenic thinking of the Western “us” against the Eastern “them." The notion began when the Greeks (the Occidental “us”) defeated the Persian army under King Xerxes (the Oriental “them”) and continued when the Christians fought against the Muslims in the seventh century (Hentsch 23-26). The idea of the opposition is also rooted in the racial theory of nineteenth-century European scientists such as Gobineau, Buffon, Linnaeus, Lamarck, Blumenbach, and Cuvier. Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, the most famous of these scientists, divides the human races into three distinct races—white, black and yellow—with the white race at the top and the black race and the yellow race at the bottom of the hierarchy in his essay, Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines (1853-1855), translated into English as The Moral and Intellectual Diversity of Races. Inspired by the theories of biologists (Cuvier) and ethnologists (Boulainvilliers), he believes that race defines culture and moral character. He believes that in contrast to the white race, the yellow race is mediocre in morals and in intellect. Gobineau argues that while the white race is superior in intellect, the yellow race “easily understand whatever is not very profound, nor very sublime,” and "they have little scope of imagination, and therefore invent but little" (The Moral and Intellectual Diversity of Races 450).

The first group to gather information on the Vietnamese Other were missionaries, traders, and explorers. They included among others Alexandre de Rhodes, Eliacin Luro and
J. B. Tavernier. Alexandre de Rhodes, a French missionary-linguist, with the aid of Italian and Portuguese missionaries, codified the Romanized system of writing, using diacritical marks to denote different sounds and tones. The writing was improperly known as **quốc ngữ** (which means national language), still used today in Vietnam. In 1651, Rhodes also published the first Vietnamese Catechism and the first Vietnamese-Portuguese-Latin dictionary. Eliacin Luro, an administrator, recorded economic, cultural and linguistic information about Vietnam in his monumental *Cours de l’administration annamite* (1875) with the intention of educating future administrators.

It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the French started to seriously gather information about Vietnam and write about it. The second group were soldiers, journalists, colonial administrators, scientists and novelists. They included writers of narratives of conquest and administration such as Père Evariste Régis Huc, Henri Mouhot, le Dr J. Harmand, Auguste Pavie, Paul Bonnetain, Paul Bourde, Pierre Loti, Louis Lyautey, Paul Giran, Francis Garnier, Pierre Mille, Eugène Pujarniscle, Roland Lebel, Louis Malleret, Paul Doumer, Albert de Pouvourville, and Francisque Vial. They appropriated the Hellenic notion of opposition between the French (Occidentals) and the Vietnamese (Orientals) and defined the Vietnamese as diametrically opposed to them (Hentsch 23-30, 79-117). For example, Paul Giran, Administrator of Civil Services in Indochina, in *Psychologie du peuple annamite. Le caractère national. L’évolution historique, intellectuelle, sociale, et politique* (1904), uses Orientalist metaphors to describe the Vietnamese and finds them to be a mediocre and passive people who never produced a great culture, language, literature, music, or architecture: “Médiocrité, tel est le terme que nous serons amenés souvent à prononcer au cours de cet examen psychologique. Médiocre est l’esprit d’invention de l’Annamite:
médiocre est son industrie, médiocre aussi est son langage” (118). Writers of “exotic literature” such as Pierre Loti, Myriam Harry, and many others appropriate Orientalist stereotypes in their description of the Vietnamese. They present superficial and negative descriptions of decor, landscape, and Orientalist images of mandarins, boys, congâis (native mistresses of Frenchmen), nha-ques (peasants), pirates, and opium, and find all things Vietnamese to be repellent. In Propos d’exil (1887), a series of essays about exotic places, Loti describes Tonkin (northern region of Vietnam) as a “sinistre pays jaune” with “ciels jaunes” populated by an indistinguishable and ugly "race jaune": “on ne sait jamais: même costume, même chignon, même laideur;” “[d]es hommes laids, [d]es hommes à soutane,” “des dames jaunes d’une grande laideur,” and “des enfants nus, jaunes de la tête aux pieds, de longs cheveux, [qui] pullulent, grouillent…” (9-14). Vietnamese men, women and children are perceived, for the most part, as dirty and ugly.

Paul Bonnetain, a journalist and a novelist, also equates Vietnam and the Far East with the absence of a great culture in his two works, Au Tonkin (1887) and L’Opium (1886). In the collection of reflections on Indochina, Au Tonkin, Bonnetain notes that even the Arabs, a race whose art is "latent" can produce poetry which is better than any Oriental poetry. He concludes that the Vietnamese do not have a language, culture, literature, or history of their own:

l'Annamite [:] [a]nimal immusclé, sans dignité et sans courage, le misérable ignore son passé. Il faudrait, pour le connaître, fouiller en Chine les vieilles bibliothèques fermées encore à nos savants. Car le sol ne compense point cette absence de livres ou de poèmes nombreux. Les monuments y sont peu fréquents, les monuments remarquables du moins. Les pagodes sont des rez-
de-chaussée sans style, des kiosques vagues, tous coupés sur un patron unique.

Le bois dont elle sont bâties a la vétusté silencieuse. (209)

In his view since the Vietnamese are culturally bankrupt (they do not have a history nor a culture), they are also morally bankrupt: "ces bâtards d'Indo-chine sont moralement des eunuques" (209). As the Vietnamese do not possess a culture of their own, they are simple and childish imitators of the great Chinese and Japanese culture (237-38). Bonnetain notes that Vietnamese society shows advanced signs of degeneration (the laborers are slow and lazy): "Elle ne dort pas, cette terre; elle est morte" (40). Bonnetain believes that the Vietnamese, a race of slaves without any pride in their "Fatherland," make a great labor force for the French. In the novel, L’Opium, the male French protagonist, a disillusioned opium addict, labels Tonkin "une enfantine civilisation perversement décadente" (152).

Eugène Pujarniscle, colonist and literary critic, reminds the Vietnamese that it is the French who taught the Vietnamese everything they knew about themselves, their geography, history, culture, and liberty in Philoxène ou de la littérature coloniale (1931):

ce sont les Français qui ont appris aux Annamites comment leur pays
est fait. Ce sont les Français qui ont dressé les premières cartes
sérieuses de l’Indochine: ce sont les Français qui ont fouillé dans les
archives de l’Indochine pour en reconstituer le passé, ce sont eux qui
ont découvert de merveilleux monuments dont beaucoup d’indigènes
ne soupçonnent même pas l’existence—et le système d’écriture si
commode dont ils se servent, est l’oeuvre des Français ou, du moins
d’Européens. (191-92)

As late as 1939, while Francisque Vial, one of the more pro-Vietnam scholars,
presents France and Vietnam as two equally rich civilizations, he still defines Vietnam—contemplative, mystic, traditional—as diametrically opposed to France—dynamic, rational, constructive—in *Le problème humain de l’Indochine*. Contrary to the earlier colonial writers, he does not view Vietnam as backwards and decadent. Yet, he still sees the French in the position of a teacher who can find a solution to “le grand problème humain de l’Indochine” (89).

The third group included writers of creative works treating French daily life in colonial Vietnam such as Marguerite Triaire, Jean Marquet, Jean d'Esme, Emile Nolly, Jules Boissière, Claude Farrère, Henri Daguerches, Roland Dorgelès, Jean Hougron and many others. They were known as writers of “colonial literature” (1918 until 1954), which existed contemporaneously with Vietnamese Francophone literature. Writers of "colonial literature" believe in the tenets of realism and naturalism and advocate exactitude, factual documentation, and objectivity in their representation of contemporary Vietnamese society. The above texts constitute the colonial discourse about Vietnam or what Said calls Orientalism. These texts reveal the pattern of misrepresentation of the Vietnamese Other resulting in stereotypes (backwards, dirty, ugly, decadent, status of child and pupil) that are reinforced through repetition over the centuries in works of colonial writers. The French accumulated knowledge about the Vietnamese in order to better know them, then dominate and subjugate them. The Vietnamese became an object of study and were stamped with an essentialist character that is passive, non-participating and non-autonomous. The writings of colonial writers produce knowledge that generates power. Michel Foucault reminds us that to constitute something/someone as an object of knowledge is to assume power over him or her. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), he writes: “[w]e should admit
rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (27). Roland Lebel, one of the theorists of colonial literature, confirms that since the nineteenth century, France has been accumulating knowledge—"les informations sérieuses" to codify Vietnam for France—"utiles tant à la science qu’à notre action politique.” In *Histoire de la littérature coloniale en France* (1928), he writes: “Mais c’est seulement au XIXe siècle, et surtout dans la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle, qu’apparaissent les vrais explorateurs et les informations sérieuses, utiles tant à la science qu’à notre action politique” (162). In short, Vietnam is constructed through research, pacification, more research and outright occupation.

It is within this context that Triaire and Trinh’s two novels should be read. In his preface to the first prose novel in French, *Le roman de Mademoiselle Lys*, published in 1921, Nguyen Phan Long writes:

> il est des Européens qui, n’ayant sous leurs yeux que des spécimens peu recommandables de la population indigène, qu’ils érigent d’emblée en types, se forment de la mentalité de l’Annamite une opinion aussi superficielle qu’inexacte. J’aurai atteint mon but si je contribue tant soit peu avec mes aînés à amener ceux-ci à nous juger avec plus d’équité en se pénétrant de la notion de l’humaine condition, et ceux-là à mieux connaître le peuple français et à identifier leur petite patrie à la grande pour les confondre toutes deux dans un culte fervent et réfléchi. (9)
His goal is thus to provide a corrective to the facile representations of the Vietnamese and their customs by colonial writers. His wish is to convince the French of the existence of a rich and long Vietnamese tradition and culture so that the Vietnamese will be treated with parity, and to advocate equal collaboration between “[la] grande patrie,” that is, France and “[la] petite patrie,” that is, Vietnam.

Nguyen Phan Long’s statement summarizes best the mission of the writers of the period 1913 to 1940. In short, to counter the superficial Orientalist images of the Vietnamese perpetrated in French scholarship, the mission of the writers of the period, as stated by Bui Xuan Bao, a noted Vietnamese scholar, "consistait à sauvegarder et à développer la culture nationale" (Littératures de langue française hors de France: Anthologie didactique 634). Thirty some years later, in 1954, Cung Giu Nguyen, one of the writers and scholars of Vietnamese Francophone literature, and "le chantre du nationalisme vietnamien" exhorts the Vietnamese to break the silence and take up the pen in Volontés d’existence, a collection of essays:

Vous, hommes d’Extrême-Occident, vous avez commencé à parler en arrivant chez nous; mais à cette époque, nos lettrés, fiers de leurs propres idoles s’étaient tus....Puis vint un moment où quelques-uns d’entre nous se mirent à parler en faisant, certes, beaucoup de fautes, mais vous ne les avez pas écoutés car vous étiez distraits par vos propres songes....Nous voici à une heure cruciale où il faut se résoudre à sortir de ce silence, à reprendre le dialogue entre les hommes, à redonner pureté, force et vigueur au langage. (Dédicace)

Cung Giu Nguyen reiterates the mission of the Vietnamese writers to affirm the merit of
Vietnamese Francophone literature.

French-educated Vietnamese writers have produced works of imagination and have shown the French colonizers that they can master the different genres of French literature since the early 1900s. In the anthology, *L’Indochine à travers les textes*, a collection of excerpts from authors residing in Indochina, Triaire indicates that the goal of the authors of the novels, *En s’écartant des ancêtres* and *La Réponse de l’Occident* is to provide a faithful mirror of Vietnamese society and its customs: “Marguerite Triaire et Trinh Thuc Oanh ont signé deux romans: ‘En s’écartant des ancêtres’ et ‘La Réponse de l’Occident,’ dans lesquels elles étudient l’évolution des femmes en pays d’Annam. Romans où la vie annamite est exposée avec une scrupuleuse exactitude de détail” (141-42). Triaire and Trinh’s goal, not unlike that of Nguyen Phan Long, is to represent contemporary Vietnamese society and individualized Vietnamese characters engaged in everyday activities with exactitude and objectivity, thus redressing the superficial and often negative representation of the Vietnamese by French colonial writers. In short, their goal is to convince the French of the presence and merit of “une littérature réaliste indigène de langue française” (Pujarniscle, *Philoxène ou de la littérature* 195).

**The Limits of the Defense of Vietnamese Customs**

In *En s’écartant des ancêtres* (1939) and *La Réponse de l’Occident* (1941), the story is set in colonial Tonkin during the 1920s and 1930s. The authors document the lives of three generations of Vietnamese women, their cultural practices, the changing mores of Vietnam, and emergent feminism with exactitude and objectivity. The three generations are Madame Huyền and her husband; their three daughters and protagonists, Mai, Gaby, and Dân; and their children, Mân, Van, Lan, Yên, Vinh, Huệ and Dào. In order to educate the
French of the richness of their customs, the authors weave cultural activities into the plot of the novels.\textsuperscript{8}

The story of\textit{ En s’écarter des ancêtres} begins with the birth, education, engagement, marriage of Mai, the principal character, and ends with the death of her father and her divorce. Given the importance of the Vietnamese New Year, \textit{Têt}, in Vietnamese culture, the authors introduce this festival into the plot. In colonial literature, as Albert Memmi so rightly puts it, it is always “the colonizer’s holiday, a religious one perhaps, [that]…is celebrated brilliantly—Christmas and Joan of Arc, Carnival and Bastille Day,” which implies that the colonized's festivals are always silenced (\textit{The Colonizer and the Colonized} 103). The authors’ goal is to offer a corrective to this silence and educate the French reader and produce knowledge about this all-important Vietnamese festival. Back from school, the authors follow Mai as she celebrates the festival with her family. The festival is documented in the chapter entitled “Le Têt”:

C’est qu’en pays d’Annam, le Têt est une fête importante. Il marque la fin de l’année lunaire, le début d’une nouvelle, mais il est bien plus qu’un premier jour de l’an. Il est la communion de tout un peuple en une aspiration au bonheur pour les vivants et un culte unanime envers les morts, il est la consécration, la glorification de ce culte et les réjouissances qui accompagnent cette solennité durent près de trois semaines. Chacun tient à fêter dignement le Têt, des plus riches aux plus pauvres, quitte pour ceux-ci s’endetter, parfois pour de longs mois. Qu’importe? Ils se priveront par la suite, mais ils auront eu quelques jours heureux et surtout, ils auront respecté la tradition qui
veut qu’on fasse bon visage à l’année qui débute comme si la manifestation de l’allégresse et de l’espoir de tous devait l’influencer, l’inciter à se montrer plus douce.

...

Pour cette solennité, toute la famille se réunit; si les membres en sont dispersés, ils se regroupent pour venir commencer l’année sous l’autorité du père de famille et sous l’œil des ancêtres. Car les ancêtres sont là, eux aussi, explicitement invités la veille à retourner sous le toit familial parmi leurs descendants.

Leurs tablettes sont découvertes sur l’autel aussi richement décoré que possible. Pendant trois jours, des cierges et des baguettes d’encens y brûlent continuellement et tous les membres de la famille apportent aux disparus des présents: des barres d’or et d’argent, des piastres pour leurs dépenses dans l’autre vie. Le simulacre leur suffit d’ailleurs et ces richesses sont en carton doré ou argenté. On leur offre également, suivant le même symbolisme, des objets votifs en bambou et en papier, puis des fleurs, des fruits, des gâteaux et du thé; on n’oublie pas de les invoquer...au moment des deux principaux repas et les visiteurs qui viennent leur offrir leurs vœux doivent, avant de saluer les vivants, faire les prosternations rituelles devant l’autel des morts.

...

...Mai...voit les baguettes d’encens exhalant leur fumée odorante, le culte aux ancêtres. Elle pense aux pétards bruyants qui n’en finissent plus,
The goal of the passage is to educate the reader and produce knowledge about the festival. Têt marks the end of the lunar year and the beginning of the next. The festival lasts three weeks; it is a time for the entire family to gather together, to pay their respects and burn incense and paper money and paper gifts for one’s ancestors at the ancestral altar, set off firecrackers to chase away evil spirits, and visit family members, friends and colleagues. The importance of the celebration parallels the number of pages (a total of eight) devoted to it. The lengthy descriptions are intended to inform the audience, presumably French, about the activities surrounding the festival. The goal is pedagogic. Besides educating the reader about their culture, the authors seek to convince the French public of the richness of their culture. Hence, the authors describe elaborate decorations and the numerous activities surrounding this celebration—copious dinners with families, visits to families and relatives, the ancestral cult, setting off firecrackers. Mai’s family ancestral altar is richly decorated with incense burners, candles and incense, offerings of food, fruits and flowers, paper money and gifts, and tablets indicating the names of the ancestors. Despite the realist, informational and pedagogical intent, the authors have obviously reconstructed the festival and dissimulated the imperfections of their culture as attested by the overemphasis on difference. This overemphasis on difference—ancestral cult, ancestral altar, offerings of paper money, incense—comes across as exoticism. Eugène Pujarniscle, colonist and literary critic, is right to criticize the Vietnamese writers for presenting an apology of their culture. Pujarniscle writes: “Comment pourrons-nous obtenir des Annamites une peinture exacte du milieu
colonial, si leur unique préoccupation est de se faire les apologistes de leurs moeurs et les critiques impitoyables des nôtres?” (Philoxène 197). He continues, “En effet, l’Annamite qui prend sa plume pour décrire, en langue française, les moeurs annamites, va-t-il les étaler sous nos yeux, dans toute leur exactitude, c’est-à-dire en nous montrant leurs beautés, mais sans nous cacher non plus leurs imperfections—car aucun peuple n’est parfait? Point du tout” (186). Pierre Do Dinh, one of the editors of the 1947 anthology on Francophone literature, Les plus beaux écrits de l’Union Française et du Maghreb concurs and also criticizes the Vietnamese writers for being guilty of exoticism: “Les Annamites ont accepté de voir leur pays sous les couleurs que leur propose l’exotisme français” (321).

To educate the reader about Vietnamese marriage customs, the authors describe Mai’s betrothal. Vietnamese parents arrange at an early age marriage partners for their daughters. Even Mai, an exceptional girl (who recites poetry at the age of four; and reads, writes, and counts in quốc ngữ at the age of eight), is not exempt from this tradition. At the age of nine, she accepts a suitor chosen by her parents, a boy she has never seen nor met. As dictated by Confucian traditions, she is excluded from the betrothal dinner. The goal of the authors is to educate the reader about the rituals of a traditional Vietnamese marriage ceremony. The marriage customs show the subjugation of women in a patriarchal Confucian society.

En s’écartant des ancêtres ends with the divorce of Mai and the death of her father. Mai falls in love with a medical student, Hùng. Fate is not on their side as he leaves for France to continue his studies. She meets another medical student, Tuong. This time, she marries him. Tuong goes to France to continue his studies and leaves her for a French woman. Mai grants him a divorce.
To educate the reader about funeral rites in Vietnam, the authors detail the burial of Mai’s father. The authors inform the reader about the dress codes (white tunic and turban worn by the family of the deceased), the role of feng shui in deciding location of burial site, the burning of paper money, houses and cars for the needs of the deceased in the afterlife, and the period of mourning that lasts up to a hundred days. Most of the passages on the funeral of Mai’s father are written in the objective style of an ethnographic account intended to inform the French audience about the Vietnamese funeral rites. These rituals also show the subjugation of women in a patriarchal Confucian society. Only males can officiate: in this case, Mai’s brother, Bao, performs the important act for the return of the soul of the dead to the body. The rituals are, however, obviously reconstructed and idealized: only well-to-do families can afford to celebrate the rites in the manner practiced by Mai’s family.

In the sequel, *La Réponse de l’Occident*, Mai is a doctor and divorced with three children; Dân, a wife and a mother with four children; and Gaby, divorced with no children. The authors introduce the children of Mai and Dân and their love lives while documenting a series of customs and cultural activities—betel preparation and chewing, opium preparation, the Mid-Autumn Festival, “bât” games (card games), and divination. The authors redress the Orientalist image of betel chewing and opium as strange and degenerate and present the customs as part of the daily life of the characters.

To redress the negative Orientalist images of insalubrity and decay associated with Buddhist pagodas and temples in colonial narratives, the authors include an episode in which Dân, a Catholic, sets out for church to pray and meditate but stops at a pagoda nearby out of curiosity. The goal of the episode is to produce information on Buddhist pagodas for the French reader as the authors devote only a few lines to the church but four pages to “la
pagode des Parfums de l’Est.” The authors seek to educate the reader about the history associated with the pagodas. The pagoda was built in honor of a Vietnamese woman by the name of Huê who defeated the Chinese enemies with her beauty and brains. The authors allude to the destruction of historic buildings (such as the pagodas) by the colonial government in order to make way for the building of the city: "Lorsque les Européens arrivèrent, apportant la civilisation occidentale et, avec elle, la nécessité de percer des rues, il ne resta de la pagode que le chevet, comparable à un placard donnant sur la voie nouvelle appelée par les Blancs: rue Jules Ferry" (42). The authors use active verbs such as “arriver,” “apporter,” and “percer” to describe the task of clearing the terrain for progress and development, thereby figuring the French as constructive and dynamic. Another goal of the authors is to affirm their culture by showing the French reader the richness of it. The authors document the exotic objects in a pagoda—incense burners, joss sticks, votive paper, copper crane, offerings of areca nuts, fresh fruits and flowers to the different deities: "Devant la châsse et de chaque côté, l’encombrement habituel: coupes et chandeliers de laque, brûle-parfums, grues de cuivre, objets votifs, vases, plateaux d’offrandes contenant des noix d’arec, des fruits, des fleurs coupées, des jossticks" (42-43). Triaire and Trinh's pagodas are certainly not Paul Bonnetain's pagodas. They are not "des rez-de chaussée sans style, des kiosques vagues, tous coupés sur un patron unique" (Bonnetain, Au Tonkin 209) and not associated with insalubrity and decay. On the other hand, in describing the objects in the temple in a state of "l'encombrement habituel," the authors suggest "clutter" as opposed to order. In using adverbs such as “magiquement” and adjectives such as “magique,” “mystérieuses,” “cabalistiques,” “fantastique” and “étrange” to figure the Buddhist pagodas, the authors connote Vietnam as a mysterious place associated with peculiar (or exotic)
customs such as the burning incense, gold and silver paper money, and the chanting of prayers (44-45). These metaphors inadvertently figure Vietnam as mystic and curiously perpetuate Orientalist stereotypes about Vietnam. The Vietnam of Triaire and Trinh is not far from being, in Said’s terms, “a place of…remarkable experiences” (*Orientalism* 1).

The catalogue of Vietnamese customs—betrothal and marriage customs, funeral rites, betel chewing, opium preparation, card games, Têt, Buddhist temples and pagodas—is not only an affirmation of the worth of the Vietnamese culture but also a refusal of the superficial and often negative representations of the Vietnamese by colonial writers, that is, Vietnam as backward and immutable, a country with no culture. It is noteworthy to point out that the customs and cultural activities described in the two novels are deconstructed and reconstructed, intended to inform the French readership about the richness of the Vietnamese culture. The authors run the risk of Orientalizing or exoticising themselves with their objective style and factual documentation. As Pierre Do Dinh puts it, "Le défaut de cette littérature est celui de l'exotisme" (*Les plus beaux écrits de l'Union française* 21). The Vietnamese Francophone authors differ from their contemporary colonial writers in that they write to affirm and produce knowledge about the Vietnamese Other, and to convince the French of the merits of their customs and literature and the presence of “une littérature réaliste indigène de langue française” whereas the colonial writers write mostly to support their mission to civilize in Vietnam and their privileged colonial lifestyle.

**La réponse de l’Occident: Christianity?**

The thesis of the two novels, *En s’écarter des ancêtres* and *La Réponse de l’Occident*, is found in the discussions between Mai, Gaby, Dân and the two representatives of the *mission civilisatrice*, Madame Constant and Le Père Le Gorridec. Is it a good thing to
renounce one’s ancestral roots and take on French values? Are the Vietnamese better off with Western changes (in education, career, marriage partners, religion) brought about by French colonization? Or as Madame Huyên, the mother of Mai who represents ancestral values, wonders, “ce vent d’Occident…fera notre malheur” (La Réponse de l’Occident 237). Madame Constant, the principal of L’école normale, believes fervently in the merits of French colonization and the selfless mission civilisatrice:

…vous étiez civilisés; une civilisation à vous, toute littéraire, immobilisée dans la tradition; nous vous avons apporté le progrès, la science moderne dont vous ignoriez tout. Et avec le progrès, le bien-être, une vie meilleure pour tous…la France est une nation généreuse et lorsque vous connaîtriez mieux son histoire, vous verrez qu’elle a souvent sacrifié des avantages matériels et immédiats à un idéal de justice, de civilisation, à quelque chose de supérieur. C’est la seule nation qui ait donné l’exemple du désintéressement, de la générosité et de l’idéalisme….nous restions ici pour vous guider et vous protéger. Vous savez parfaitement que si la France n’était pas là, votre Indochine deviendrait immédiatement une proie que d’autres nations se disputeraient et vous savez aussi qu’aucune domination n’est aussi douce que celle de la France. Vos pères ont souffert des exactions des mandarins chinois qui les menaient à coups de bâton. Croyez-moi, si l’intérêt des Français est de rester en Indochine, l’intérêt des Indochinois est de rester sous la domination française. Nous n’avons donc qu’à nous entendre, à marcher la main dans la main à l’ombre du drapeau français.

(En s’écartant des ancêtres 112-13)
She believes that all French living in the colonies are missionaries, and hence her mission is “faire de ‘ses filles’ des femmes au coeur large, à l’esprit éclairé, de leur rendre accessible la culture française et de leur faire aimer la France comme une seconde patrie” (En s’écartant des ancêtres 109). Her mission is not dissimilar from that of the colonial writers who believe in civilizing the backward Vietnamese with their mediocre language, ridding them of their penchant for hyperbole and transmitting the values of French clarity: “Elle luttait…contre leur goût naturel de l’emphase;...contre le style amphigourique,…l’abus des adjectifs et des superlatifs. Elle les obligeait à un sévère contrôle de leurs expressions, ne tolérant pas qu’elles parlissent ou qu’elles écrivissent pour ne rien dire” (En s’écartant des ancêtres 116).

Le Père Le Gorridec, a French priest and an adept in Vietnamese traditions, also believes fervently in the merits of French colonization and the selfless mission civilisatrice. He believes that the mistake of the Vietnamese youth lies in accepting Western changes without the moral anchor of Western culture, Christianity: “c’est cette jeunesse désaxée ne songeant qu’au plaisir…Ce que nous vous apportons, je vais vous le dire. Je vais vous la donner d’un mot, la réponse de l’Occident [sic]. Nous vous apportons le christianisme, le salut par la Croix de Jésus, et c’est un don si magique qu’un bon nombre d’entre nous n’a pas hésité à verser son sang pour le mettre à la portée de vos mains” (La Réponse de l’Occident 233). Like Madame Constant, Le Père le Gorridec points out the merits of the "selfless" mission civilisatrice:

On dit trop couramment, parmi vous, que les Européens sont venus dans ce pays pour exploiter et pour s’enrichir. Il faut bien reconnaître que c’est vrai de quelques particuliers dont on généralise fâcheusement
les convoitises. Il est exact que les premiers Européens venus en Extrême-Orient obéissaient à des mobiles d’ordre commercial. Mais il ne faut pas oublier que les bateaux qui amenèrent au seizième siècle des marchands et des soldats amenèrent aussi des missionnaires mûs par un tout autre idéal et dont beaucoup bravèrent tous les tourments pour vous ouvrir les portes de la vie. Ce sont les missionnaires qui ont frayé le chemin à la civilisation occidentale, eux qui vous ont apporté l’idéal de fraternité et d’amour qui doit être un jour celui de l’humanité entière….Sous l’influence de la civilisation occidentale, les jeunes se sont éloignés de la tradition; ils se sont écartés des ancêtres….Si elle [la jeunesse] est désaxée, c’est qu’elle a commis la faute de dissocier la culture occidentale du christianisme. La culture occidentale est chrétienne; elle est inséparable du christianisme. (La Réponse de l’Occident 233-35)

Dân and Mai, the two emancipated female protagonists, try to point out the exploitation of the Vietnamese by the French but in the end “écoutaient toutes les deux et cela leur paraissait si évident et si simple qu’elles s’étonnaient de n’avoir pas pensé plus tôt à cet apport de l’Occident” (233). They acquiesce like children:

--Comme c’est clair! accepta Dân.

--Oui, c’est clair, convint Mai.

(La Réponse de l’Occident 237)

It is not at all clear, however, if the authors endorse the view of the representatives of the mission civilisatrice or the view of Mai, Dân and Gaby. Dân is a Catholic without
foregoing her belief in ancestral traditions (she seeks the aid of “la déesse Lieu-Hanh” when her daughter falls ill). Đạo chooses Catholicism as the response to her heartbreak, hence the title of the sequel, “La réponse de l’Occident.” Mai and Gaby are Buddhists. It is therefore not clear if the authors endorse Christianity or Buddhism. Moreover, Madame Constant and Le Père Le Gorridec’s rants about the merits of the mission civilisatrice which come across as an apology of Christianity can be explained by the authors’ goal to document the Vietnamese society under French colonization in the 1930s with accuracy. Representatives of the mission civilisatrice such as Madame Constant and Le Père Le Gorridec are, in the words of Said, “imperial agents” (Orientalism 240) and fervently believe in the selfless mission civilisatrice. They do not overtly denounce French colonization but point out some social injustices. They note the existence of the disenfranchised rickshaw drivers. Mai admits to Gaby that she does not like the French for personal reasons. The authors depict quite accurately the rise of nationalist sentiments among the Vietnamese students and their active role in anti-colonial nationalist organisations in the 1920s and 1930s. Gaby and Mai belong to “le Club secret,” an anti-colonial nationalist organisation, and discuss questions such as “l’Annam libre,” the right to govern themselves, and the exploitation of the Vietnamese. The fiancé of one of Gaby’s classmates has been arrested for anti-colonialist activities, and Gaby’s band of friends suspect that he will be sent to the infamous Poulo Condor. Nathalie Nguyen is right to point out that Triaire and Trinh paint a rather sympathetic portrayal of a country in transition between old and new in the two novels (Vietnamese Voices 44).
En s’écartant des ancêtres and La Réponse de l’Occident: A Study on “l’évolution des femmes en pays d’Annam”

In the brief introduction to a passage on Buddhist pagodas in the anthology, L’Indochine à travers les textes, Triaire and Trinh indicate that their goal in the two novels, En s’écartant des ancêtres and La réponse de l’Occident, is to provide a faithful portrait of “l’évolution des femmes en pays d’Annam” and “la vie annamite.” This section looks at how Triaire and Trinh use women to figure change and redress the superficial Orientalist images of Vietnamese women as passive and inscrutable.

Madame Huyên, the mother of Mai, represents the first generation of Vietnamese women in colonial Vietnam, and the transmission of traditional Confucian values. Like “la dernière feuille du vieux paravent” (287), she considers traditions to be an anchor for morality.

Mai, Gaby and Dân, the three female protagonists, represent the second generation of women. They choose Western values and begin to liberate themselves from the yoke of ancestral traditions, hence the title of the novel, "En s’écartant des ancêtres." All the three girls have a French education. They are first schooled in quốc ngữ and then in French. Mai first went to a Vietnamese school (where she learns “[les] caractères”12) and then (at the age of eight) to a sino-annamite school (where she learns to read, write and count in quốc ngữ). She obtains a baccalauréat and then a diploma in medicine to become the first Vietnamese woman doctor in Tonkin.13 She has not found happiness as her husband has left her.

Gaby is the wealthiest, and the most Westernized of the three. Her father is the secretary to the Résident (the governor of the province). Besides her Vietnamese name, “Son,” her father gave her a Christian name, “Gaby.” She speaks French with her father
since childhood, a sign of Gallicization. She has a brief career as a teacher. Both Mai and Gaby forego the Confucian tradition of arranged marriages and choose their own marriage partner. Later, both Mai and Gaby are divorced. Gaby represents the metaphor of the “carrefour.” She believes that it is impossible to go back to the past, and that her generation has reached a “bifurcation, charnière, carrefour”:

Nos ancêtres ont parcouru une longue route droite, toute tracée. Et voici que l’Occident a ouvert des voies nouvelles. Nous sommes au carrefour: plusieurs chemins s’offrent. On ne sait pas ce qu’ils ménagent, comment choisir? Et déjà il n’est plus possible de retourner en arrière: l’élan est donné. Nous sommes à un croisement dangereux et je suis la première écrasée. (En s’écartant des ancêtres 288)

Gaby has benefited from Westernization (she has a Western education, she chooses her partner) but at the same time she has been victimized by it—she is divorced, she is childless, she has a series of lovers (“[elle est] la première écrasée”). The two authors use Gaby to show that women are not better off (they do not find happiness) because of Westernization.

Dân is the daughter of a rich mandarin. She is educated first at l’Institution des jeunes filles, and then at l’École normale and the Lycée Albert Sarraut. Dân is the most traditional of the three women. She is married to a mandarin widower with many children, lacquers her teeth and dresses in the traditional manner in a turban and tunic over pants. Dân represents the transmission of Confucian values and traditions, through the metaphor of the “paravent” or the self-replicating screen:
Je pense qu’autrefois, la vie s’écoulait, toujours pareille, fixée par la tradition dont nul ne s’évadait. Les fils succédaient à leurs pères, ayant reçu l’éducation que ceux-ci avaient eux-mêmes reçue des aïeux et qu’ils transmettaient à leur descendance sans la modifier. Une génération disparaissait, une autre calquée sur le même modèle la remplaçait, rien ne changeait dans l’ordre immuable des choses. Imagine un paravent aux feuilles semblables; lorsqu’on plie une feuille, on en déplie une autre, soeur de la précédente. On ne prévoyait pas que rien dût un jour troubler la face de la vieille civilisation. Les mères enseignaient à leurs filles ce qu’on leur avait enseigné à elles-mêmes et tout le monde trouvait cela très bien. Il semblait que jamais cela ne dût finir; il semblait que jamais cela ne dût changer. Cela durait depuis tant de siècles! Depuis tant de siècles se dépliait le paravent, mettant au jour des feuilles identiques à celles qui disparaissaient! Et puis, l’Occident est venu chez nous, nous apportant une science dont nous n’avions aucune idée, un progrès matériel dépassant notre imagination, des mœurs totalement différentes, des idées nouvelles, des besoins nouveaux aussi, un outillage moderne, tout ce qu’on nomme: la civilisation. Eh bien, je pense que nos parents sont la dernière feuille du vieux paravent au dessin tracé d’avance. Nous sommes à la charnière….Avant, on savait; on était sûr que la nouvelle feuille allait ressembler à l’ancienne. Maintenant, nous allons vers l’inconnu.

(En s’écartant des ancêtres 286-87)

Dân laments the instability and uncertainty ("l'inconnu") brought about by the adoption of new ideas and Western values ("l'Occident," that is, "des mœurs totalement différentes, des
idées nouvelles, des besoins nouveaux aussi, un outillage moderne, tout ce qu’on nomme: la civilisation"). She believes that her parents' generation is the last to enjoy the stability brought about by the transmission of ancestral values, and hers lives in a period of transition between old and new.

The female offspring of Mai and Dân represent the third generation of women. Dào, Lan and Huê represent modernity at a more advanced stage. They take up Western dancing, swim at the beach, and don Western outfits, shorts and bathing suits. They have the right to choose their partners, careers, and religion. Lan finds love with Vinh. Faced with heartbreak (she is secretly in love with Mân who loves another girl), Dào chooses Catholicism (spiritual love). Huê finds happiness with Francis Lourdanel, a French lawyer. Despite being a student in philosophy, Huê sees herself as the object of the French gaze as she wonders how her future sister-in-law will accept “cette petite soeur jaune.” In using the term “yellow” to refer to herself, a term which has been used for centuries by colonial writers to refer to the inferior Other of the Far East, Huê is reinscribing centuries of French perceptions of the Vietnamese women in the construction of their self-image. In using adjectives such as “petite,” “frêle,” “mystérieuse,” and “indéchiffrable” to describe Huê, Francis adopts the colonial gaze and figures her as the inscrutable female Vietnamese Other:

Lorsqu’une Blanche sourit, ses yeux entrent dans le jeu autant que ses lèvres: toute sa figure est éclairée; c’est limpide. Lorsque Huê sourit, ses yeux demeurent impassibles et semblent réserver une pensée secrète. Combien de fois, déconcerté, s’est-il demandé ce que dissimulait cet indéchiffrable regard…Regard de sphinx qui garde son énigme même dans l’épanouissement du sourire. (La Réponse de l’Occident 308)
Huê is figured through Orientalist stereotypes and as diametrically opposed to the Western woman—impassive, inscrutable and mysterious ("indéchiffrable regard," "pensée secrète") as opposed to her transparent Western counterpart ("figure...éclairée"). In short, she is an "enigme" and a "sphinx."

The portrayal of interracial relations between Huê and Francis, an important theme in Vietnamese Francophone novels, reinscribes rather than deconstructs colonial notions of gender and racial difference. Huê and Francis marry. The happy union between them could be read as a metaphor for the ideal relation between Vietnam and France. After all, *En s’écartant des ancêtres* and *La Réponse de l’Occident* represent the first and only literary collaboration between a French and a Vietnamese woman.  

Are the emancipated Mai, Gaby, Dân and their daughters better off than their mothers? Have they evolved or is Westernization skin deep? The women are not models of passivity but independent emancipated women who accept changes. Despite her role as a mother to ensure the continuation of ancestral values, Madame Huyên is not a model of passivity. She insists on raising Mai in the traditional way despite the resistance of her more progressive husband. Both Mai and Gaby have careers, a modern concept. Mai has her own career as the first Vietnamese woman doctor; she is divorced and raises her children alone as a single mother. Despite being an accomplished doctor, Mai has not found happiness. Her husband leaves her for a French woman, a situation that can only arise in a colonial context. Gaby has a career as a teacher. Gaby has not found happiness. She is divorced but still lives with her husband. Disillusioned, Gaby loses herself in opium, and takes on a series of lovers. In the sequel, Gaby is briefly mentioned. Under Confucian rules, a woman is defined in relation to her father, her husband or her son. As family determines all relationships, Gaby is
a nonentity as her father has passed away, her husband is living separately from her, and she is childless. Dân, married to a mandarin widower with children, and many years her senior, is the most traditional. She has not found happiness but “une existence paisible.” Dân, however, continues to play an important role in the sequel as mother and wife. All the women have not found happiness whether they choose traditional values (Mme Huyen, Dân) or Western values (Mai, Gaby, Lan, Huê). Triaire and Trinh use women to show the evolution of the roles of women.

Although Triaire and Trinh use women to figure evolution, they also use women to figure the fate of Vietnam. The authors close *En s’écartant des ancêtres* with a feminized Vietnam represented by Gaby. She represents the French-educated Vietnamese youth of the 1920s and 1930s who has strayed too far away from traditions and is now disoriented. Disillusioned with life, she seeks refuge in opium. The last scene depicts her motionless and in a horizontal position, smoking an opium pipe and drifting into deep slumber:

Allongée sur sa natte, la tête posée sur un coussin, incapable de faire un mouvement, il sembla à la fumeuse que son esprit s’évadait de son corps inerte et insensible, qu’il flottait pareil à une algue ondulant au gré du reflux. Elle ne souffrait plus; elle ne pensait plus. Ni désirs, ni souvenirs. Submergée par un oubli total même de sa propre personnalité, elle n’était plus qu’un léger nuage se dispersant dans les profondeurs bleues du ciel, un atome perdu dans l’immensité éthérée, dissous dans l’âme universelle des choses.

Elle goûta un instant la béatitude d’être et de ne plus être, puis elle s’endormit. (444)
In their description of Gaby who seeks solace in opium, the authors reinscribe the Orientalist trope of women as a colonized nation and of Vietnam with opium. *La Réponse de l’Occident* similarly ends with a feminized Vietnam incarnated by Dào who has decided to enter the convent:

> Alors elle s’inclina, mit sur le front de Van un baiser fraternel puis elle s’éloigna sans se retourner, frêle silhouette vite estompée dans la nuit, vers la maison illuminée d’où s’échappait une rumeur de fête. (339)

While the authors redress the Orientalist trope of women as passive and immutable, they still reinscribe the Orientalist trope of women as static and inert in the last two scenes in the novels.

**Conclusion**

Triaire and Trinh use women to document and figure change, evolution and the fate of Vietnam, thus offering a corrective to the superficial Orientalist images of Vietnamese women as passive and inscrutable. In order to rescue Vietnamese customs from oblivion, Triaire and Trinh explain, defend and alter/idealize their customs, objectifying themselves in ethnographic descriptions intended for the French audience and seeing themselves through the French gaze. They overemphasize difference in an attempt to assert their specificity. In short, they are guilty of a new exoticism, i.e., reducing Vietnam to a place of temples, peculiar marriage and funeral rites, customs, and cultural activities, the very same stereotypes of Vietnam that have been circulated and repeated for centuries in colonial literature. The narratives of cultural activities written to inform the French audience of the richness of their culture and to produce information on the Vietnamese Other, are, however, different from those of the colonial writers. As Jack Yeager rightly points out in his book, *The Vietnamese
Novel in French: A Literary Response to Colonialism: “the inclusion of all the exotic detail…and the emphasis on certain customs and practices, taken together across several texts, reinforce the cultural difference and accumulate to construct an elaborate and equally valid cultural edifice that stands of necessity in opposition to French Civilization” (72). In other words, the inclusion of all the exotic detail and the emphasis on certain customs and practices is a response to the colonial attempt to assimilate the Vietnamese Other, and an example of, in the words of Gayatri Spivak, “strategic essentialism.” En s’écartant des ancêtres and La Réponse de l’Occident are, in fact, great collaborative pieces of literary work of “[la] littérature réaliste indigène de langue française” which reflects quite accurately the changing mores and the emergent feminism of Vietnam of the 1920s and 1930s.
Notes

1 Jack Yeager (1987), Nathalie Nguyen (2004) and Emily Vaughan Roberts (Diss. 2000) gave little biographical information on Marguerite Triaire and Trinh Thuc Oanh in their respective works.

2 French colonial writers who advocated Franco-Vietnamese collaboration included among others Eugène Pujarniscle, Louis Malleret, and Francisque Vial. Moderate French-educated Vietnamese who advocated Franco-Vietnamese collaboration and who were in favor of a French presence in Vietnam, included among others Pierre Do Dinh, one of the editors of the 1947 anthology on Francophone literature, Les plus beaux écrits de l’Union Française et du Maghreb; Nguyen Phan Long, a journalist and the author of Le roman de Mademoiselle Lys; and Pham Quynh, the founder of the French-sponsored newspaper, Nam Phong (1917-1934). See Malleret, Pujarniscle, Cook, and Vial.

3 Marie-Paule Ha points out that the 1924-25 educational reforms actually promoted the preservation of ancestral customs in the curriculum of the Franco-Vietnamese schools (“From ‘Nos ancêtres, les Gaulois” 113)

4 As theorized by Freud, the gaze is a phallic activity linked to the anal desire for the mastery and control of the object. In the context of Vietnamese Francophone literature, the French Orientalists are the master of what they survey, the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese as object of the gaze is cast as the passive, feminine and inferior Other. See Sigmund Freud, “The uncanny”; and Michel Foucault, “Panopticism,” in Discipline and Punish, 195-231.

5 For an analysis of Orientalist stereotypes of the Vietnamese Other, see Henri Copin, L’Indochine dans la littérature française des années vingt à 1954 and Jennifer Yee, Clichés de la femme.
In his Préface to *L’étendard vert*, Charles Régismanset, one of the early theorists of colonial literature, together with Louis Cario, classified Marguerite Triaire’s novel *L’étendard vert* (written in collaboration with Pierre Redan), a novel about the death of Bou Hamara (a pretender to the throne of Morocco), as an example of colonial literature. See Marguerite Triaire, *L’Etendard vert*, 2.

From the tenth century when Vietnam gained its independence from the Chinese to the mid-nineteenth century, Vietnamese society was divided into four classes: the Confucian scholar gentry, farmers, artisans and merchants. With French colonization, Vietnamese society was divided into three classes: bourgeoisie consisting of the landlords, capitalists, entrepreneurs, and civil servants; the peasant class (about ninety-five percent); and the proletariat. See Paul Grace.

For a documentation of cultural activities in *En s’écartant des ancêtres*, see *Le Têt* 99-107; funeral rites for Mai’s father 383-95; Mai’s betrothal 41-57; opium preparation 441-42; *La Réponse de l’Occident*, Mid-Autumn Festival 174-190, card games 169-192, and betel preparation and chewing 4-5, 8.

The most detailed documentation of *Têt* is found in the first Vietnamese prose novel in French, *Le roman de Mademoiselle Lys* (1921) by Nguyen Phan Long. The following passage shows *Têt* through the perspective of the female protagonist. The passage also reveals that the goal of the author is to inform the French reader of the different kinds of New Year cakes and the richness of his culture:

Je suis allée jeter un coup d’œil à la cuisine. Les gâteaux sortaient des chaudrons, des bassines, du four, où ils cuisaient dans la vapeur, dans l’eau, au feu. Rangés au fur et à mesure, ils débordaient des tables,

On apprêtait les pièces de résistance; bánh-tét de forme cylindrique, enveloppés dans des feuilles de bananier, ficelés de lacets de bambou, bánh-ơ bruns, saupoudrés de sésame, semblables à des crêpes de caoutchou. (26-27)

10 This combination of contradictory beliefs is known as "religious syncretism," an essential trait of the Vietnamese cultural identity. See Jack Yeager, “Préceptes de vie.”

11 An introduction on the evolution of women (the bourgeoisie, the peasant class, the proletariat) in Vietnamese society is in order since this dissertation treats the role of women. In Vietnamese society the patriarchal teachings of Confucius guide the Vietnamese woman in her thinking. According to Confucius, a woman’s role is summarized in the four words "Tam tong tu duc" meaning the Three Obediences and the Four Virtues. She is taught the Three Obediences: to her father as a girl; her husband as a wife; and her son as a widow. In sum, a woman is subordinate to men throughout her life. The Four Virtues serve as a guide for behavior for women. Historically, they are i) labor: one mastered cooking, sewing, and embroidery, but normally not reading or writing; ii) right appearance: one learned to be attractive to one’s husband but not enticing to others; iii) right speech: one was polite and
self-demeaning; and iv) right conduct: one was always loyal to one’s superiors. The Three Obediences and the Four Virtues inculcate female subordination and virtue, and guide the Vietnamese woman in her thinking (Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition* 192; Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism* 93).

If the Three Obediences and the Four Virtues guide the Vietnamese woman in her thinking, it follows that womanhood means bearing hardships and supporting her husband and male children. This is because historically in Nguyen times men spent many years of study for civil service examinations. Once the husband passed his examinations and became a mandarin, she would share in the glory. Therefore, in literature, women are often associated with patience, understanding, loyalty and devotion, self-sacrifice and tolerance. For the Vietnamese women, sex is a duty and not a right. Chastity is valued and put on a par with such masculine qualities as loyalty and righteousness. The daughter has no right to pick her spouse; her choice of spouse is negotiated for her by her parents. A woman is groomed for marriage since infancy. It is also necessary for her to have a male child to continue the family name. She is therefore expected to be pregnant as often as possible. Physical complications often weaken her health permanently. She is responsible for raising her children but fathers and paternal ancestors receive the credit for sons who score well on civil service examinations and daughters who manage to satisfy their in-laws. A daughter-in-law is supposed to bear the harsh and intolerant ways of her mother-in-law. The principle, “[L]’homme vit au dehors (en société), la femme vit dans la famille,” is responsible for the arbitrary and unequal division of work in the Vietnamese society (Mai Thi Tu et al. 38). The woman is therefore responsible for all domestic chores. As shown, the notion of male superiority is reinforced. Although the Three Obediences and the Four Virtues apply in
practice only to women of the bourgeois class, they represent the dominant ethos which women of all classes were expected to follow even if they could not apply them in their daily conduct.

In Nguyen times, women did not have the right to obtain a formal education and were barred from civil service examinations and hence, from public office. When the French came, they supported the education of women, but within a limited framework. According to a French administrator, a good young Vietnamese rural woman should know how to clean, and be kitchen-wise, proficient in sewing, and should even know how to read and write quốc ngữ.

The situation of the peasant class which constituted ninety-five percent of the population deteriorated under French colonial rule. Both French and Vietnamese collaborators took the land from the peasants and sold back or rented it to them for cash. The Three Obediences and the Four Virtues still applied to peasant women but were never observed by the peasant class. However, the position of peasant women was higher than that of the women of the bourgeois class. Since peasant women worked in the fields and alongside their husbands, they were independent economically and therefore enjoyed an egalitarian relationship with men. Besides their work in the fields, they also practiced manufacturing and handicraft work. During the French colonial period French economic policies and monopolies took jobs away from women. Peasant women thus became dependent on men for their survival, which dealt a severe blow to the equality of men and women. Peasant women often resorted to working as servants for landlords’ families or as concubines. Polygamy, which was finally abolished in 1960, had been practiced by members of the ruling class during the Nguyen period, but it became more widespread during the colonial period, and it even reached into the ranks of the rich peasants (Grace 10).
The situation of proletarian women, those who worked on plantations, in factories, and in mines, deteriorated under colonial rule. These women worked long hours, and received starvation wages. They were raped by their superiors, and many became pregnant. Even pregnant women about to deliver were forced to work. If they made their grievances known to their superiors, they were put in prison. The conditions were so terrible on the plantations that the workers called the plantations “hell on earth” and “slaughterhouses” (Grace 47). It came as no surprise that peasant and proletarian women were at the forefront of the struggle for independence.

During the years of decolonization, the First Indochina War and the Vietnam War, women from all classes, especially the peasant women, occupied myriad roles as transporters of food, medicine, and ammunition, and as nurses, couriers, and surrogate mothers to young guerillas, as VC girls in sabotage, ambush and liaison work, and as bar girls. Most of the work was still “women’s work,” i.e., their role was to aid their men in the fight for independence. During the First Indochina War, a small minority of women actually actively participated in combat, mostly as guerillas. During the Vietnam War, most of the women who were active in combat served in local and regional forces rather than in the national forces. After the war, Vietnamese women were honored not as soldiers but as “Heroic Mothers,” a title created by the Vietnamese government in 1994 and given to women who have lost their children in the Vietnam War (Kyouraku "Gender in War: The Case of the Vietnam War and 'Vietnamese Heroic Mother” 11-14).

The advent of Communism since 1954 has dismantled the structure of the family, the foundation of Confucianism. Women now work inside as well as outside the home. They occupy triple roles as mothers, wives and salaried employees. Students are taught
patriotism and love of revolutionary heroes instead of the concept of filial piety. The right to vote was granted to Vietnamese women in 1946. The Marriage Decree 97 of May 1950, which treats matters of the family, gives married women the same legal rights as men, and states “la pleine capacité juridique de la femme mariée” as well as “l’égalité entre le mari et la femme dans la famille” (Mai Thu Vân 250). In theory, these new laws render obsolete the Three Obediences and the Four Virtues especially in the urban areas. In the current Socialist Republic of Vietnam women have the right to divorce and live in a monogamous marriage. Today, women have equality but are still not equal.


12 “Les caractères” refers to the Chinese characters.

13 According to Paul Grace, in 1930 there were only 26 women out of a total of 193 medical students and three women out of 49 students in the teacher’s college (15).

14 According to Paul Grace bourgeoisie women spoke French with their husbands and children (16).

15 In her dissertation Emily Vaughan Roberts analyses the metaphors of the “carrefour” and the “paravent” in *En s’écartant des ancêtres* and *La réponse de l’Occident* (103-155).

16 The other literary collaboration between a Frenchman and a Vietnamese man,
Albert de Teneuille and Truong Dinh Tri is the 1930 novel, *Bà-Dam.*
Chapter 2


This chapter treats Ly Thu Ho, the only Vietnamese Francophone woman writer from the period spanning 1954 to 1975. Unlike her Vietnamese Francophone contemporaries who avoided the Indochina Wars and treated less controversial themes—cultural conflict, exile, alienation such as Jean Hougron, Pham Van Ky, Pham Duy Khiem, and Nguyen Huu Chau,¹ Ly Thu Ho was not afraid to document the effects caused by more than three decades of war on the South Vietnamese during the turbulent years between the 1930s and 1970s.

Little is known about the life of Ly Thu Ho. She was born in 1920 in South Vietnam, and received a French education at the *Collège Indigène* in Saigon.² In 1956, she moved to Paris where she settled and lived till her death in 1989.³ She returned to Vietnam frequently, and was able to witness some of the events described in her work. She is the author of the trilogy—*Printemps inachevé* (1962), *Au milieu du carrefour* (1969), and *Le Mirage de la paix* (1986). In 1987, she won the *Prix littéraire de l’Asie* from the *Association des écrivains de langue française* for *Le Mirage de la paix*. In this chapter, my goal is twofold. First, I argue that in her three novels Ly Thu Ho aims to provide a corrective to the tendentious accounts of the wars and to the often negative Orientalist stereotypes about the Vietnamese propagated by Western media, and offer the French reader a faithful mirror of the South Vietnamese society between 1930s and 1970s. Secondly, I examine the construction of women in her novels and contend that her goal is to redress the Orientalist images of women during the Indochina Wars as silent, passive, and oversexualized, and as female soldiers in order to forge knowledge about the Other.
To what extent does she redress the commonly received ideas about the Indochina Wars propagated by Western media in her trilogy? Does she orientalize the Vietnamese women in her works? These are some of the questions raised in this chapter.

Covering Vietnam: Ly Thu Ho, a South Vietnamese woman of French expression, writes back

Ly Thu Ho aims to document changes caused by the wars—the Second World War (1939-1945), the Indochina War (1945-1954), and the Vietnam War (1954-1975)—on the South Vietnamese with exactitude. Her goal is to redress the stereotypical construction of the Indochina Wars propagated in Western, that is, American and French media and literature.

Orientalism as “a ‘Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient’” (Said, Orientalism 3) manifests itself on the political as well as the discursive level. As a body of knowledge about the Orient produced by and for the Occident, Orientalism influences traditional and contemporary Orientalists alike such as linguists, missionaries, explorers, statesmen, policy makers, administrators, and intellectuals (44-49, 322). In the previous chapter I have shown that since the seventeenth century, Vietnam has been the object of knowledge of French missionaries, traders, explorers, soldiers, scientists, journalists, colonial administrators, and novelists. This body of knowledge, which has been used to figure and codify Vietnam by France and for a France that had overlooked indigenous Vietnamese sources influenced the way France viewed Vietnam, encouraged and legitimized military action against it, and finally governed it. In Writing Diaspora, Rey Chow points out that Orientalism as ideological domination is still felt in everyday culture and value (7-8). Contemporary Orientalists such as statesmen and policy makers are not that
different from their predecessors in the treatment of the Orient. He points out that traditional Orientalists, mostly British and French, and contemporary Orientalists, mostly French and Americans, alike divide the world into two unequal halves, the Occident and the Orient: the “advanced” nations and the “backward” nations; the developed West and the developing world; the United States and the Third World (which, according to Said, includes China, Indochina, the Near East, Africa, and Latin America) (46). Insofar as the Vietnamese do not have the same values as the peoples of the developed world, statesmen and military strategists feel that “the United States can deal less problematically with the industrial, developed West than it can with the developing world [Vietnam]” (46). In the 1974 documentary, *Hearts and Minds*, an indictment of American brutal war-making in the Vietnam War, William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam known for his search-and-destroy tactics, repeats in his interview with his director, Peter Davis, the Orientalist thesis that the "Orientals" do not have the same regard for life as the Westerners, “Well, the Oriental does not put the same high value on human life as does the Westerner. Life is plentiful; life is cheap in the Orient; and as the philosophy of the Orient expresses it, life is not important.” In the same documentary, George Thomas Coker, a United States Navy aviator held as a prisoner of war by the North Vietnamese for six and a half years, espouses the same Orientalist thesis that the "Orientals" are inherently backwards and incompetent in his response to a student’s question about Vietnam at a school assembly, “If it wasn’t [sic] for the people, it was very pretty. The people there are very backwards and primitive and they make a mess out of everything.” Contemporary Orientalists such as Westmoreland and Coker espouse the same Oriental thesis as traditional Orientalists which is that of viewing Vietnam as part of the Third World, and therefore weaker, backward, and
“not quite as human” as the stronger and more developed U.S. This thesis promotes the difference between the developed West and the developing and backward Vietnam, and legitimizes American policies in Vietnam.

In 1945, North Vietnam fell under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh and became part of the simplistic dichotomies of the Cold war rhetoric: developed, non-Communist “us” against Third World, Communist “them.” In the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, statesmen such as Pierre Mendès France, Charles de Gaulle, John Foster Dulles, Winston Churchill, F. D. Roosevelt, H. S. Truman, D. Eisenhower, J. F. Kennedy, L. B. Johnson, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Henry Kissinger, military strategists such as General Navarre, General de Castries, General de Lattre, William Westmoreland, and Robert McNamara, and intellectuals such as Townsend Hoopes, Richard Goodwin, Daniel Ellsberg, Randolph Bourne, David Halberstam, Noam Chomksy, Walter Lippmann, and the New York intellectuals\(^5\) investigated, accumulated, and analyzed information on and published their reactions to the events of Vietnam (the sending of military advisers, the escalation of troops, the Têt Offensive, etc.) that shaped policies regarding Vietnam. During the last two years of the Indochina War, known as “la sale guerre” or “la guerre impopulaire” in France, American policy makers heavily influenced French policy in Vietnam. The Americans were involved in military training, advisory programs and covert manipulations of the internal political affairs of Vietnam. By the end of the First Indochina War in 1954, the United States was paying for more than 80% of France’s military operations.\(^6\) The need to contain Vietnam and the Communist threat continued and culminated in the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident and the Tonkin resolution authorizing presidential use of American forces in Vietnam, and finally full-scale military operations in 1965. In short, knowledge of Vietnam produced by and for
the French and Americans influenced policy making in the management of the so-called Vietnam problem, and gave rise to the power which legitimized French pacification of Tonkin in the late 1890s, French colonization and reconquest in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, direct American military intervention in 1965, and the management of the internal affairs of Vietnam in the 1960s.

Orientalism as a Western discourse through which Vietnam is constructed not only manifests itself on the political but also on the discursive level itself. In his 1979 book *The Question of Palestine*, Said shows that Western media distort and disseminate images of the Palestinians that end up reified as negative stereotypes—a “monster poised to threaten the entire world,” and a race associated with terrorism, genocide, anti-Semitism (230-31)—repeated in literature, movies, and news which are in turn used to justify the control and containment of the Palestinians. Said is right to point out that “[w]hat is…worse…is the hypocrisy of Western (and certainly liberal Zionist) journalism and intellectual discourse, which have barely had anything to say about Zionist terror” (x). He adds, “Could anything be less honest than the rhetoric of outrage used in reporting ‘Arab’ terror against ‘Israeli civilians’ or ‘towns’ and ‘villages’ or ‘schoolchildren,’ and the rhetoric of neutrality employed to describe ‘Israeli’ attacks against ‘Palestinian positions’…?” (x). In his 1981 book *Covering Islam*, Said shows how negative Orientalist stereotypes of Islam in the Western media operate to justify the control and containment of the Arab lands. Similarly, Nguyen Tran Huan, the author of the preface to *Au milieu du carrefour*, points out that Western media distort images of Vietnam and the Vietnamese. In addition, he argues that Western media produce a reductive picture of the Vietnamese:

[En] France, terre de liberté où l’on a encore l’heureux privilège de lire
Jean-Paul Sartre\textsuperscript{8} criticizes the predominantly anti-Communist viewpoint and the conflation of the terms “Viet Cong” and “Vietnamese” in the Western media. A glance at the articles on the Vietnam War in the French and American media\textsuperscript{9} confirms Sartre’s criticism and reveals the confusion between the groups, “les Nord-Vietnamiens,” “le F.N.L.,” and “les Vietcongs.”\textsuperscript{10} The three terms are used interchangeably.\textsuperscript{11} The confusion is symptomatic of the pattern of misrepresentation of the Indochina Wars in print and electronic media.

The conceptual feminization of the Orient and the Orientals or the Western style for authorizing views of the Vietnamese Other also takes place in French\textsuperscript{12} and American\textsuperscript{13} literature and cinema. In their memoirs, fiction, and filmic representations of the war, French journalists, novelists, military commanders, parachutists, military doctors, nurses and prisoners often present the Vietnamese either as legionnaires fighting alongside the French against the Viet Minh or as the enemy, that is Viet Minh guerillas; and Vietnam as an outpost defended by a handful of French legionnaires (Stora 32). In their memoirs, speeches, fiction, and filmic representations, American statesmen, intellectuals, and novelists often present the Vietnamese and Vietnam through repeatedly negative Orientalist stereotypes: "Asian boys" (Schlesinger 28-29), “the weaker neighbors” (Schlesinger 71), “underdeveloped”
(Schlesinger 72), “unpredictable” (Schlesinger 72), “alien, mysterious, impenetrable” (Schlesinger 78), “Oriental multitudes” (Goodwin 355), and “Vietnamese guerillas” (Martin 99). Benjamin Stora, a French historian who shows how French, American, and Vietnamese television, cinema, documentaries, novels, journals, photographs and footage construct the cultural imaginary of the Vietnam and Algerian Wars in his 1997 book *Imaginaires de guerre: Algérie—Viêt-nam, en France et aux Etats-Unis* rightly points out that the Vietnamese are themselves absent from the American Vietnam War films except as a faceless enemy or snipers (217-18). In both French and American literature and film, Vietnamese women, if present, usually play a minor and negative role. The negative representations attest to the Western need to strategically contain and control Vietnam on the discursive level.

It is within this context that I read Ly Thu Ho’s trilogy. Ly Thu Ho, “une intellectuelle non-engagée” (*Au milieu du carrefour* 8) is writing against the Western perception of Vietnam. In short, she is writing against the West’s desire to contain Vietnam militarily and discursively. An examination of the plots of the three novels is useful here: it shows that Ly Thu Ho’s goal is to offer the French reader a corrective to the tendentious accounts of the wars and to provide information on Vietnam between the 1930s and 1970s. Ly Thu Ho uses discussions and anecdotes as a narrative pretext to present opposing perspectives on the events. Since it is impossible to list all the episodes in the novel, I have chosen to present key episodes that best exemplify Ly Thu Ho’s goal of offering a corrective to “[l]es mythes et [l]es images d’Epinal n’ayant souvent que fort peu de rapports avec la réalité” (7).
Set in South Vietnam, Ly Thu Ho’s first novel, *Printemps inachevé* (1962), recounts the story of Tran, a South Vietnamese girl, between the 1930s and 1950s. In the novel Ly Thu Ho documents the tragic consequences of the Second World War, French reconquest, the anti-French resistance and war of liberation, and the 1954 Geneva Accords on the South Vietnamese. As the goal of the Vietnamese Francophone writers is to affirm their cultural difference, she also documents the customs of the period. The novel consists of three parts. The first and third are third-person narratives while the second is a first-person narrative. The first traces the upbringing of Tran and her siblings. The second and main part traces Tran’s engagement to Châu, a young Vietnamese man who is fighting with the anti-French resistance fighters, her separation from Châu and her subsequent rape at the hands of a French soldier. The last part traces the aftermath of the traumatic events.

The first part spans the years between 1934 and 1948. Tran’s family consists of her father, M. Thai; her mother, Mme. Thai; her older brother, Ba; her older sister, Tuoi; and herself. In addition, this circle includes Dung, a close childhood friend of Tuoi. This part begins with the relatively uneventful period of Tran, Tuoi and Ba’s life in the 1930s. As descriptions of customs are *de rigueur* in Vietnamese Francophone novels, the omniscient narrator documents the preparations of the Thai family for the departure of Ong Tao (Kitchen God), the festival of Têt and the funeral of a rich Vietnamese. On the day of the departure of Ong Tao, the family bribes him with offerings of “chè” (a traditional sweet dessert) and fruits, hoping that he will write a favorable report on the family’s behavior. The narrator informs the reader that preparations for Têt begin a month in advance, including the thorough cleaning of the ancestral altar and the house, baking and cooking. The family observes the cult of the ancestors and places offerings to them on the altar; on the first day
of Têt, children put on their new clothes, receive red envelopes with money, and set off firecrackers; during Têt, sweeping is not allowed as the Vietnamese believe that by sweeping, one chases away fortune, and visitors who are in financial difficulties, mourning, expecting or have names that signify poverty, sickness or widowhood are not welcome on the first day. The episode of the funeral of M. Bao, a close friend of Tuoi and Dung’s families, gives Ly Thu Ho the opportunity to produce information on the funeral customs of Vietnam. The narrator correctly points out that given the relatively wealthy background of the deceased, “l’enterrement était aussi une occasion de fête” (25). The narrator describes the elaborate funeral procession consisting of three cars, the last one carrying the deceased in his expensive coffin made out of precious wood and painted in red and gold; an orchestra playing music which sounds discordant to the French ears. This reflection reveals that the narrator views her own race as the French's other. The family of the deceased is dressed in white tunics and turbans and follows the procession on foot to the burial ground. These episodes allow Ly Thu Ho to show that Vietnam is not “a tiny backward nation” and the Vietnamese are not backward “Oriental multitudes.”

In 1935, both Tuoi and Dung receive their teaching diplomas. In 1936, the peaceful life of Tran’s family comes to an end. M. Thai passes away. Tuoi finds work as a secretary for an export/import company where she meets her future husband, André, a Eurasian. Dung finds a job at a French pharmacy in Saigon. Ba is thinking about going into the trucking business. Tran abandons her studies, and takes up embroidery in order to help her mother. Vietnam enters into the Second World War and comes under Japanese occupation in 1941. In May 1944, Saigon is bombed for the first time. There is a rise in the cost of living and a shortage of everything; families are displaced. In August 1945, the Viet Minh seize power
and declare Vietnam’s independence. Dung has to evacuate from town to town. This part ends in 1948, when Tuoi runs into Dung and recounts to her friend the misfortunes that have befallen her. Tran has apparently kept a diary detailing her life. Tuoi hands over Tran’s diary to Dung.

Tran’s diary, read by Dung and Tuoi, offers more details on the life of Tran and consists of a series of letters between Tran and Châu from 1945 to 1947. In her diary, the first person-narrator, Tran, documents the French reconquest and the war of liberation. She also records her visit to a Buddhist pagoda. This episode gives Ly Thu Ho the opportunity to tell the French reader about the differences between the lifestyle of a Catholic and that of a Buddhist. Tran, her mother and her brother are Buddhists whereas her sister, her brother-in-law, and their two children are Catholics. Through their discussions, the reader learns that Tran eats a vegetarian meal when she goes to the pagoda. She tells André, thus the reader, that like the Catholics, Buddhists fast but on the first and the fifteenth day of the lunar calendar. They are required to wear a special black or dark brown loose-fitting tunic and wash their faces and rinse their mouths before participating in a Buddhist ceremony. She tells André what a Buddhist pagoda looks like: a building consisting of different rooms—the ordination hall with giant statues of Buddha and other divinities, the dining halls with tables for monks on one side and nuns on the other, and the dormitories. She tells André that there are three categories of Buddhists: those who want to dedicate their lives to the faith; those who are old, sick, or have lived through tragedies and want to live a life of contemplation; and the lovelorn. This episode allows Ly Thu Ho to forge information on the lifestyle of followers of Buddhism.
In the episode on April 1945, Tran records her meeting with Châu, a young and wealthy Vietnamese man, and her subsequent engagement to him. Besides providing information on the central characters, this episode gives Ly Thu Ho the opportunity to produce information on the betrothal customs. Tran and her mother seek a fortune teller to choose a date for the ceremony. Tran confides to the diary that it is the tradition for a Vietnamese couple to choose another couple in a stable marriage, preferably with numerous children, to perform the candle ceremony, and for the fiancé’s family to bring gifts such as tea, wine, betel and areca nuts to the fiancée’s family.

Tran recounts Châu’s decision to leave her and join the anti-French resistance in the South and discusses numerous political changes. From July 1940 to March 1945, Vietnam was under Japanese occupation. In August 1945, Japan surrendered to the Allied forces and Vietnam came under Allied occupation: British and French in the south, and Chinese in the north. She documents armed patrols, their distrust of one another, the displacement of families, and the proclamation of the independence of Vietnam by Ho Chi Minh during the confusion and power struggle in August 1945. Tran records a conversation between the nationalists—Châu, Ba, and M. Phan—and herself about September 1945. The men recount a gunfire exchange at a parade. They are unsure of the origins of the perpetrators and suspect that the exchange could have been orchestrated by either “des colonialistes,” French colonialists who believe in maintaining Vietnam under some kind of French trusteeship; “des fanatiques,” extremists who believe in using violence and avoiding negotiations; or “des agents policiers étrangers,” British, French or Chinese police. By foregrounding the impossibility of ascertaining the origins of the violent encounter, Ly Thu Ho underscores the
confusing political situation, and offers a corrective to the limited representation of the war by the Western media.

In the episode on January 1946, Tran documents the political events of the period of transition between 1945 and 1946 and the competing alliances. Châu explains to Tran, hence the reader that after the Japanese relinquish control over Vietnam, the Allies and the French start their reconquest of Vietnam, and the war of liberation against the French begins. Contrary to the reductive presentation in the Western media of the resistance movement as limited only to the Viet Minh forces, Châu informs Tran that the movement is a complex one and consists of various nationalist groups—political parties and religious movements, soon to become unified under the nationalist umbrella of the Viet Minh:

> Comme partout ailleurs le mouvement nationaliste ‘Jeunesse d’avant-garde’ prit le pouvoir. A part une minorité affiliée à divers autres partis politiques ou sectes religieuses, tout le monde, depuis l’intellectuel jusqu’au coolie-pousse faisait parti du mouvement nationaliste....Peu après, l’autorité Vietminh se substitua au mouvement nationaliste et coiffa tous les organismes de résistance.

(115-16)

Châu explains that as soon as the Viet Minh seized power, they carried out a campaign of terror (“l’épuration”) to eliminate their enemies. Many victims of the Viet Minh aligned themselves with the French, transforming Vietnam into a nation with many different alliances. The already starving peasant class is forced to share their produce with the French and the Viet Minh and fight for them.
The episode on November 1946 in which Châu is saved by Bong is an uplifting one. Bong is a Japanese officer, a member of one of the former ruling powers. He is now a resistance fighter, fighting on the side of the South Vietnamese for the liberation of the south. He has given up his life to save a South Vietnamese. This episode shows that despite the enmity between the different warring camps, heroism and selflessness is still alive.

In the episode on November 1946, Tran records in her diary a conversation between Ba, her brother; Buu-Tâm, now a Buddhist monk; and herself. Buu-Tâm and Ba’s life reflects the politics of the period. Buu-Tâm relates that after having been caught in a confrontation between the Vietnamese and the French police, he ends up in a French jail, and consequently, he loses his scholarship and future administrative positions and ends up on a plantation. There, he meets a Northerner who explains to him the Communist goal of restructuring the society through a revolution led by the peasants against their bosses. A week later, anti-French pamphlets are found in Buu-Tâm’s possession leading to his arrest and his imprisonment at Poulo Condor. Tran also recounts the unfortunate fate of her brother. He has his truck burnt and his merchandise confiscated by the Viet Minh. Later, he is forced to enter a reeducation program. To make matters worse, he is arrested shortly after by the French for suspicion of collaboration with the Viet Minh. Tran’s accounts of the plight of Buu-Tâm and Ba—their victimization by both the French and the Viet Minh—are a welcome change from the partisan anti-Communist or anti-French viewpoint propagated by the Western media.

The third part of the novel spans the years from 1947 to 1955 and ends tragically. Tuoi’s husband, André, is killed in a gunfire exchange near his home in 1946. The perpetrators are unknown which shows the complex political situation. Tuoi’s mother has
passed away. Ba has been hospitalized for tuberculosis. Tran has been raped by a French foreign legionnaire, and she decides to break off her engagement to Châu. Tran is now a nun and working in a hospital in Saigon. Châu learns of Tran’s fate through Tuoi, and comes to take her back. Tran feels she is unworthy of his love, and refuses his offer.

In 1954, the Geneva Accords divided Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel into two zones, with the communist north and the non-communist south. Through a conversation between Tuê, a former resistant fighter and Ba, the omniscient narrator informs the reader about life under the communists. By proposing viewpoints of the members in Tuê’s family, Ly Thu Ho educates the reader about the socialist transformation of the familial structure: children denounce their parents for the good of the country and give lessons on patriotism to their grandparents and great grandparents.

The novel ends with the death of Tran. She has herself transferred to a leper colony and dies a year later in 1955. Tuoi decides to leave for France with her two métis children as a repatriate. Just as Tran’s life is cut short at its zenith, Vietnam’s dream of independence is crushed with the French reoccupation and the impending American incursion. This young Vietnamese woman thus becomes the figure for the fate of Vietnam and gives the title to the novel, *Printemps inachevé*: “la vie de Tran était comme une rose dont la tige s’est rompue au moment de son éclosion, comme une aube à peine dorée, souillée par le mauvais temps, comme un printemps inachevé” (205).

Set in the 1960s in South Vietnam, Ly Thu Ho’s second novel, *Au milieu du Carrefour*, is a third-person narrative and relates the story of Mlle Lang, a young South Vietnamese woman. The novel shows the tragic consequences of the civil war between the north and the south that has been going on for twenty years and the American intervention in
South Vietnam. The story begins in Tân-Binh, a village a few hours from Saigon in 1965. American air raids and defoliants have destroyed the forests. Plantation owners including Lang’s family have cleared the trees surrounding their homes for fear of harboring Viet Cong guerillas. Lang has seven siblings, most of whom are deceased. The surviving members are her two sisters, Mme Sang and Mme Tam, and a brother, Danh, a commander in the South Vietnamese Air Force. Lang’s feelings for the communists are unfavorable. This is not surprising as she has lost a brother to the Viet Minh during the war of liberation and another to the Viet Cong. Her aunt, Tante Ba, has lost family members to both camps—the Viet Cong and the South Vietnamese army. Tante Ba’s situation represents the fratricidal nature of the war which pitted brothers against brothers, Northerners against Southerners and communists against nationalists. Besides the loss of loved ones, the consequences of the war could be felt in the rise of the cost of living, the constant sound of bombings, and the difficulty in traveling. Lang meets Vân, a medical doctor. They fall in love. After three months together, he decides to postpone their marriage, and join the opposing camp, the National Liberation Front (NLF).²⁴

Lang questions Vân about his reasons for joining the NLF who has taken the lives of members of both their families.²⁵ Vân explains that like all wars, the war of liberation which began in 1945 is a complex one, and has taken lives of members of both camps. He wishes to study the motivations of the “hommes du maquis” and the role of the peasant class in the war of liberation and to care for the wounded.

During her separation from Vân, Lang moves in with her sister, Mme Tam, in Saigon. She teaches herself about the politics and the realities of the country. She visits Camp Quang-Trung, a military base where soldiers are trained to fight a guerilla war against
the Viet Cong. After the partition in 1954, many refugees fled from the north to the south. Lang’s sister’s neighbor’s son is one of these refugee soldiers undergoing training at the camp. His family has lived through the hardships of the communist regime. Now the soldier wants to fight against the Viet Cong till his last breath. To balance this account of extremism in the South Vietnamese army, Ly Thu Ho presents an anecdote by Vân in which he relates an incident between himself and a Viet Cong who harbors a morbid hatred for the South Vietnamese soldiers and is willing to go to great lengths to kill the South Vietnamese and even the wounded prisoners. Ly Thu Ho uses this anecdote to show that extremism is not limited to any particular camp and to counter the limited image of the Vietnamese soldiers.

Lang accompanies Xinh to the shanty towns on the outskirts of Saigon which have mushroomed from the exodus of the Northerners into the south after the partition of the country. This episode allows Ly Thu Ho to discuss the changes since the American incursion. Lang witnesses the numerous restaurants and bars for GIs that have sprung up. She visits Mme Thuy’s bar. Mme Thuy defends the situation of the bar girls and their line of work, stating that they are not all “des filles perdues” nor “des poupées de plaisir des G.Is” and that they are in this profession for economic reasons.

Lang is invited to a dinner held in honor of her grand nephew’s first birthday. The goal of this long episode is to provide information on birthday customs in Vietnam as well as the political situation of the country. On the child’s first birthday he is asked to choose one object from a tray with a variety of objects such as a book, a brush holder, a mirror, etc. The object of choice indicates his future. If the child chooses a book, he will probably be an intellectual; if he chooses a mirror, he will be a coquette; if he chooses a brush holder, he will be a scholar.
At the birthday dinner, the women discuss the economic situation and the men inform the women on the politics of the country. Major Danh, Lang’s brother, presents the viewpoint of the South Vietnamese army and criticizes the NLF for using cases of corruption to discredit the South Vietnamese government and demoralize the population. He also denounces their recruiting methods and their manner of waging war. He informs his guests, thus the reader that the NLF recruit girls and boys as young as fourteen years of age and use them as human shields, as well as men and women to perform all kinds of sabotage activities. To present the opposing viewpoint, Ly Thu Ho uses the character of M. Sang, a professor, to explain the reasons for the American escalation of the war. He informs Major Danh, thus the reader that the Americans entered the war at the request of the South Vietnamese government and as a response to North Vietnamese aggression. According to the professor, the Americans do not consider the Vietnamese as their enemy but a domino in a worldwide conflict between two ideological blocs—communism and capitalism. The professor informs his guests that unfortunately the South Vietnamese government is too divided to declare peace and the decision to stop or continue the war is in the hands of the Americans. Lang pleads for peace.

The last key episode is a dinner reunion for the young couple, Lang and Vân, at Vân’s uncle and aunt’s home.28 The author’s goal in this episode is to offer a history of the war from 1945 to 1966. After seven months with the NLF, Vân gives an account of his service. He praises the courage, spirit of sacrifice, endurance and discipline of the NLF soldiers while criticizing them for denying their communist affiliations and using American funds for the ruling elite instead of the populace. Vân believes that the peasants do not side with either the communists or the nationalists but are interested in seeing the establishment of
a more equitable system. Vân explains that the peasants have given their support to the NLF because they have been forced by the Ngo Dinh Diem government to pay for the land that has been given to them by the Viet Minh during the First Indochina War. M. Quan, Vân’s uncle, a former resistant fighter, and Vân conclude that the fight against the NLF is going to be a tough one for the South Vietnamese and hope for peace negotiations.

Ly Thu Ho closes the novel with two life-affirming stories. The first one is that of John, the fiancé of Xinh. He saves the baby of a Viet Cong woman killed by the Americans. The second is the story of the two wounded soldiers—Cang, a Viet Cong, and Eddy, an American prisoner. As Vân can only take one person with him, Cang decides to take his life so that Eddy could be evacuated to the nearest American military base. With this heroic act Ly Thu Ho blur s the boundaries between the two ideological camps and shows the absurdity of the fratricidal war. Ly Thu Ho closes the novel with three Vietnamese—Vân, Lang and a baby representing a resolute Vietnam—marching towards a better future:

Et dans le silence matinal le jour naissait avec ses premières lueurs dorées. Sur le sentier désert, trois silhouettes dont l’une portrait un enfant, s’entrainant pour se déplacer, s’avançaient vers la grande route. Leur demarche était lente mais résolue; leur visage mal débarbouillé trahissait la fatigue; mais dans leurs yeux brillait un intense espoir, l’espoir d’un lendemain tout proche où cette terrible image de guerre ne leur serait plus qu’un mauvais souvenir. (208-09)

Ly Thu Ho uses the verbs “naissait” and “s’avançaient,” and the adjectives “matinal,” and “résolue” to symbolize optimism and hope for a better future for Vietnam.
After seven months with the NLF, Văn eventually returns and marries Lang. In light of the growing number of casualties on both sides, Văn argues for peace negotiations and a ceasefire. By asking for peace negotiations which will end the fratricidal civil war, Ly Thu Ho is writing against the containment of Vietnam by the world powers, China, and the U.S. on the military and discursive level. On March 31 1968 U.S. President Lyndon Johnson ordered the de-escalation of Vietnam and the beginning of peace negotiations.

Set in the period of 1970 to 1975 in South Vietnam, Ly Tho’s last novel, *Le Mirage de la paix*, is a third-person narrative that relates the story of Thu-Thuy, a refugee from the north, and Ngoc-Suong, the daughter of a South Vietnamese plantation owner. The novel shows the tragic consequences of the final phase of the Vietnam War, the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, the fall of Saigon to the communists in 1975, and the reunification on a South Vietnamese family. The characters of the Tran Huu-Phuoc household are Huu-Phuoc, the wealthy patriarch; the sons, Huu-Loc, Huu-Ngân, and Huu-Tho; the daughters, Mme Thêm, Ngoc-Suong; Bac-Thanh, the overseer; Ba-Sau, the nanny; Ba-Sau’s son, Pham; and an employee on the plantation, Manh. In *Le Mirage de la paix* it is again through anecdotes and political discussions that Ly Thu Ho informs the reader of the complex historical events of the period. In the first part of the novel, the first key episode takes place in the Central Highlands in the spring of 1970. The omniscient narrator introduces the male characters, and depicts skirmishes between the South Vietnamese soldiers and the Viet Cong. Through the conversations between the South Vietnamese soldiers and the montagnards, the narrator informs the reader that the montagnards, indigenous people of the Central Highlands, are exploited by all the groups involved in the war. They are assigned a minor position by the South Vietnamese government and often not offered enough protection from the Viet Cong;
they are bribed by the Americans with economic aid to fight for them; and they are persuaded by the Viet Cong to fight on their side, and dissuaded from joining the South Vietnamese Army. As the story takes place in post-1954 Vietnam, there is less of a need for Ly Thu Ho to affirm her cultural difference. As a result, Vietnamese customs are more closely woven into the plot. For example, the narrator gives a simple description of the celebration of the Feast of the Wandering Souls: the South Vietnamese soldiers make offerings of food and fruits to the souls of the forgotten dead. This episode ends with an ambush launched by the South Vietnamese against the Viet Cong during which Huu-Loc and Duy-Cau are wounded and Muon-Sui is killed.

The second part takes place on the home front at Tran Huu-Phuoc’s tea plantation in South Vietnam. The narrator introduces the central characters—Thu-Thuy, Huu-Loc, Ngoc-Suong and Duy-Cau. Thu-Thuy is a girl of humble origins. She finds work as a manager on the plantation. She meets Huu-Loc, a captain in the South Vietnamese army, falls instantly in love with him, and becomes part of the Huu-Phuoc family. Ngoc-Suong is the daughter of the plantation owner and a student at the Couvent des Oiseaux in Dalat and her lover is Duy-Cau, the son of the estate manager. Thu-Thuy and Ngoc-Suong become friends and represent female bonding.

In the third part, Thu-Thuy marries Huu-Loc and Ngoc-Suong becomes engaged to Duy-Cau while in the fourth, characters from the two previous novels reappear, giving a sense of unity to the trilogy: Châu is now a teacher and an agent for the NLF; Vân is now a military physician and married to Lang; Buu-Tâm is still a Buddhist monk, and a close friend of the patriarch; and Huu-Phuoc is now offering shelter to the orphans, the homeless,
and the refugees of the war. The section closes with the marriage of Huu-Loc and Thu-Thuy and the engagement of Duy-Cau and Ngoc-Suong in 1972.

A key episode in the fourth part is the conversation between the men at the dinner honoring the death of the patriarch, Huu-Phuoc. This discussion takes place just before the imminent fall of Saigon to the communists in April 1975. As before, Ly Thu Ho's apparent goal is to present the current political situation from different perspectives. She uses Châu, the principal male character from Prîntemps inachevé, nephew of Buu-Tâm, and now a volunteer for the North Vietnamese government, to present the viewpoint of the communists. He believes in the inevitable victory of the North Vietnamese despite the firm resolve of the South Vietnamese to defend their land. He argues for an end to the war between the North and South Vietnamese that has lasted for more than twenty-five years and for national sovereignty. The author uses Huu-Loc to present the viewpoint of the South Vietnamese soldiers. He believes in continuing the war against the North Vietnamese. He envisions a bleak future for Vietnam and explains to his dinner guests (and the reader) that liberation of the south, for the North Vietnamese, means annexation of the south by force, and that reunification means the installation of a totalitarian communist government, followed by executions, concentration camps, and displacement of families. Like most South Vietnamese soldiers, he wants the south to be a separate state free from communism. To present a more moderate view, the author uses Vân, the principal character from Au milieu du Carrefour “enthouiaste mais prudent.” He is enthusiastic about the reunification but skeptical of the claims of the communist government in granting real freedom to the South Vietnamese. To present the view of the majority of the South Vietnamese population, the author uses Bac-Thanh, “sage et résigné.” He is a refugee from the north, admits that the
fall of the south is inevitable and wants to know how the communist regime is going to
reconstruct the country after the reunification. The author casts the Buddhist monk Buu-Tâm to present the view of the Buddhists. He believes that changes are inevitable and prays
that peace will come to Vietnam. Ly Thu Ho uses the discussions to inform the reader that
all the men, and the South Vietnamese, have one thing in common: their desire to stay in
Vietnam and see "un lendemain plus clément" with peace returning to Vietnam.

At the end of the novel, the North Vietnamese do not respect the Paris Peace Accords
and in 1975, Saigon fell to the communists, giving the title to the novel, Le Mirage de la
paix. The communist state has taken over Huu-Phuoc’s plantation, cars and furniture, and
the family is reduced to a few survivors. Most of the men are deceased—at the front lines
(Huu-Loc, Muon-Sui, Muon-Sui’s grandson, Binh), from old age (Ba-Sau, Huu-Phuoc, Buu-
Tam), and some are learning communist doctrine at the reeducation camps (Bac-Thanh, Chu-
Han, Vân). Most of the survivors are women (Thu-Thuy, Ngoc-Suong, Manh, Thiem-Han):
they are left behind to fend for themselves, and are forced to work sections of the land that
formerly belonged to the Huu-Phuoc family. The novel closes with Thu-Thuy before her
husband’s grave, swearing eternal fidelity to him:

Sur ta tombe…, je fais le serment pour le reste de ma vie, et dans
l’attente de jours meilleurs, de garder mon coeur intact et pur pour
vénérer ta mémoire, de ne pas passer dans une autre barque aussi
enchantée soit-elle de tenir ma promesse d’une fidélité éternelle
envers toi, et de ne jamais quitter cette terre du Sud où reposent
désormais tes cendres, bien que cette terre soit enveloppée d’un voile
de souffrances et de désespoir. (308-09)
Thu-Thuy’s fidelity towards her husband symbolizes her fidelity towards her people, and by extension Vietnamese values which would soon disappear after the reunification.

In her novels Ly Thu Ho refuses to let the Western media speak for the Vietnamese. Using anecdotes and opposing viewpoints to undercut the reductive construction of the wars, she documents her version and participates in the construction of knowledge about her county and her people. In her trilogy Ly Thu Ho thus shows that the Vietnamese—“les petits hommes jaunes naguère méprisés” (Ruscio 11)—have always had a sense of nationalism: they repelled their stronger Chinese neighbors several times, later the French and eventually the Americans. In her works, the Vietnamese and Vietnam are not conceptually emasculated and reduced to stereotypes.

_Printemps inachevé, Au milieu du carrefour, and Le Mirage de la paix: A Study of South Vietnamese Women on the Home Front between 1930s and 1970s_

In both French and American literature and film that deal with the Indochina Wars, women, if present, usually play a minor role. Some of these examples are Hollywood films such as _Green Berets_ (1968), _The Deer Hunter_ (1978), _Apocalypse Now_ (1979), _Platoon_ (1986), _Full Metal Jacket_ (1987); French films such as _La 317e Section_ (1964), _Dien Bien Phu_ (1992); American novels such as _One Very Hot Day_ (1969) by David Halberstam, _Dispatches_ (1977) by Michael Herr; and French novels such as _Les Centurions_ (1960) by Jean Lartéguy and _La rivière noire_ (1953) by Pierre Courtade. By contrast, in Ly Thu Ho’s trilogy women play a central role. The principal character of the three novels is a woman and each relates the story of a woman and her mother, her father, her brother, her sister, her fiancé, and her future husband.

It is important to point out that Ly Thu Ho is not the only female author to document
the story of women during the wars. Vietnamese women of the diaspora such as Le Ly Hayslip (When Heaven and Earth Changed Places, 1989; Child of War, Woman of Peace, 1993), Jung Krall (A Thousand Tears Falling: The True Story of a Vietnamese Family Torn Apart by War), and Nam Phuong (Communism and the CIA, 1995; and Red on Gold: The True Story of One Woman's Courage and Will to Survive in War Torn Vietnam, 1991) depict their experiences of the Vietnam War in their memoirs. In their memoirs, women are depicted in myriad roles: daughter, mother, wife, rape victim, Viet Cong girl, bar girl, prostitute, immigrant, businesswoman, refugee and spy. In Vietnam, Duong Thu Huong, a contemporary female writer who participated in the Vietnam War as a member of the Communist Youth Brigade presents the women in reconfigured roles in her novel, Roman sans titre (1992): they provide food and shelter to soldiers, recite slogans, give up their sons for the war ("Heroic Mothers") and act as liaison officers.

In Ly Thu Ho’s trilogy none of the women characters play any role in the war, but she documents the Indochina Wars mostly from the perspective of the home front. The women are depicted as mothers, daughters, fiancées, wives; bar girls and the new emancipated woman. This section looks at how Ly Thu Ho uses these three categories of women to show the evolution of contemporary Vietnamese society from the 1930s to the 1970s and thus figure the fate of Vietnam. I also show how Ly Thu Ho redresses the often negative Orientalist images of Vietnamese women during the wars as silent, passive, and oversexualized, and as female soldiers. I also contend that she showcases and safeguards traditional Vietnamese values through her construction of women.

In Printemps inachevé, the women in the category of the mother—Mme Thai, Mme Minh, Mme Hai, Vu Gia—represent the first generation of Vietnamese women and the
transmission of traditional Vietnamese values. Mme Thai is resigned to her fate as submissive wife. Her husband makes all the decisions in the family. She walks behind her husband and never sits at the same table with him in public. She believes that the role of woman is that of being a wife and mother and inculcates these values in her daughters: “la principale vertu de la femme…est sa vie d’épouse et de mère, car, en tous temps, ce qu’on lui a d’abord demandé, c’était d’être l’âme vivante du foyer…C’est sur elle que repose l’éducation des enfants, avec l’aide, certes, de l’autorité paternelle” (101). Under the supervision of their husbands, mothers are responsible for the education of the children. Vu Gia, the nanny, also inculcates the subordinate place of women in the patriarchal family and the concept of filial piety and the cult of the ancestors in Tuoi. Vu Gia explains to Tuoi:

Jeune fille, tu dois te soumettre à l’autorité paternelle, mariée, tu subiras celle de ton mari, et veuve tu dépendras de ton fils aîné. Tu sais bien que chez nous le respect des personnes âgées, sans distinction de rang ou de richesse, est aussi un principe absolu et que pour remplir notre devoir filial, nous devons nous conduire conformément aux principes dictés par nos aïeuls. Le culte des ancêtres, la vénération des morts sont la base de notre religion, et puis, surtout, n’oublie pas que tu ne seras jamais l’égale de l’homme. (19-20)

Mme Minh, Tuoi and Tran’s grandmother, reminds her granddaughters of the role of women as dutiful daughters and wives: “les jeunes filles sont faites pour garder la maison, cuire le riz, raccomoder les vieux vêtements et plus tard, pour servir leur mari et lui donner de nombreux enfants qui perpétueront la race” (35). Mme Hai, the mother of Mlle Nam, equally
believes that her role as a mother is to perpetuate the subordinate place of women in a marriage.

In *Au milieu du carrefour* Mme Vinh is the mother of Lang, Mme Sang and Mme Tam. As thirty years have elapsed since the first novel, Mme Vinh is more of “une amie sûre et une confidente compréhensive” (14) than an oppressive mother. Mme Vinh thus represents the mores of the more progressive society in the 1960s. However, she is still imprisoned in her role as mother: her role is to bear children ("pour assurer le culte des ancêtres" 19) preferably males to continue the family name. She has seven children, four of whom are alive, and her health is fragile due to the frequency of pregnancies. The fate of Mme Vinh attests to the deplorable fate of women in a patriarchal society.

In *Au milieu du carrefour* Mme Sang and Mme Tam, Lang’s married sisters, are presented not as oppressive mothers who ensure the transmission of values but as supportive mother figures to their children. Like Mme Vinh, they represent the mores of the more progressive society in the 1960s. For example, Mme Tam believes that her children are mature enough to think for themselves. She is also a “second mother” to Lang: she gives moral and emotional support to Lang, and provides her with the family network. Mme Tam also puts Lang up when she goes to Saigon.

In *Le Mirage de la paix* Ba-Sau, the nanny, is the mother figure in the Huu-Phuoc household. She is the mother of Pham, a supplier for the NLF, and a “second mother” to the two main female characters, Thu-Thuy and Ngoc-Suong whose mothers are deceased. She advises the two women on affairs of the heart. She teaches them to prepare Vietnamese dishes and thus perpetuates Vietnamese values. Like Vu Gia, the nanny in *Printemps inachevé*, Ba-Sau inculcates the role of women as wives and mothers. In *Le Mirage de la*
Thiem-Duoc and Thiem-Han, both employees in the Huu-Phuoc household, act like a "second mother" to the two female characters and offer them support.

In *Printemps inachevé* Tran, the central woman character, is beautiful and virtuous and embodies the principles of ideal Vietnamese womanhood. She is described as “une grande et belle jeune fille…avec son visage ovale et pur, son teint clair, ses grands yeux noirs et son petit nez au-dessus d’une bouche toujours souriante[,] [s]es longs cheveux noirs et lisses relevés en chignon...A ce charmant physique, s’ajoutaient une grande douceur de paroles, une grâce naturelle et une gentillesse qui n’excluait personne” (47). As a daughter, she is dutiful. After her father’s death, she becomes an embroiderer so that she can support herself and her mother. She is contrasted with her sister, Tuoi, who does not embody filial piety. Tuoi is married to an Eurasian, and after his death she leaves her family for France with her métis children. As a fiancée, Tran is faithful. She waits patiently for Chau’s return while he is fighting up in the north. During the long separation, she gets raped by a French soldier. She feels sullied as she has lost her virginity and like her famous female literary predecessor, Kieu, in the Vietnamese classic poem, *Kim Vân Kiều*, she decides she is unworthy of her fiancé’s love, and renounces Châu. She becomes a nun to care for the wounded and dies a year after she has herself transferred to a leper colony. This young Vietnamese girl who has her life cut short at its zenith thus becomes the figure for the tragic fate of Vietnam whose hopes of independence are extinguished with the French reoccupation.

Lang, the central woman character in *Au milieu du carrefour*, also embodies the principles of ideal Vietnamese womanhood. She is beautiful and dutiful. When she finds out that her mother is ill, she immediately cuts short her schooling and returns home to take care
of her, thus fulfilling her filial duty of responsibility toward the parents. Her most important role in the novel is that of dutiful and faithful fiancée and future wife of Vân, a doctor for the NLF. As a fiancée and wife, her role is that of a helpmate. While Vân is taking care of the sick with the NLF, she decides to take up nursing classes so that she can better help her future husband with his patients. Lang ponders her future and decides: “Au lieu de continuer ses études d’anglais elle allait suivre des cours d’infirmière. Elle pourrait ainsi aider Vân dans sa profession et surtout rester constamment auprès de lui” (34). Inspired by Vân, she spends her time researching the civil war. In Le Mirage de la paix known as Mme Vân, emphasizing her role in society as a wife, she has faded into near anonymity and is seen through the eyes of her husband: “Quel caractère simple et tolérant, elle était toujours d’humeur égale et souriante. Elle n’ouvrait la bouche que pour s’enquérir de la santé de son mari et l’encourager dans sa mission” (96). It is important to note that in contrast to Tran from Printemps inachevé who remains a virgin until she is raped by a French soldier, Lang is the one who initiates sexual relations with Vân. Lang thus also shows the evolution of the mores of the Vietnamese society.

Xinh, Lang’s cousin and confidante, belongs to the category of virtuous women later to become faithful future wives. Albeit emancipated—she has a job as a travel agent in an airline company and she drives, Xinh is equally defined in her role as future spouse. She is engaged to John, a lieutenant in the US Marines. She sees her role as that of a future spouse: she plans to follow John back to the U.S. and make herself accepted by her in-laws: “mon devoir est donc de le suivre dans son pays et d’essayer avec toute ma bonne volonté de me faire admettre dans sa famille” (120).
The central woman character in *Le Mirage de la paix*, Thu-Thuy, falls under the category of dutiful and virtuous daughter later to become faithful fiancée. She is a young woman of humble origins and a refugee from the north. As a daughter, she is dutiful. When her father loses all his money due to his illness, she abandons her studies, devotes her life to him, and pays for her brother’s schooling. She meets Huu-Loc, the son of a rich tea plantation owner from the south and a captain in the South Vietnamese army, falls in love with him and marries him. Like Lang, Thu-Thuy is the one who initiates sexual relations with Huu-Loc. After her marriage she is defined in her role as a wife and labeled as “la femme d’un soldat” (227). After the birth of her sons, she is seen in her role as a mother, described as “[une] belle et jeune maman” (291), and often seen in the company of her two infant boys. After the death of her husband, she is depicted as “[une] veuve…à mi-chemin entre la vie et la mort” (291). She remains faithful to him as a wife and grieving widow. Thu-Thuy embodies all the roles of the Vietnamese woman: dutiful daughter, faithful wife and widow.

Ngoc-Suong falls under the same category as the daughter of the patriarch Huu-Phuoc. As a daughter, her duty is to stay in Vietnam and take care of her aging dad. As soon as she is engaged to Duy-Cau, her role is that of fiancée: she plans to help her fiancé to rehabilitate his leg and prepare for her upcoming marriage. As the omniscient narrator puts it, “elle partageait sa journée entre de courtes promenades avec Duy-Cau pour rééduquer sa jambe et la transformation de sa chambre de jeune fille en chambre nuptiale” (199). Like Lang and Thu-Thuy, Ngoc-Suong initiates sexual relations with Duy-Cau.

The characters in the category of new resourceful and emancipated women are Mlle Nam, Thuy, Liêu, Kieu-Lien and Manh. In *Printemps inachevé* Mlle Nam has witnessed the
subjugation of her mother by her father and rebels against traditions, asserting her independence by choosing relationships outside marriage. In her words she prefers “être l’amante à la femme légitime” (134). She is a consort to Japanese and French officers. She dies during childbirth and not a single man comes to her funeral. In Ly Thu Ho's works women who assert their independence and who have careers do not fare better than their conservative sisters. Both groups of women either fade into anonymity as fiancées or wives or die.

In *Au milieu du carrefour* Thuy represents a new class of women entrepreneurs who are resourceful enough to profit financially from the American involvement. Daughter of a former cook, she, like many young women from the peasant and working classes, moves from the country to the capital, Saigon, to make a living. She dabbles in small businesses—she first sells cigarettes, and moves on to more expensive electronics, and then opens a shop selling refrigerators and air conditioning units—before she opens a bar. Thuy defends her line of work, explaining that this class is born out of the wars and poverty. Some of the women are married to men in the service and choose to supplement their husbands’ paltry income with this profession while others work to support themselves as they come from formerly well-off families that are now ruined by the anti-colonial revolution and the Vietnam War. Liêu is one of these numerous bar girls. Her mother has also worked as a bar girl and is now destitute. In the end Liêu is finally killed by an explosion, leaving behind a daughter.

In *Le Mirage de la paix* Kieu-Lien represents the new group of emancipated women. She is a bar girl in Saigon and the mistress of Huu-Loc. Kieu-Lien is presented as a “prostitute with a good heart.” When Thu-Thuy, pregnant with Huu-Loc’s son, shows up at
his studio, Kieu-Lien graciously gives up her lover to Thu-Thuy. With the character of Kieu-Lien, Ly Thu Ho humanizes the bar girls, contrary to the Orientalist stereotype of bar girls as women with loose morals. Kieu-Lien defends her line of work while admitting that the war allows women to emancipate themselves:

L’histoire des filles de mon genre est connue. A la différence de tant de mes compagnes, cela me gêne d’en rejeter la faute sur cette guerre bonne pour certaines et mauvaise pour les autres. Elle a permis à nombre de femmes vietniennes d’avoir l’occasion de servir leur pays, de lutter pour son indépendance et même de mourir sous l’étendard du pays. Mais pour moi, “sacrifice” et “noble cause” sont des mots creux. J’ai horreur de la mort comme de la faim. Je veux vivre, m’amuser et profiter de la vie, des joies de tous les jours….Je ne pense qu’à moi seulement parce que je suis d’une nature égoïste, mais parce que je trouve absurde le fait de se sacrifier pendant que d’autres exploitent vos cadavres. Je me fais une idée particulière du mot “patriotique”. Lorsque je me trouve en contact avec un militaire, qu’il soit étranger ou vietnamien, j’emploie tous les moyens pour le décourager de la guerre, lui enlever le goût de se battre….Ma seule lutte à moi, c’est survivre à tout prix, et je vous avoue qu’il est difficile aujourd’hui de se faire une place dans mon sale métier; il y a des concurrentes!” (175)
Kieu-Lien acknowledges the contribution of her female compatriots in the war of liberation. Unlike them, she is not willing to die, and is only interested only in survival but she does her part by dissuading her compatriots from joining in the war.

Manh, a refugee from the peasant class from the north, also represents the new emancipated woman. Unmarried, she is an employee on Huu-Phuoc’s plantation and assists Ba-Sau in the running of the affairs of the house. Her character evolves in the course of the novel: she changes from a woman of loose morals to a mother figure. After the 1976 reunification Manh fares better than the other women of the bourgeoisie. She represents the new communist Vietnamese society and the restructuring of women’s roles. Class distinctions have disappeared, and she becomes the leader of her unit. She also takes charge of the Huu-Phuoc household, including taking care of the children and protecting the widows, Thu-Thuy and Ngoc-Suong, from suitors (she invents a venereal disease for them). She is one of the four women who survives at the end of the novel. She represents resilience and resourcefulness. Through the character of Manh, Ly Thu Ho gives voice to a woman who is not from the South Vietnamese bourgeoisie and nuances her representation of women.

Since one of Ly Thu Ho’s goals is to redress the negative Orientalist stereotypes of the Vietnamese, a brief analysis of the construction of men in her novels is in order here. In Virginia Thompson's argument in French-Indochina, even the least racist Orientalists such as French colonial writers—Paul Bourde, Paul Bonnetain, Jules Léon Dutreuil, and Hubert Lyautey—find the Vietnamese “from top to bottom of the social scale, totally unheroic, lacking in virility, essentially servile, incapable of spiritual growth…effeminate…” (434). Ly Thu Ho redresses the negative stereotypes of Vietnamese men in her novels by presenting
men of valor who hold positions of authority. Huu-Loc, the central male character in the third volume of the trilogy, is the captain of the South Vietnamese army. He is described as physically attractive, manly, and sure of himself:

Le jeune capitaine, Tran-Huu-Loc,…, [i]ssu d’une riche famille du Sud…de taille élancée, bien bâti, c’était un karateka redoutable. Son visage expressif et souriant prenait parfois un air sérieux et décidé. Et ses yeux aux reflets d’acier pouvaient à la fois se durcir pour intimider un interlocuteur réticent ou s’adoucir pour obtenir les faveurs d’une femme. Il avait aussi une voix aux consonnances [sic] agréables qui plaisaient bien au sexe faible. Il parlait toujours calmement à ses hommes. Mais quelle résolution énergique dissimulait ce front autoritaire qui ne to lèrait pas la contradiction! (19)

Huu-Loc is definitely not the faceless, repellent and cowardly Asian man as described in colonial discourse. Duy-Cau, another central male character, is a lieutenant in the South Vietnamese army. Importantly, Ly Thu Ho describes him, a métis, son of a Djarai mother and a father from the north, in an equally positive way:

Leur chef à tous, un jeune lieutenant, se trouvait en tête de la section. Il ne participait pas à cette chorale improvisée. Un voile de tristesse semblait envelopper ce gaillard aux bras musclés, dont les pieds foulaient le sol à grands pas. Son visage hâlé aux sourcils épais et rapprochés, lui donnait un air de fierté et de rudesse. Mais des yeux
brillants, un regard doux presque candide, démentaient cette dureté apparente. (10)

Duy-Cau, too, is not the repulsive "savage" Other (Kamm 31). He is manly and proud. Besides Huu-Loc and Duy-Cau, most of the men, both Vietnamese and montagnards—Binh, Muon-Sui, Khoan, Nhiep, and Major Danh—are South Vietnamese soldiers of valor. The only exceptions are Vân, a doctor; Pham, an informant for the NLF; and Châu, a volunteer for the North Vietnamese government. Unlike other French colonial writers and American statesmen, Ly Thu Ho does not recuperate the Orientalist myth of Vietnamese men as the enemy or faceless, effeminate and sexless.

Despite the evidence above, it is not entirely clear if Ly Thu Ho is subversive in her use of traditional female characters. The principle, “[L]’homme vit au dehors (en société) [sic], la femme vit dans la famille” (Mai Thu Ti et Le Thi Nam Tuyet 38) that governs Vietnamese society is at work in Ly Thu Ho’s trilogy. In all the novels most of the women are circumscribed in the private sphere and men in the public one. Most of the men are at the front lines in their capacity as soldiers and doctors. The women are the wives of these soldiers and are at the home front. They are depicted in their roles of mothers, wives, daughters and fiancées. They do not take part in the discussions about the politics of their country. When the men discuss politics, the women are either preparing meals, caring for the children or occupied at some form of domestic activity. In Au milieu du carrefour, at the anniversary of the first birthday of Mme Sang’s grandson, the women do not voice their opinions on the political events of their country. Similarly, in Le Mirage de la paix Lang is not heard and is excluded from the discussion on politics when her husband invites his high school classmate Huu-Loc to lunch: “Le repas terminé, la maîtresse de maison [Lang] resta
juste le temps de servir le café et s’éclipsa aussitôt pour laisser les deux hommes à leur conversation” (102). At the marriage of Huu-Loc and Thu-Thuy and the engagement of Duy-Cau and Ngoc-Suong, the women talk about personal matters and relationships and the men about the political events and the military situation. At the ceremony honoring the death of the patriarch of the family, the men discuss the politics while the women are relegated to their role of caring for the children.

In all three novels the women do not take part in the war effort, and their men are the ones who hold positions of responsibility and command. Ly Thu Ho, however, acknowledges the role of women in the wars in passing on several occasions. In Printemps inachevé Châu tells Tran in his letter that women are participating in the resistance as nurses and as transporters of food supplies and munitions: “Des jeunes filles faisaient des stages d’infirmières pour la Croix-Rouge. Des femmes s’occupaient du ravitaillement et des cantines pour les jeunes gens qui venaient des villages voisins” (115-16). In Au milieu du carrefour Thuy explains to Lang that the majority of girls have joined the resistance movement (82).

Both Nathalie Nguyen and Pamela Pears argue that Ly Thu Ho is subversive in her use of traditional female characters. In her book, Vietnamese Voices: Gender and Cultural Identity in the Vietnamese Francophone Novel, Nguyen contends that Ly Thu Ho’s depiction of women in her trilogy is a critique of the Confucian values of filial piety and wifely obedience, and of beauty and gentleness as the women who embody these traditional virtues are rewarded with "stultified" lives and "deadened potential" (48). Nguyen states that "Ly locates the subversive aspect of her work in the fates of its female characters" (72). In her book, Remnants of Empire in Algeria and Vietnam: Women, Words, and War, Pears argues
that Ly Thu Ho is creating an imaginary space in which the female characters reclaim traditional roles (89). She goes on to argue that the women in traditional roles are actually revolutionary in their resistance to modern socialist reforms. According to Pears, these women do not condone the socialist way of achieving liberation, and they debunk the myth of Vietnamese women as soldiers. As true as that may be, it is important to point out that the female protagonists in Ly Thu Ho’s trilogy—Tran, Lang, Thu-Thuy, Ngoc-Suong, and Mlle Nam—trace similar trajectories: they know a brief period of happiness, they live many tragedies, they wait faithfully for their fiancés or husbands, they die, they end up in anonymity (imprisoned in their role as dutiful wives), or they are widowed.39

What does the unfortunate fate of these women who embody traditional Vietnamese values of filial and wifely obedience, beauty and gentleness signify? Is their destiny a criticism of the traditional role of women as Nguyen and Pears contend? In fact, I argue that Ly Thu Ho is not criticizing the conservative role of women. It is important to bear in mind that Ly Thu Ho, having grown up during the colonial period in Vietnam, believed in documenting contemporary society with accuracy. Most of her women are relegated to the roles of mothers, daughters, fiancées and wives, because these are the roles assigned to women in a patriarchal Vietnamese bourgeois society of the 1930s to 1970s. In his preface to Le Mirage de la paix, Thai Van Kiem is right to refer to Ly Thu Ho’s depiction of family values as the safeguarding of “l’essentiel des traditions ancestrales, les vertus civiques et les principes moraux” (6) or what he calls “la Vietnamité” (6). It is not surprising that in Le Mirage de la paix Ly Thu Ho closes the novel with the widow, Thu-Thuy, swearing fidelity towards her dead husband, an act which symbolizes her people, and by extension Vietnamese values. The Confucian emphasis on invaluable qualities such as patience, perseverance, hard
work, inner strength and quiet resilience have benefited the women and facilitated their insertion into their community after the reunification of Vietnam. Contrary to Nguyen and Pears' argument, Ly Thu Ho is not subversive in her criticism of traditional values; she uses women to showcase these values that would soon disappear under reunification. Importantly, all the remaining survivors in the last novel, *Le mirage de la paix*, are women. Ly Thu Ho also uses women to symbolize the fortitude of the Vietnamese nation in the face of tragedies.

In her novels Ly Thu Ho participates in the construction of knowledge about the Vietnamese Other, male and female. In her texts the Vietnamese women characters are certainly not those described by Said: they are not the creation of a male power-fantasy; they do not express unlimited sensuality, they are not more or less stupid, and they are not willing (*Orientalism* 207-08). Like the women in Vietnamese myths, legends and history, the female characters are strong women. The Vietnamese male characters are not totally unheroic nor lacking in virility. In short, Ly Thu Ho redresses the Orientalist images of women and men during the Indochina wars as bar girls, prostitutes, Viet Cong girls, Viet Cong guerillas or the faceless enemy by constructing male and female characters who embody traditional Vietnamese values. One can argue that by using women to showcase the traditional Vietnamese values of virtue, patience, filial piety and wifely obedience, and fidelity that would soon disappear under the reunification of Vietnam, Ly Thu Ho runs the risk of imprisoning women in the age-old Orientalist trope of women as passive observers. However, women play an important role as the central characters in her novels. The stories in Ly Thu Ho’s trilogy are about the women and their fiancés, husbands, brothers and
fathers. In short, the novels are about the home front, and it is the women who drive the narrative.

**Conclusion**

French and American construction of the Indochina Wars is a way of creating and controlling Vietnam, making it known. In her trilogy Ly Thu Ho questions the reductive construction of the wars and revises the commonly received ideas about the wars. That said, her representation of the wars is equally problematic. Her anecdotes in which she forges knowledge about the complexities of the political situation of her country come across as digressions and weaken the plot. In the words of Jack Yeager, “[t]he overall picture is multifaceted and immensely complicated and confusing” (*The Vietnamese Novel* 118).

While Ly Thu Ho’s goal is to present a non-partisan viewpoint of the political situation of her country, as stated by her preface writers, her representation is still biased. Ly Thu Ho purposely omits the role of French figures such as Jean Decoux, Jean Sainteny, General Philippe Leclerc, Thierry d’Argenlieu, and Jean de Lattre in the discussion of the reconquest of Vietnam. Perhaps the absence of the French figures enables the presence of the Vietnamese and represents the rewriting of the Indochina Wars from the Vietnamese perspective. Secondly, most of the men are soldiers in the South Vietnamese army and as such, they are the mouthpiece of the South Vietnamese government. The South Vietnamese soldiers’ use of “nous les Sudistes” to refer to themselves and “ils,” “leur,” “chez eux dans le maquis” (*Au milieu du carrefour* 38, 160, 161, 170-71) to refer to the NLF betrays Ly Thu Ho’s partisanship. It is correct to say that she documents corruption, pilfering, and killings committed by all the different groups—the Viet Minh, the Viet Cong, the South Vietnamese soldiers, and the Americans, but the number of anecdotes of killing, looting, and use of
relentless propaganda by the Viet Minh and Viet Cong is superior to those about the other groups. Thai Van Khiem’s feelings on the 1975 reunification in the preface to *Le Mirage de la paix*, “cette réunification qui s’est réalisée en 1975 par le feu et par le sang, et dans la précipitation la plus ahurissante, ne s’est imposée en définitive que territorialement, par l’annexion pure et simple du Sud Viet-Nam, mais ne s’est pas traduite par l’union des coeurs” (5), reveals Ly Thu Ho’s partisan sentiments for the South Vietnamese and antagonistic feelings about the 1975 reunification.

Her goal of deconstructing the Western portrayal of the Indochina Wars notwithstanding, Ly Thu Ho tends to view the Vietnamese through a Western lens. Like the French colonial writers, she lapses into Orientalism in her use of the parent-children relationship to describe the relationship between the French and Vietnamese. She recuperates the myth of “the native [as] a perpetual minor” when Châu and Ba, in *Printemps inachevé*, refer to the Vietnamese as children in relation to the French. She again lapses into Orientalism when the omniscient narrator in *Au milieu du carrefour* uses the term “Orientaux” to refer to the Vietnamese, a term which has been traditionally used by Westerners to refer to the whole Far East and which shows that the Vietnamese are looking at themselves through a Western gaze: “les bambous, de tout temps, avaient été chantés et honorés par les Orientaux dans la poésie comme dans la peinture” (21).

However, unlike the Orientalists who believe that the "natives" cannot be heard nor represent themselves, Ly Thu Ho proves that the Vietnamese can speak for and represent themselves and forge knowledge about Vietnam. Ly Thu Ho is writing against the West’s desire to contain Vietnam militarily and discursively. She is to be commended for being the only Vietnamese writer of French expression to depict the Indochina Wars from the
perspective of the South Vietnamese. Despite her occasional partisanship towards the South Vietnamese government, her novels are a faithful mirror of South Vietnamese society during the turbulent years from 1930s to 1970s and “cette guerre destructive transformant…[les] fécondes campagnes en désert, en chaos” (Ly Thu Ho, *Au milieu du carrefour* 38-39). According to Nguyen Tran Huan and Thai Van Kiem, the authors of the prefices to *Au Milieu du Carrefour* and *Le mirage de la paix*, Ly Thu Ho’s novels are a welcome change from the partisan anti-Communist or anti-American viewpoint propagated by the French and American media and literature. In the words of Thai Van Kiem, “Madame Ly Thu Ho nous offre un tableau vivant et honnête de la société vietnamienne en butte à des bouleversements profonds dans un monde agité qui cherche lui-même une voie de salut dans des méandres multiples aux apparaences souvent trompeuses” (6). Her novels are a great example of “une littérature réaliste indigène de langue française” (Eugène Pujarniscle, *Philoxène ou de la littérature coloniale* 195).
Notes

1 The works of Pham Van Ky, Nguyen Huu Chau, Jean Hougron, Lucien Bodard, Jean Lartéguy, and Pierre Courtade are examples of literary production in French about Indochina by French and Indochinese writers. Pham Duy Khiem’s, Pham Van Ky’s, and Nguyen Huu Chau’s novels treat themes such as cultural conflict, intercultural identity, exile, alienation and death. Pham Van Ky is one of the better known Indochinese writers in France and is the most extensively published. He has written novels, poetry, plays and short stories. A full list is in the bibliography. *Perdre la demeure* won him the Grand Prix du Roman by the Académie française in 1961. His works explore themes such as conflict between the East and West, filial piety and individualism, tradition and progress, and exile. Pham Duy Khiem attended la classe de Khâgne de Louis-le-Grand with Georges Pompidou and Léopold Senghor from 1929-1930 and is the author of several texts, all listed in the bibliography. His works address themes such as the pitfalls of interracial love and a “return to the source.” Nguyen Huu Chau who was a Secretary of State under Ngo Dinh Diem and a professor in France published his only novel, *Les Reflets de nos jours*, in 1955. The novel is a first-person narrative and relates the loss of loves, solitude, and the conflicted sentiments of a Vietnamese caught between Eastern and Western cultures. Together with Lucien Bodard, Jean Lartéguy, and Pierre Courtade, Jean Hougron is one of the colonial authors writing in the dusk of the colonial empire. Unlike his contemporaries whose subject is the First Indochina War, Hougron’s works treat the contradictions and injustices of the colonial system. He is famous for his cycle of six novels set during the war of liberation and the dusk of the colonial empire in Vietnam grouped under the title, *La nuit indochinoise* whose novels are listed in the bibliography. *Mort en fraude* (1953) was made into a film by Marcel Camus.
in 1956, and he was awarded the *Grand Prix du roman de l’Académie française* in 1953. For more information on these authors, see Jack Yeager; Lucy Hong Nhiem Nguyen; Nathalie Nguyen, *Vietnamese Voices*; Lisa Lowe, "Literary Nomadics"; and Bernard Hue.


3 As Ly Thu Ho belonged to the wave of Vietnamese immigrants repatriated to France after 1954, a brief commentary on the history of Vietnamese immigration in France is in order. According to scholars such as Gisèle Bousquet and Le Huu Khoa, Vietnamese immigration in France is divided into three main waves. The first wave consists of Vietnamese who arrived in France before 1945. This group is made up of immigrants who belonged to three distinct categories: students, workers, and military personnel. These immigrants, especially students, belonged to political organizations that opposed French colonialism, and promoted Vietnamese nationalism. During the two world wars, the French government recruited Vietnamese workers to replace French workers who had left for the war. The French government also recruited Vietnamese to enlist in the French army. The second wave is made up of Vietnamese repatriated to France after the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. This group is composed of Vietnamese of French nationality, Franco-Vietnamese Eurasians, and those who wanted to flee the Vietnam War. Women and families formed a part of the second wave and showed little interest in French politics and were absorbed in national issues of their homeland. During this period (1954-1975), the Vietnamese community was divided into the pro-communist faction (or pro-Hanoi faction)
and the anti-communist faction. According to this division of the Vietnamese community, Ly Thu Ho, by virtue of her South Vietnamese bourgeois background, is expected to be anti-communist. In fact, Ly Thu Ho’s goal is to set herself apart from this wave who took sides and those who avoided the topic of the war, aim at non-partisanship, and provide a faithful portrait of the South Vietnamese society during the Indochina War years. The third wave settled in France after 1975. This exodus continued for twenty years and is subdivided into two groups. The first consists of those who fled Vietnam after the victory of the North over the South and the departure of the Americans. They were known as the "boat people" as they fled by sea. Upon arrival in France they were instructed by French authorities to declare themselves as “refugees.” The second group consists of those from the post-1979 period and came from a lower socio-economic background than the first group who belonged to the urban middle class. For more information, see Gisèle L. Bousquet, “Vietnamese Immigrants and Refugees as an Ethnic Minority in France,” in Behind the Bamboo Hedge 71-105; Lee Huu Khoa, Les Vietnamiens en France: Insertion et identité 9-91; and Marie-Paule Ha, “Vietnamese Diaspora in France.”

4 The Indochina Wars referred to the First Indochina War (also known as the Indochina War in France and the French War in Vietnam), the Second Indochina War (also known as the Vietnam War in the U.S. and the American War in Vietnam) and the Third Indochina War (fought between Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge between 1975 till 1989). Historians list different dates for the Vietnam War. Some such as Benjamin Stora list 1964-1975 as full-scale military operations took place in Vietnam after 1964 while others such as Pierre-Richard Féray list 1954-1975 as they saw the Vietnam War as a continuation of the Indochina War in that both wars were a fight against world communism between the Western
and Communist powers. It is important to point out that in her trilogy Ly Thu Ho never uses the terms, “First Indochina War,” “Second Indochina War,” “American War,” nor “Vietnam War.” She refers to the wars simply as “la guerre,” “la guerre fratricide,” “le conflit” or “une guerre injuste et vaine” which attests to her attempt at accuracy and neutrality. See Henry Kamm, *Dragon Ascending*, 101-03; Benjamin Stora, *Imaginaires de guerre*, 20-21; and Pierre-Richard Féray, *Le Viêt-Nam*, 63-80.

5 The term “New York intellectuals” refers to a group of American writers based in New York City in the mid-twentieth century. They advocated left-wing politics and sought to integrate literary theory with Marxism. Like the traditional Orientalists, they researched, and accumulated information on Vietnam and influenced policy makers in the management of the Vietnam problem. These thinkers include, among others, Hannah Arendt, Daniel Bell, and Saul Bellow. Please see Andrew Martin’s excellent chapter, “Writing the War,” on the role of intellectuals in assisting and resisting the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s in his book, *Receptions of War* (55-94).

6 Stora, 29; and Irving, “Preface.”

7 By media, I mean print (newspapers, literature) and visual media (film). For Said, the word "media" mostly refers to information, knowledge and opinions disseminated by intellectuals, statesmen and film.

8 Jean-Paul Sartre was an opponent of the French and American involvement in the Indochina Wars. He authored *L’Affaire Henri Martin* in 1953 in defense of Henri Martin who was jailed for five years for complicity in sabotage against the French during the First Indochina War.

“Les Nord-Vietnamiens,” “le FNL,” and “les Vietcongs” are three distinct groups. Founded in 1960 in the south, the Front national de libération (le FNL) or the National Liberation Front (the NLF) was a resistance movement whose goal was to liberate South Vietnam from Ngo Dinh Diem’s repressive South Vietnamese government (1954-1963). The FNL brought together communists and non-communists in an umbrella organization. The FNL claimed that its members were not communists but came from different economic backgrounds, and that most of its members were native Southerners, and independent of the communists in Hanoi contrary to the image propagated by the American media. “Les Vietcongs” were Vietnamese guerillas fighting against the South Vietnamese government, and were recruited from South Vietnam. “Les Nord-Vietnamiens” were soldiers of North Vietnam supporting the resistance in South Vietnam. These three groups shared one goal: they were all fighting for the liberation of South Vietnam. See Richard N. Goodwin, 371; and Mark W. McLeod and Nguyen Thi Dieu, 34-36.

An example of the confusion between the three terms, “le F.N.L.,” “les Nord-Vietnamiens,” and “les Vietcongs” is found in the following article from *Le Monde* 3 septembre 1968: “Au début de cette année, le camp de Langvie, près de Khé-Sanh, a

12 There are many works in French on the First Indochina War. Most appear as testimonials, journalistic accounts and fiction. Some of the better known authors are Lucien Bodard, Jean Lartégy, Pierre Courtade, Laurent La Praye, and Pierre Schoendoerffer. There are only two American films that treat the First Indochina War; they were never distributed in France: Jump into Hell (1955) and China Gate (1957) recount the experiences of the legionnaires in Indochina. There is a handful of French films about the First Indochina War; that were made in the post-Indochina War period: Le rendez-vous des quais (1955), Patrouille de choc (1956), Mort en fraude (1957), Fort du fou (1962), La 317e Section (1964), Dien Bien Phu (1992), and Indochine (1993). See Benjamin Stora, Imaginaires de guerre, 16-18, 29; and Bernard Hue, Littératures de la péninsule indochinoise, 319-53.

13 There is a vast amount of American creative works and films that treat the lived experiences of American soldiers and veterans during the Vietnam War. Some of the better known creative works are: William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick, The Ugly American; David Halberstam, One Very Hot Day; Philip Caputo, A Rumor of War; Michael Herr, Dispatches; Bobbie Ann Mason, In Country; Le Ly Hayslip, When Heaven and Earth Changed Places and Le Ly Hayslip, Child of War, Woman of Peace. See Andrew Martin, Receptions of War, 55-132 and Jeremy M. Devine’s Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second: A
Critical and Thematic Analysis of Over 400 Films about the Vietnam War for an analysis of Vietnam War fiction and movies.

14 For a cogent history of the turbulent period of Vietnam between 1940 and 1948, see Vu Chieu Ngu, “Political and Social Change in Viet-Nam between 1940 and 1948.”

15 For the festival of Têt, see pages 13-24; and the funeral of M. Bao, pages 25-30 in Ly Thu Ho's Printemps inachevé.

16 For the differences between the lifestyle of a Buddhist and a Catholic, see pages 60-64.

17 For the engagement of Tran and Châu, see pages 66-91.

18 For a discussion between the resistant fighters, see pages 103-05.

19 For the political events of the period between 1945 and 1946, see pages 112-27.

20 For the episode on Bong, a former Japanese officer turned resistant fighter, see pages 138-41.

21 For the conversation between Ba, Buu-Tâm and Tran, see pages 142-58.

22 Buu-Tâm returns as a close friend of the patriarch in the third volume.

23 For the conversation between Ba and Tuê, see pages 181-89.

24 The National Liberation Front will be abbreviated to the NLF in the rest of the chapter.

25 For the discussion between Lang and Văn on Văn's reasons for joining the NLF, see pages 35-45 in Ly Thu Ho's Au milieu du carrefour.

26 For Camp Quang-Trung, and the two fanatic soldiers, see pages 52-55, 176-77.

27 For the dinner celebration, see pages 92-115.

28 For the dinner reunion, see pages 144-79.
29 For the stories of John, Cang and Eddy, see pages 188-209.

30 For the skirmishes between the South Vietnamese soldiers and the Viet Cong, see pages 9-56 in Ly Thu Ho's *Le mirage de la paix*.

31 A tribeswoman in a far-off village in South Vietnam summarized best the situation of the montagnards: "The Americans bomb us, the Communists take away our sons, and the government steals our lands...." See Henry Kamm 72.

32 For the Feast of the Wandering Souls, see page 43.

33 For the dinner honoring the death of Huu-Phuoc, see pages 266-82.

34 For an analysis of Oliver Stone’s filmic representation of Le Ly Hayslip’s memoirs, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* and *Child of War, Woman of Peace: Heaven and Earth* (1994), see Matthew Killmeier and Gloria Kwok’s “A People’s History of Empire, or the Imperial Recuperation of Vietnam?"

35 Duong Thu Huong together with Nguyen Huy Thiep, Pham Thi Hoai, and Bao Ninh are some of the authors who belong to the new generation of writers (Renovation Period, 20th century-Present) whose works are critical of the totalitarian Communist regime. In their works (see bibliography), they break with the writers of the previous generation (Resistance Literature) whose goal is to serve the Communist Party’s objectives, that is, to mobilize the people in their revolutionary struggles against the French or the Americans. The writers of the Renovation period debunk the myth of a Socialist utopia, depict the disillusionment with the betrayal of the ideals of the revolution in postwar Communist Vietnam. They expose the harsh reality of present day Vietnam, moral and economic corruption of the Communist cadres, prostitution and drug addiction. For more information, see Gloria Kwok, “Duong Thu Huong: Figure de résistance littéraire au Viêt-nam
“d’aujourd’hui,” and “Duong Thu Huong: Vietnam’s Female Dissident and Contemporary Novelist”; Pamela Ann Pears, Remnants, 83-84; Henry Kamm, Dragon Ascending: “Pain, but Not Shame.”

36 See chapter 1, footnote 11.

37 Often considered the masterpiece of Vietnamese literature, The Tale of Kiều or Kim Vân Kiều is a famous nineteenth century verse novel written by Nguyen Du (1765-1820). The title, Kim Vân Kiều, refers to the three main characters of the story: Kim is the talented scholar, Kieu the beautiful young woman, and Van, Kieu’s sister. It tells the story of Kieu, a beautiful and chaste girl of bourgeois background. In order to save her brother and father from financial destitution and imprisonment, Kieu sells herself into prostitution and gives up her love for the man she loves, the scholar, Kim, thus fulfilling her filial duty of responsibility towards her parents. In the course of the novel which spans fifteen years, she becomes the second wife of the scholar, Thuc Sanh, is sold as a servant by the latter’s jealous first wife, becomes a prostitute again, becomes the wife of another man, the rebel, Tu Hai, and becomes the wife of a dignitary upon the latter’s death in a rebellion. In the end, she is saved by a nun and is reunited with Kim, but as she finds herself sullied and unworthy of his love, she asks him to keep their union platonic. Her sister, Van, is the one who fulfils the sexual union as she becomes the other wife of Kieu. On the surface The Tale of Kiều seems to be an innocuous tale of love, but careful analysis shows that Kieu as victim figures the fate of Vietnam: like Vietnam who serves multiple masters, Kieu serves masters other than those to whom she feels that she rightly owes loyalty. See Nguyen Du, The Tale of Kiều, Trans. Huynh Sanh Thong.

38 Djarai refers to an ethnic group in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.
The themes of fidelity to one’s mate, separation and suffering in Ly Thu Ho’s trilogy is reminiscent of those found in the well-known eighteenth century poem, *Plaintes de la femme d’un guerrier (Lament of the Soldier’s Wife)* by the poet, Doan Thi Diem. Hoang Xuan Nhi, known for his defense of Vietnamese literature in France, later translated the poem into French. In this poem, the poet recounts the long and painful separation of a woman from her husband-soldier. The plight of the woman echoed that of generations of women separated from their loved ones during the Indochina Wars. See Hoang Xuan Nhi, *Plaintes de la femme d’un guerrier*. 

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39 The themes of fidelity to one’s mate, separation and suffering in Ly Thu Ho’s trilogy is reminiscent of those found in the well-known eighteenth century poem, *Plaintes de la femme d’un guerrier (Lament of the Soldier’s Wife)* by the poet, Doan Thi Diem. Hoang Xuan Nhi, known for his defense of Vietnamese literature in France, later translated the poem into French. In this poem, the poet recounts the long and painful separation of a woman from her husband-soldier. The plight of the woman echoed that of generations of women separated from their loved ones during the Indochina Wars. See Hoang Xuan Nhi, *Plaintes de la femme d’un guerrier*. 

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Chapter 3

Linda Lê Revisited: Redefining Contemporary Vietnamese Francophone Literature

This final chapter treats Linda Lê, a prolific author with some twenty works to her name. Although she refuses all forms of literary affiliation, be they with French writers of Vietnamese origins, French writers, or the Vietnamese diaspora, she technically belongs to the group known as “Contemporary Vietnamese Francophone writers,” that is, writers of Vietnamese origins who published on French soil between the 1980s and the present. That said, Lê shares more literary affinities with authors such as Virginie Despentes, Amélie Nothomb, Rochelle Fack, Christine Angot, Laurence Cossé, Marie Desplechin, Agnès Desarthe, Anne Wiazemsky and Catherine Lépront than her Vietnamese Francophone counterparts and is considered one of the established voices of the contemporary French literary scene. Her work has been regularly reviewed in newspapers and periodicals and the subject of numerous book chapters and dissertations.

Linda Lê was born of Vietnamese parents in Dalat in 1963, eight years after the fall of the French colonial regime and the beginning of American involvement in Vietnam. In 1969, Lê’s father took the family to Saigon at the height of the Vietnam War. The exodus for the south was traumatic. She witnessed corpses lining the roads. At the same time, the relationship between her parents deteriorated. It was at that point that she began to have a pessimistic vision of life. In Saigon she attended a French lycée, Le Couvent des Oiseaux. As a result of her French education, she felt like an outsider in Vietnam. She spoke Vietnamese at home although she confesses that she barely speaks it today. In 1977, two years after Saigon fell to the communists, at the age of fourteen, she fled to France with her mother and three sisters, leaving her father behind in Vietnam. She stayed with her family in
Le Havre for four years. There a teacher introduced her to literature. She left her mother and sisters and went on to Paris to study at the *Lycée Henri IV* and then at the Sorbonne. She has been publishing works of fiction and non-fiction since 1987. She now resides in Paris and does not have a relationship with her mother but maintains a close relationship with her sisters.4


**Toward a “littérature déplacée”**

In 1987, Linda Lê erupted on the French literary scene with *Un si tendre vampire*. In her first novel Lê does not present any Vietnamese characters nor the Vietnamese experience—childhood, adolescence, education in French schools, relocation from one house to the other, from one town to the next, usually from the north to the south, eventual separation from family, departure for France, and return to Vietnam. Instead, Lê treats the

Critics have generally given Lê’s works positive reviews, emphasizing her originality and her acid style. These positive reviews notwithstanding, critics and the press have repeatedly emphasized her Vietnamese childhood despite the explicit absence of the Vietnamese content in her earlier work. For example, in 1993, Vincent Landel of *Le
Magazine littéraire foregrounds Lê's Vietnamese origins and her status as refugee: “Linda Lê est cette jeune Vietnamienn arrivée en France avec les boat people” (76). In 1994, Sylvie Genevoix of Page des libraires also foregrounds her Vietnamese origins, “Elle a tout juste trente et un ans, elle a publié son premier livre, Un si tendre vampire, il y a sept ans et elle a déjà l’impression d’avoir beaucoup vécu. Sans doute parce que la route est longue depuis Dalat, sa ville natale du Viêt-nam, jusqu’à Paris” (32). In 1998, Marie-Hélène Martin of Le Nouvel Observateur classifies Lê as a writer of the Vietnamese diaspora, calling Un si tendre vampire, which does not address the Vietnamese experience “le premier texte issu de la diaspora vietnamienne.” Martin also emphasizes Lê’s “silences” and her sartorial habits—“Linda Lê arrive…tout habillée de noir.” In 1998, Marie-Françoise Colombani of Elle, describes Lê as small and mysterious: “toute menue, aux cheveux sombres et aux habits noirs…” (201). In 1996, on this side of the Atlantic, in the United States, Esther Allen, translator of Calomnies, labels Lê a Vietnamese writer. In 2010, Marine Landrot of Télérama describes Lê as mysterious and melancholic: “Comme ses personnages aux noms singuliers...Linda Lê marche en solitaire, secrète, farouchement indépendante” (10). As late as 2014, Laurence Houot of Livres de Culturebox also describes Lê as mysterious: “Ce qui frappe tout de suite, c’est cette manière qu’elle a d’occuper l’espace avec le silence...” (16). Reviews of her works have always emphasized her Vietnamese childhood and her refugee status. Moreover, reviews of her works are almost always accompanied by a photograph of a young attractive non-Caucasian woman with long straight hair looking at the camera in a demure manner. Lê is viewed through a series of stereotypes—small, mysterious, melancholic, attractive—that orientalize her and reduce her to the Vietnamese Other. As
such, she is expected to represent the plight of the Vietnamese refugee and her Vietnamese community.

In _Le Complexe de Caliban_ (2005), a short collection of essays containing meditations on literature and autobiographical details, Lê confirms that she was led to believe that performing the ethnic stereotype made her more attractive:

> Elle se plaisait à imaginer que son image réveillait chez les natifs la nostalgie d’étran
ges contrées…subjugués par le mystère de l’absolument autre. Jusqu’au jour où elle surprit, dans un regard qui l’écorcha vive, la haine et le mépris qu’inspirait son origine. Elle baissa la tête et détala comme un insecte menacé d’asphyxie…La fleur exotique était piétinée, l’étrangère échaudée n’était plus qu’une ‘métèque’, autant dire un singe parvenu. (31)

Lê realizes that her origins led her to be perceived as "[une] fleur exotique" and "une ‘métèque’." As the critic Catherine Argand puts it so succintly, “le discours dominant la [Lê] voudrait romancière jolie, ou Vietnamiennne de service, ou épigone de Cioran” (28). “Le discours dominant” to which Argand refers is the French literary institution including intellectuals such as editors, critics, and the press. Both Leslie Barnes and Martine Delvaux have argued that Lê is critical of the French literary establishment that sets rules of representation and consumption. In so doing, the French establishment legitimizes certain categories of literature and representation ("Linda Lê's *Voix*" 130-34, "Linda Lê" 205)

Judging from the reception of Lê by the critics and press, Orientalism still influences the way the "Oriental," in this case, Lê is perceived by the Occident. Rey Chow rightly points out that Orientalism as ideological domination is still felt in everyday culture and value (Writing
Diaspora 7-8). The French literary institution whose task is to make statements about the authors, interpret them, authorize opinions of the authors and decide which authors get published shows that Orientalism as ideological domination still exists today in metropolitan France. Intellectuals such as editors, critics, and the press are not that different from traditional Orientalists (travelers, missionaries, journalists, soldiers, colonial administrators, natural historians, statesmen, military strategists) in that their goal is to produce a specific knowledge about Vietnam and the Vietnamese community for the metropolitan French. The French literary establishment is not unlike Orientalism, “a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient [in this case, writers of Vietnamese origins]—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it (Said, Orientalism 3). Reviews of authors are a projection of the will of the literary institution on them. Editors, critics, and the press dictate the content for the writers and their reception, thus controlling and containing them.

Writers of Vietnamese origins are interpellated by the literary institution to write about what Lê calls “ces fameuses ‘paroles d’exil’ qui font tant vibrer la fibre paternaliste de la critique” (“Littérature déplacée” 329). In other words, they are compelled to write about their Vietnamese experience, to confess themselves and to recount their experiences in the first person. They are compelled to take the reader on an emotional roller coaster ride through colonial and present-day Vietnam and the immigrant community in France. In short, they are interpellated by the literary institution to write memoirs, testimonials, autobiographies and novels based on real stories. Kim Lefèvre, Anna Moï, Anne Daurbrun, Jean-Luc Coatalem, Kim Thuy, Kim Doan, and to a lesser extent Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut are authors known for stories about their experiences in Vietnam. Lê’s literary goal is to
challenge the literary establishment that expects her to write about her experience and represent her community. In order to counter the will of the French literary establishment to dictate the content for the writers and exploit the orientalist tendencies of the metropolitan public or what Said calls “aggression, activity, judgement, will-to-truth, and knowledge” (Orientalism 204), Lê proposes the concept of a “displaced literature.”

In the key text “Littérature déplacée” in the collection Tu écriras sur le bonheur, a collection of essays on an international community of authors who transcend all literary affiliations, Lê presents the characteristics of “displaced literature” and explains her literary vision. She defines a “displaced literature” as one written by an author who has left the native country for political reasons. This literature may celebrate exotic tales about the tropics, or autobiographies or novels based on real stories.

Lê refuses the traditional definition of a "displaced literature" as “paroles d’exil.” She redefines it to signify a literature that is not a romanticized reading of the experience of exiles but one that disorients the reader. This literature is produced by a writer who is displaced from the native country and is born of loss of the native language, country, and origins. That is what Lê means by “une littérature placée…sous le signe du deuil original” (330). That is the first definition of a "littérature déplacée.”

Lê elaborates the notion of literature born of exile and loss in a short essay “Les pieds nus” in the collection La part d'exil (1995). In it, she presents a short parable about a little girl fleeing her home during the war shoeless. Her father brings her back a pair of mismatched shoes: the left shoe is hers but the right one is her sister’s. As a result, the girl has to leave her country with two mismatched shoes. Before the war, her self is unified, symbolized by the matching shoes; after the war, her self is divided, symbolized by the
mismatched shoes. The mismatched shoes symbolize the split self and the loss of one’s other half. The girl is required henceforth to learn to walk with “des chaussures dépareillées” (58). Lê uses this girl as a model for the writer of a “displaced literature” or any writer who has chosen to write in a language other than the native language. Like the girl, the writer of a “displaced literature” is a displaced person, an exile. The writer is separated from her or his country, culture and language of origin, and she or he cannot go home. She or he has abandoned her or his country and language to write in a new one. The exiled writer has two disparate selves, the native one and the adopted one, and has to live the dilemma of a double heritage.

To find her or his voice, the writer has to suppress her or his origins. Lê elaborates this idea and uses herself as a model for the exiled writer in the essay "Le mandarin" in *Le Complexe de Caliban* (2005). In the essay, Lê presents the theme of criminality, a theme she associates with writing. Lê compares her decision to write to Eugène de Rastignac’s project to kill an old Mongolian mandarin just by willing it in order to inherit his fortune in *Le Père Goriot*:

Quand je pris la décision d’écrire, il me fallut d’abord faire le deuil de ma langue natale. Tout commença donc par dépossession, ou plus exactement un crime, le meurtre de mon vieux moi. J’avais tué le mandarin....En me lançant dans l’écriture et la conquête de la langue française après avoir trahi la terre et la langue de mon père…je tuais mon vieux moi. (51-52)

Lê uses the old Mongolian mandarin ("le mandarin") to embody her Vietnamese origins or her "vieux moi." For her, the selection of the French language signifies the
murder of the native language which she likens to a crime—"Tout commença donc..."—but one necessary for literary creation.

Lê compares herself or the exiled writer to Caliban, enslaved by Prospero. Like Caliban, she sees herself as a traitor to her native language but inferior in relation to the new language: “L’écrivain qui choisit d’écrire dans une langue autre que celle dans laquelle il a grandi vit son rapport à cette autre langue comme Caliban vit sa soumission à Prospéro...L’écrivain exilé qui choisit d’écrire en français souffre du complexe de Caliban. Sa dévotion à la langue est mêlée d’hérésie” (102). The exiled author writes from a position of heresy as she has abandoned and betrayed her native language to write in a new one. If Caliban is the exiled writer, then Prospero is the French literary establishment or "le discours dominant" to which Catherine Argand refers in her 1999 interview with Lê.

As a "displaced literature" is born from the separation of the exile from the native land, duality, a metaphor for the divided self, informs this literature. Lê writes: “mon rapport à cette autre patrie, la littérature...s’adresse à un double” ("Littérature déplacée" 330). Hence, the twins, the couple and the double are metaphors of the divided self. In the words of Emily Vaughan Roberts, “the duality is both the cross borne by the exile, and the origins of the state of the exile” (“A Vietnamese Voice in the Dark...” 335).

Lê presents the idea of duality in a short parable inspired from a news item in Vietnam in the essay “Littérature déplacée.” She tells the story of a Vietnamese peasant in whose stomach was found a dead fetus. The fetus was that of his twin who had developed inside his body. Lê writes, “Ma patrie, je la porte comme ce jeune paysan portait le foetus de son jumeau. C’est un lien monstrueux. Un lien où le pays natal, le jumeau donc, est couvé et étouffé, reconnu et dénié. Et finalement porté comme on porte un enfant mort. Ce
lien monstrueux commande mon rapport à cette autre patrie, la littérature, qui naît de l’obsession d’une tare, d’une malformation, et qui s’adresse à un double” (“Littérature déplacée” 330). Lê thus makes the connection between “le pays natal” and “le foetus d[j]umeau.” In her interview with Catherine Argand in 1999, she confirms the idea that “le pays natal” refers to Vietnam (31). The twin becomes a metaphor for “le pays natal”—Vietnam, and the burden of guilt she carries because of its death. Lê frames her relationship between herself and her twin (Vietnam) in terms of a grotesque malformation (“un lien monstrueux”). Vietnam is simultaneously feared and desired (“couver et étouffé, reconnu et dénié”).

Lê defines a “displaced literature” as a literature that transcends boundaries. That is the second definition of a “displaced literature.” As Lê puts it, it is “une littérature qui ne trouve pas sa place…[et] qui [n’est n]i d’ailleurs ni d’ici” (“Littérature déplacée” 330). In the essay “Le Complexe de Caliban,” Lê uses the story of the bat who uses its ambiguous position—the bat who claims to be both a bird and a mammal—to escape the weasel’s claws as an allegory for the writer who refuses all forms of literary affiliations:

Ecrivain français? Ecrivain vietnamien d’expression française?
Ecrivain français d’origine vietnamienne? Dans ces moments-là, il se sent comme la chauve-souris qui dans la fable d’Esope découvre devant l’adversité l’ambiguïté de sa position. Quand la chauve-souris est attrapée par la fouine qui déteste les oiseaux, elle déclare qu’elle n’appartient pas au monde des oiseaux. Et lorsqu’elle est attrapée par la fouine qui déteste les mammifères, la chauve-souris déclare qu’elle n’appartient pas au monde des mammifères, mais à celui des oiseaux. Ce stratagème permet à l’écrivain amphibie d’échapper à
A “displaced literature” therefore transcends national categories of literature. It is for this reason that Lê rejects the reading of a direct parallel between Vietnam and the world depicted in her works. In the short essay, “Tangages” in the collection *Vietnam, le destin du lotus* (2010), she confirms the idea and calls for “les oeuvres qui transcendent l’enracinement dans le terroir” (23) and a “littérature universaliste” (23).

Lê defines a “displaced literature” as a literature that is transgressive in terms of its content and style. That is the third definition of a “displaced literature.” Like Antigone, the writer of a “displaced literature” flouts the authority of her native country and that of her adopted country; hence the authority of both the Vietnamese and French literature, refusing either categories. In the words of Lê, “[e]lle cherche à rompre avec l’autorité. L’autorité du pays quitté. L’autorité de la langue empruntée. L’autorité de la tradition littéraire dans laquelle aucune place ne lui est réservée,…c’est-à-dire une littérature qui ne trouverait jamais son lieu, qui ne trouverait jamais le lieu approprié [,] [u]ne littérature qui se voudrait malvenue, voire inconvenante” ("Littérature déplacée" 330-31). A “displaced literature” is a literature that cannot be but illegitimate, inconvenient, and inappropriate ("malvenue,” “inconvenante”). A “displaced literature” legitimizes itself through illegitimacy and the use of a transgressive style and subject matter.

*La littérature d’inconvénance: Redefining Contemporary Vietnamese Francophone Literature*

In this section I show how Lê challenges the French literary establishment’s expectations of a writer of Vietnamese origins with her notion of “displaced literature.” In
other words, I show that unlike her contemporaries of Vietnamese origins, Lê does not affirm her cultural and linguistic difference and make Vietnam the actual subject matter of her novels. Instead she uses an unnamed country, unnamed characters, an imprecision of setting in time and space, the mythical and not the historical, a non-linear structure and an experimental style and themes not limited to the Vietnamese experience to evoke the immigrant experience. She universalizes the immigrant story through the use of myths and dreams, hence moving it from the specific to the universal and preventing a literal reading of the immigrant story. I also show that although Lê does not make Vietnam the subject of her novels, Vietnam is present in an oblique manner through images associated with it in her early works (1987-1995) and appears more explicitly in her later works (1997-present). To what extent do the exiles in Lê’s works embody the characteristics deemed necessary for literary production—exile, duality, suicide, madness? How does Vietnam manifest itself in her works? These are some of the questions raised in this section through analysis of the following works: *Fuir* (1988), *Les Evangiles du crime* (1992), *Calomnies* (1993), *Les dits d’un idiot* (1995), *Les Trois Parques* (1997), *Voix: Une crise* (1998), and *Lettre morte* (1999).

*Fuir* is one of Lê’s early novels, which means she does not make any direct references to Vietnam nor give any historical dates nor any geographical precisions. Vietnam is referred to as “mon pays” (15, 53) and “cette contrée” (42). That said, Vietnam is present through images associated with it—superstitions, customs (“alcool de riz,” “gâteau de riz,” “tunique,” “pantalon”), historical events, and Vietnamese names (Vinh, Tanh, Loan).

As Lê does not seek to reproduce Orientalist stereotypes of the Vietnamese experience, she evokes the Vietnamese immigrant story through the peripatetic experience of
two unnamed exiles in Paris. The two main characters are a Japanese and a (presumably) Vietnamese. Moreover, through her use of a Japanese to figure her Vietnamese origins, Lê moves the Vietnamese immigrant story from the specific to the universal. She does not name most of the secondary characters which also prevents a literal reading of the Vietnamese immigrant story.

The protagonist is deduced to be a Vietnamese because of the circumstances of his flight. He is the first person narrator of the story. The second protagonist is deduced to be a Japanese as he is called “le Japonais” by the narrator. The Vietnamese and the Japanese are exiles living in Paris. The narrator reveals that he is from a village “au nord de cette contrée hostile” (15), implied to be Vietnam. He is cast out by his family after the tree his parents planted at his birth perishes. The protagonist is hence called “le Rabougri” (18) by the villagers. Le Rabougri alludes to his Vietnamese origins through a superstition. He is sent to live with his aunt and studies with a preceptor who turns out to be an impostor. He soon meets a village tramp, Loan, and entertains a perverse relationship with her. He flees to the south and arrives at a city in “le Sud” with its “bidonvilles, suintant la moiteur et la misère” and its “quartier des prostituées,” a city thinly veiled as Saigon (99-105). Le Rabougri alludes to his Vietnamese origins through the exodus of the Northerners to the South after the partition of the country into two countries in 1954. Le Rabougri’s comment about the often hostile treatment of the Northerners by the Southerners in South Vietnam confirms the historical event: “Je regrettais d’avoir fui mon village pour le Sud inconnu, qui me traitait en cousin indésirable” (101). Le Rabougri works several demeaning jobs before obtaining a better one with the help of a rich compatriot. Le Rabougri soon finds himself wed to Tanh, “[une] pimbêche,” in a marriage of convenience. His wife and in-laws deem him unworthy
of them and treat him with condescension. Le Rabougri soon meets Vinh, his homosexual brother-in-law. Another marginal, Vinh is Le Rabougri’s double. They are like a mirror reflecting each other’s outsider status back to the other.

Le Rabougri flees to another country, deduced to be France, with his wife and in-laws. In France, le Rabougri meets another exile, another “paumé,” a Japanese beggar. Nicknamed “le bouffon de tragédie,” “un vaurien galeux,” and “un clochard,” he is a grotesque figure and is dressed in a filthy coat. He reveals that he too has left behind a shameful past in his native country. He is sent to France in exile for setting fire to his parents’ house in Japan. The novel ends with the suicide of the Japanese character. Unable to find a place for himself in the host country, he hangs himself.

The Japanese and le Rabougri form a couple in which each person is the twin of the other. The Japanese figures the Vietnamese origins and the outsider status of le Rabougri. They are brought together by their race and outsider status; both are uprooted from their native country and they are without a family. The outsider status of the exile is summed up in the feelings of le Rabougri: “Rien à moi: ni patrie ni famille. Orphelin par un caprice de sort, exilé par lâcheté, marié par hasard, cocu comme tout le monde. J’étais un bonhomme qui ne comprenait rien à la poésie de l’errance. J’avais le don d’attirer des parasites, des importuns qui se collaient à moi et ne me lâchaient plus” (148-49). As exiles, they have both experienced, in the words of Said, “terminal loss” (“Reflections on Exile” 137)—loss of family, country, language and culture. They both speak “un français correct.” Lê treats language issues through these two characters. Le Rabougri reflects on his feelings of betrayal—he feels he has betrayed his native language by learning French: “Je m’encanaillais en la compagnie de ces mots étrangers, je trahissais mon pays avec une volupté scandaleuse.

In Fuir the Vietnamese experience presents itself through the metaphor of flight and the exilic experience of loss, double/couple, and death. And yet these themes are not unique to the Vietnamese immigrant experience. The novel is thus a universal story which addresses a series of displacements, hence the title Fuir of the novel. With it, Lê challenges the French literary institution that wants her to write the Vietnamese immigrant story.

Les Evangiles du crime (1992), a collection of four stories characterized by a transgressive subject (murder, death, suicide, cannibalism, plagiarism, double) and an experimental style (complex narrative positions) marked Lê’s entry into literature (Yeager, "Foreword." i). Each story bears the name of its main character: “Reeves C.,” “Le Professeur T.,” “Klara V.” and “Vinh L.” Suicide informs the first three stories while plagiarism, cannibalism, and anthropophagy inform the last one. This text, "Vinh L.,” is of interest as it is the only story which features Vietnamese characters.

“Vinh L.” is not a testimonial of survival of the boat people produced for consumption by the metropolitan French readers. The story is a complicated narrative of survival, betrayal, crime and plagiarism consisting of two intertwining voices: Vinh L. and his correspondent, a plagiarist writer. In a series of letters, Vinh L. recounts to the plagiarist writer his story of survival at sea where, with the help of his countrymen, he kills another of
their own. The plagiarist rewrites Vinh L.’s story, because he wants a story that shocks the public. He then destroys the original letters (those by Vinh L.) to cover up his crime. He decides that he does not like his version, and thus, he has to re-write Vinh L.’s original version.

Vinh L. is deduced to be Vietnamese because the plagiarist tells the reader that the person whom he plagiarized has a strange sounding name. The plagiarist who is the narrator is unnamed and is also implied to be Vietnamese because he calls himself a “métèque.” By not naming her characters nor the country and by not focusing the story on the crossing by boat and the refugee relocation centers, Lê prevents the story of the boat people from being read on a literal level and herself from being ghettoized as a writer of Vietnamese origins.

As duality nourishes Lê's exilic narrative, it is not surprising that “Vinh L.” contains multiple couples. All the pairs are united by and in crime. They are all grotesque figures. They are the bad consciences of one another. The first couple are the plagiarist and Vinh L. They are linked together by criminal acts: just like the cannibal, Vinh L., who has killed and ingested another human being at sea, the plagiarist, a “cannibal,” has stolen and plagiarized and ingested another person’s work. The plagiarist recognizes Vinh L. as his double: “Mon livre, pour exister, avait mangé d’autres livres. Vinh L., pour survivre, avait mangé de la chair humaine. En ouvrant mon livre...il s’était vu” (176-77). Moreover, Vinh L. and the plagiarist are both exiles, have both adopted the French language, and are thus both separated from their Vietnamese selves. The second couple are Vinh L. and his accomplice. They are literally both cannibals and have both killed a human being. Later in France, Vinh L. runs into him and calls him “[son] complice, [son] amant criminel. [sa] mauvaise conscience” (185). The third couple are Vinh L. and his victim whose flesh he ate. Vinh L. and his
victim thus share the status of victimhood: just like his victim, Vinh L. is victimized by the plagiarist who stole his story. Vinh L.’s victim is as unscrupulous as his executioner: Vinh L.’s victim is willing to put in his stead an orphan girl for the killing. Through Vinh L.’s statement, “On n’assassine que son double” (190), the theme of duality that nourishes the story becomes apparent. Vinh L.’s victim is his twin other just as Vinh L. is the twin other of the plagiarist and his accomplice. In this short story Lê does not romanticize the plight of the boat people; instead she presents their story as a universal story of survival, plagiarism, cannibalism (physical and literary), duality, and death. With “Vinh L.,” Lê challenges the French literary institution that wants to ghettoize her.

_Calomnies_ with its subject of incest, filiation and writing as slander continued to mark Lê’s entry into literature. It is one of the two novels translated into English (the other being _Les Trois Parques_). In _Calomnies_ Lê evokes the Vietnamese immigrant story through the letters of two narrators, an uncle and his niece. The niece and the uncle are nameless, and have no physical attributes. The reader learns that the niece has an Asian last name and an international first name and that she is “[un] écrivain originaire des anciennes colonies” (37). Vietnam is not mentioned but referred to as “le Pays” (12). Lê’s refusal to name the country and use proper names gives a universal dimension to the Vietnamese immigrant story.

The voice of the uncle is presented in odd chapters and that of the niece in even chapters. The uncle is exiled by his family to a mental hospital in Corrèze in France for having had an incestuous relationship with his sister in Vietnam. She commits suicide in Vietnam while the brother (the uncle) leads a life of isolation in France and eventually also commits suicide. The uncle and his sister form a couple and represent the split self of the exile, the sister representing the abandoned Vietnamese self and the uncle the French self.
The uncle’s relationship with the sister in Vietnam mirrors the exile’s relationship with the native country. Like the uncle who is separated from his sister, the exile is separated from the native country and cannot return home. The uncle is released from a mental institution and is working in a library when the novel begins. He receives a letter from his niece requesting information about the identity of her father. At the end of the story, the uncle sends the niece the notebook which she never reads. Unable to find a place for himself in the host country, the uncle commits suicide by setting fire to the library where he works.

*Calomnies* depicts the world of isolation of the exile not unlike that portrayed in Lê's later novel, *Les Trois Parques*. The uncle and the niece form a couple. The uncle is the twin other of the niece. The uncle and the niece are both "orphans." The uncle is a madman without a country. He is “le Chinetoqué,” “le Taré,” “le Toqué.” And yet he holds the key to the truth; he alone knows if his niece’s father is Vietnamese or a foreign army officer. The niece appears to be illegitimate as she does not know who her real father is.

Both the uncle and the niece are *métèques* who have learned French. The uncle learned French at the mental hospital to communicate with the nurses and to live. The niece has learned French to write. They both see the French language and culture (books) as a tool to advance themselves in the host country and to combat the burden of their Vietnamese past. And yet the French language separates them from their families. Lê’s criticism of writers who write autobiographical tales that pander to the Orientalist tastes of the metropolitan public shows through the uncle’s description of his niece’s profession of writer as a “[d]istillateur de calmants, [ℹ]abricant de sédatifs” (11). Like Ingebord Bachmann and Antonin Artaud, both renegade writers of modernism, Lê believes that a writer should reveal lies.
Lê extends her criticism of the French literary establishment through the character of Ricin, the niece's critic who runs a publishing house. Lê's scorn for the press for appropriating the stories of the Vietnamese refugees and selling them to the public reveals itself through Ricin’s description of the plight of the boat people: “[Les fugitifs] sont des victimes qui ne sont pas mortes des sévices de leurs bourreaux mais d’avoir été remarquées, exhibées à la foire des injustices pour être ensuite envoyées à la casse quand le divertissement a cessé de plaire et que la foule réclame un nouveau numéro…” (42-43). The boat people represent the Vietnamese experience that has been the object of consumption of the press and writers alike.

The shoe repairman and his elderly mother form yet another couple. These two characters are nameless. The shoe repairman is deduced to be Vietnamese as the niece calls him “l’homme de son pays” (15). The mother is deduced to be Vietnamese as she is his mother. She foreshadows La Mandragore in Les dits d’un idiot. She is a grotesque figure, physically deformed and in a wheelchair. Both characters are barely tolerated by their sons. Like most characters, the shoe repairman and his mother are solitary figures.

The shoe repairman stalks and accosts the niece in “la langue natale.” Like Fanon's "évoluée,” the niece avoids him as he represents the link she has with her native language. She is afraid that she will become his “woman” and go back to her "jungle" status and start speaking and writing in her native language. Lê uses the shoe repairman and his mother to represent the Vietnamese language and culture that the niece tries to flee.

Calomnies is a semi-autobiography: like the author, the narrator has an international first name and an Asian last name; she is a writer from a former colony and has a father she idealizes and a mother she finds distant. At the same time the text questions the possibility of
writing an autobiography. *Calomnies*, in fact, resembles an autofiction in that the novel contains fictional and autobiographical details. If writing is a fraudulent act and contains both lies and truths (hence the title of the novel), then it is impossible to write an autobiography. Lê does not want a reading of a direct parallel between the world depicted in her novel and the Vietnamese community. As it happens, in *Calomnies* the themes of unbelonging, unclear origins, madness and writing are not unique to the Vietnamese experience. *Calomnies* is a universal exilic narrative that transcends the experience of any particular group.

In its style *Les dits d’un idiot* marks a departure from others of Lê's novels. It is a highly experimental text written in a stream of consciousness style without punctuation nor paragraphs. The novel is a monologue, and it presents two main characters, the son and the mother who form a couple. The protagonist is the son who is also the narrator. He is a writer whose books nobody reads. He is a “raté” and is working on a novel titled “Déploration” which his mother labels sarcastically “les dits d’un idiot.” The son is a grotesque figure, physically deformed and in a wheelchair since the age of seventeen. The mother is known as La Mandragore. She is named by her son after the mandrake which grows under the gallows. The character of La Mandragore is thus associated with death. She is eventually killed off in her son’s novel.

*Mortesaison* whose name—“morte-saison” ("dead season")—evokes death is a solitary figure and has no family nor friends nor domicile. *Mortesaison* is suspected to be Vietnamese: “Mortesaison débarquait de ce Pays dont elle ne parle jamais” (57). She is a writer for an agency, and her job is to fabricate stories of past glory for its elderly clients. *Mortesaison* is reminiscent of Lê’s other characters: the plagiarist writer in “Vinh L.” and the
niece in *Calomnies*. With the character of Mortesaison, Lê criticizes the act of writing which she likens to a fraudulent act. Mortesaison makes her living off the stories of her clients. She is a "petit lutin saboteur" (24), a secret murderer of the elderly. She is connected to the world of sorcery, embodies the “unheimlich,”¹⁵ and foreshadows the character of La Manchote in *Les Trois Parques*.

Mortesaison has a relationship with two men, le vieux Ragot and le Jumeau. Le vieux Ragot is a wealthy Frenchman. Mortesaison rejects his advances because of her love for le Jumeau. Le Jumeau is her twin from "le Pays." He sends her letters from there. Mortesaison has a platonic incestuous relationship with le Jumeau: “elle se réservait pour celui qui dans sa sentimentalité criminelle elle appelait le Jumeau, c’est avec lui qu’elle voulait se faire enterrer tête-bêche et sur le flanc c’est comme ça qu’ils allaient fricoter ensemble” (105). To figure loss and separation and the incestuous relationship between Mortesaison and her twin, Lê appropriates the famous Vietnamese legend, “la légende du bétel et de la noix d’arec” and renames it “la chanson des amants épuisés”¹⁶ (105). The couple of Mortesaison and Le Jumeau figures duality and the separation of the exile from the native country. Le Jumeau symbolizes the lost native country Mortesaison misses. He is her conscience who is there to remind her of her guilt of having abandoned her native country.

With *Les dits d’un idiot* Lê challenges the authority of the French literary establishment with an experimental style and the scandalous subject of incest and murder. The unnamed characters and themes are not unique to the Vietnamese experience and thus prevent a literal reading of the Vietnamese immigrant story.

*Les Trois Parques* (1997) was on the list of the twenty best novels of the magazine *Lire* and was officially selected for the *Prix Médicis*. The novel marks a turning-point. It is
the first in which Lê mentions the name of Vietnam and evokes more explicitly the Vietnamese immigrant experience, that is, the first wave of boat people. Written following the death of her father in 1995, the novel addresses the theme of the abandoned father. Lê deals with the subject of abandonment and death through mythology, Roman and Greek, and literary myths, Western and Vietnamese. The three women are the three Fates of the title of the novel and the three daughters of King Lear (Hamilton 49). Le ventre rond, symbol of life (she is expecting) is Clotho, the Spinner of the thread of life; Belles Gambettes, symbol of fate is Lachesis, the Disposer of Lots, and La Manchote, harbinger of death, is Atropos, the one who carries the "abhorred shears" and cuts the thread of death.

In Les Trois Parques Lê evokes the Vietnamese diasporic experience through the use of contiguity by calling the three female protagonists “la progéniture dorlotée en exil” (154) and “les princesses en exil” (193). She evokes the country of Vietnam by mentioning at the end of the novel the "S" shape of the unnamed country comprising the communist north, the imperial centre with its fondness for traditions, and the capitalist south: “Le sommeil l’avait quittée à petits pas l’année où la terre en S avait été sectionnée juste sous la veine jugulaire S, un collier de barbelés séparant la tête, rouge de fièvre communiste, du tronc gringalet, arc-bouté sur sa nostalgie des courbettes devant le dernier empereur dédaigneux de ses jambes qui couraient au-devant de la soldatesque étrangère en bons valets de l’impérialisme” (219). One can see the three principal female characters in the description of Vietnam: La Manchote who is the main narrator, is the head; le ventre rond with her need to transmit her heritage, is the body and the self-absorbed, modern and frivolous Belles Gambettes is the pair of legs.
Le ventre rond is, on the surface, the model immigrant. She is well integrated into the French community and married to “Clousvispitons,” a Swiss businessman named after the hardware business he owns. She lives in a new gleaming apartment, and she is expecting a child. Below her affluent exterior, she is, however, not too happy with her husband “avec ses manies de vieux garçon, ses économies de bouts de chandelles, sa voix terne, ses phrases moroses” (136). Le ventre rond also represents the immigrants' need to accumulate material wealth and social success. The reader learns that her motivations to bring her father to France are questionable. She wants to show off her apartment and her marriage to her father and see him bow before her future son ("s'inclinant devant le petit prince") (25).

The younger sister is nicknamed Belles Gambettes by the narrator for she has long legs. She works at an office administering questionnaires over the telephone. She represents French youth who wants nothing to do with traditions. She is the “modern girl”: she is always surrounded by men, and she smokes and is often depicted in a pair of cutoff shorts. She is in an unhappy relationship with her parasitic French boyfriend, Théo. She is waiting to borrow money from her sister for an abortion. She is trapped in an unsatisfying life filled with “le café et les clopes, les croquettes du chat et la tambouille à la cantine de l’institut de sondage” (56). Like most exiles, she hides a troubled past revealed by her childhood memories of the Vietnam War.

The cousin is nicknamed La Manchote for she is missing a hand. She is a grotesque figure and is physically deformed. She is always dressed in black and scratching her stump. She had her hand cut off as punishment for having an incestuous relation with her twin brother. La Manchote anchors the story as the first person narrator and describes in minutiae
the inner thoughts, memories and activities of the other characters. She recounts the story leading to her lost hand:

Des sorcières et des fantômes, grand-mère en avait plein la bouche, dit ma cousine…grand-mère ajoutant à la farine, tout en racontant comment, la nuit, les mains des sorcières tombaient de leur attache et volaient dans le noir à la recherche d’une âme à capturer. Celui qui était pris dans son sommeil ne sentait rien qu’une intense brûlure au cœur, mais, la nuit suivante, sa main à son tour se détachait de son corps pour aller saisir un cœur endormi, puis elle revenait se greffer au poignet avant que le jour se lève. Les mains devaient faire vite, ne pas s’attarder à caresser le visage ou le torse nu de leur proie, car si les sorcières tombaient amoureuses, leur main restait accrochée au cœur du dormeur et, au lieu de le brûler, elle se laissait consumer jusqu’au petit matin, où il ne restait plus d’elle qu’une poignée de cendres. Les sorcières amoureuses ne voyaient jamais revenir leur main, mais c’était rare: elles ne tombaient amoureuses que de leur pareil, leur moitié humaine; et, si elles lui donnaient leur main, l’amour les ravalait au rang d’infirmes, elles perdaient tout, leur main, leurs pouvoirs, et même leur moitié humaine, qui ne se remettait pas d’une telle nuit d’amour et sombrait dans la folie ou s’abandonnait à la mort. (231-32)

The story of ghosts and witches inscribes the novel in the space of the “unheimlich” and in the realm of myth. After she loses her hand, like her mythological sister, Cassandre, she is gifted with prophecy. The narrator tells the reader:
Les sorcières amoureuses étaient bannies de leur tribu, condamnées à se mêler aux mortels, où elles vivaient en parias, se nourrissant du souvenir de leur main morte sur le coeur de leur moitié humaine. Elles comprenaient la langue des fantômes et les fourmillements de leur moignon les avertissaient des catastrophes, mais il n’était plus en leur pouvoir d’en accélérer le mouvement ni d’en détourner le cours. (238)

She is now separated from her hand. Just as she is separated from her hand, she is separated from her brother who represents her native country. Thus, La Manchote, like the niece in *Calomnies*, is “un corps amputé de ses membres” (*Calomnies* 105) and represents loss.

The other characters are also known by their nicknames: le roi Lear; his old friend, le couineur; and lady Chacal (lady Jackal). They represent the voices from the native country. Like his namesake in Shakespeare, le roi Lear is abandoned by his daughters and figures betrayal and abandonment. As he represents Vietnam, Vietnamese geographical markers such as “Saigon” and “Vung Tau” are mentioned in association with him. He lives in Saigon and is a lonely figure. The father’s friend is the Catholic priest, abandoned by everyone, even God. A victim of postwar communism in Vietnam, the priest is nicknamed le couineur: he lost his voice from constant screaming during his internment. At the end of the novel, both the father and his friend die. The father pedals his bicycle and vanishes. The Catholic priest commits suicide by setting fire to the church. The manner in which the two characters die inscribes the novel in the realm of the “unheimlich.”

The grandmother of the two sisters and their cousin, lady Chacal, also represents Vietnam. Like a bird of prey, she kidnaps the three girls from le roi Lear and brings them to
France. She is already dead but haunts the novel as a ghost. According to Vietnamese customs, the family is composed of the living and the dead (Cung Giu Nguyen Volontés d'existence 20). Lady Chacal is thus part of the family. She is also present in the form of memories and the Vietnamese recipes she left behind for the women. With her character, Lê inscribes the novel in the space of the “unheimlich.”

Language and food are important factors in the construction of immigrant identity. It is not surprising that the adjective “vietnamien” is used in relation to the reflections of the three women characters on language. Language figures loss and guilt. In order to be assimilated in the new culture, the three communicate with one another in French. The acquisition of the French language signifies necessarily an abandonment of their “patois d’enfance” (13) which explains the negative comments regarding their native language. Belles Gambettes calls it “[les] poussières de vietnamien” (13). La Manchote calls it “[les] bafouilles du roi Lear” and “[un] parler barbare” (13). Most of the time, the women use disparaging terms to describe the language, calling it “un vietnamien strident” (68).

Food is another preoccupation in the novel. Lê associates cooking with writing in that both acts involve the ingestion of the other. Just as cooking and eating imply the incorporation of the other, writing necessarily implies the making of others’ material one’s own. In Les Trois Parques food does not lend an exotic touch to the story but pushes the boundaries of acceptability. The menu of dishes attests to the unacceptable side of food: “le sang d e canard parfumé au basilica,” “les petites oreilles porcines,” “le nid d’hirondelles,” “le potage au tamarin et au poisson,” and “fruits verts à la croquet-au-sel et au piment rouge.” Even the preparation of the dishes for example, the cooking of the prawns “roulées dans la farine, qui attendaient d’être plongées dans l’inféral chaudron électrique rempli
d’huile bouillonnante, et d’en ressortir dans leur enveloppe croustillante, se recroquevillant…” (233) evokes dismemberment and death. More importantly, the cooking of dishes in which meat and seafood are chopped up into small pieces evokes the Vietnam War during which the victims resemble pieces of meat: “toute le monde était bel et bien mort, débité en quartiers, un bras par-ci, un pied par-là, des viscères servis froid, une oreille dans une sauce rouge, des morceaux de cervelle dans un nid de cheveux d’ange calcinés” (196).

In Les Trois Parques illegitimacy takes place not only on the level of content—the incestuous relationship, ghosts and witches—but also on the level of form. Written in an experimental style—the non-traditional chronology, the absence of punctuation, paragraph and chapter breaks, a stream of consciousness style of narration, multiple narrators, different registers, digression and flashbacks, Lê challenges the French literary institution that wants her to use a conventional style, that is, first person narration and a transparent style. The use of Greek mythology and Shakespeare, coupled with a scandalous subject and a highly experimental style prevents a literal reading of the Vietnamese immigrant experience.

Voix: Une crise (1998) is the second novel of the trilogy. The text is written after Lê’s hospitalization in a mental institution following the death of her father in 1995. As the subtitle of the novel indicates (“Une crise”), the story, told in the first person, is the voice (“voix”) of a female patient who is going through a mental crisis. The narrator is in a mental institution. It comes as no surprise that Voix consists of a series of hallucinations written in short and disjointed paragraphs mirroring the mental state of the narrator. In her hallucinations she sees images of headless bodies, drowned bodies, dead birds, three-headed dogs, the ghost of her deceased and abandoned father and is pursued by persecutors of a repressive authority, “l’Organisation.” The men from “l’Organisation” tell her to burn her
manuscript which they label a “petite romance tire-larmes”. "L'Organisation" could be read as the repressive French literary establishment that dictates material for writers. "L'Organisation" could also be read as Prospero who enslaves Caliban, the writer. They try to contain the narrator by dictating the content and telling her to choose them as the subject. They also tell her to burn the letters of her father as they represent the link with her past and her language. "L'Organisation" could also be read as the narrator's doctors and psychiatrists who decide when she can leave the mental institution. The novel ends with the suicide of the narrator: she finds peace in death as she lies in the snow.

As *Voix* is the second novel in the trilogy that addresses the theme of the abandoned father, images of the deceased father haunt the novel. He is already dead and appears as a ghost engulfed in flames: "Mon père réapparaît sur l'autre rive, enveloppé dans un suaire. Je l'appelle. Il prend feu" (63). He accuses her of abandoning him and burning his letters. The couple of the father and the daughter figure the two selves of the narrator. The father figures the narrator's Vietnamese self and her failed filial piety and the daughter the French self who is trying to make it in the host country.

*Lettre morte* (1999) is the last novel of the trilogy. As it is one of Lê's later works, she uses the word "vietnamese." The novel is about a woman who writes to come to terms with the death of her father. The novel is written in the first person and takes the form of a letter in which the narrator confesses to Sirius, her silent interlocutor, and to her deceased father her guilt for having left him behind in his country and for having a doomed affair with Morgue, a married man. The dead letter of the title refers to the one the narrator writes to the silent interlocutor. It also refers to that addressed to the father who is deceased.
The narrator is plagued by thoughts of her deceased father and feelings of guilt. She blames herself for not being with her father while he was dying in Vietnam: "J'ai laissé mon père mourir seul" (10). To figure her guilt, Lê uses the story of a loyal Vietnamese princess wrongly killed by her father who thought she had betrayed him: “l’histoire de cette princesse qui avait, sans le vouloir, trahi son père. Il la décapita. La tête de la princesse, en roulant dans l’eau, se transforma en une perle blanche et pure, prevue de sa loyauté. Mais je ne suis pas cette princesse-là. Je l’ai trahi. Je l’ai laissé mourir seul” (27). This Vietnamese legend evokes another tale of guilt and abandonment, a Western one, *King Lear* of Shakespeare, in which the youngest daughter, Cordelia, is rejected by her father who mistakes her honesty for her lack of affection. Lê thus links this novel with the first of the trilogy.

The narrator resurrects her spectral father through dreams, memories and letters. Her father merges with her two lovers, Morgue (who metamorphoses into a bird of prey) and Sirius. These nightmarish dreams and memories mirror the narrator's troubled mental state which is in turn reflected in the use of disjointed paragraphs. As punishment for having abandoned her father, she has an abusive relationship with Morgue and with all her lovers.

The daughter and the father form a couple. The spectral father appears in the form of letters and represents her Vietnamese childhood. The narrator feels that she is bound to the dead body of the father, as in the Mézence method: "C'est le supplice de Mézence que j'endure, attachée à un mort, main contre main, bouche contre bouche, dans un triste embrasement" (9). She feels that she carries her dead father (her past) like a burden:

> Je porte le cadavre de mon père sur mon dos, mes épaules ploient sous la charge. Je suis comme ces fils qui portent leur mère malade au
Just as Lê confesses in the 1999 interview with Catherine Argand and the essay "L’autre" published in _Clair obscur_ in 2011 that she carries Vietnam like a dead body (21), the narrator carries her father, figure for the native country and the Vietnamese self, in her.

Unlike _Les Trois Parques_ and _Voix_, _Lettre morte_ ends on a positive note. The narrator completes her grieving process for both her father and Morgue and comes to terms with her guilt and sorrow:

> Il me semble que des lettres de mon père ne monte plus la voix des reproches, mais un appel pour que je tourne les yeux vers la lumière.

> Le mort est dans cette chambre, mais il n’est pas là pour me tourmenter. Il panse les plaies, il adoucit l’amertume. Les mots de ses lettres sont comme des notes célestes qui jouent une douce mélodie.

> J’entends venir la vie. Ses ailes se posent doucement sur moi. Je vais quitter cet appartement, il n’a vu que la destruction, entendu que des cris de détresse. Je dois m’en aller. Ainsi, l’ombre de Morgue ne pèsera plus sur moi. Adieu, Morgue, gué de la mort, amer amour, amour tu, amertume, tumeur de l’amour. Le jour se lève, Sirius. (104-5)

The father is no longer a judge ("mon père ne monte plus la voix des reproches"). He encourages her to go forward ("tourne[r] les yeux vers la lumière"). The father merges with
Morgue, and they are both no longer a burden to her. The narrator bids farewell to the two men as well as to her guilt and her recrimination in a lyrical outpouring of love and bitterness.

Her trilogy relates stories of “déracinés” mixed in with “des éclats de la mythologie,” containing “des traces du Vietnam” (Lê, "Tangages" 23-24). In Lettre morte “[l]es traces du Vietnam” are present in the memories of the father and the customs—the use of white as the color of mourning, fake money, and funeral music. The narrator uses the word "vietnamese" in talking about the death of her father: “La formule, en vietnamien, disait non la mort, mais la perte. Mon père s’était perdu en route, s’était égaré, n’avait pas trouvé le chemin du retour” (16).

Are Lê’s characters not her double—exiles, outsiders in the native country and the host country ("étranges étrangers"), métèques who have abandoned their native language to write and communicate in French, orphans who carry their twin other like a dead body, and anthropophagi who appropriate the ideas of others and make them their own? Her characters live through crises she considers necessary for literary creation—madness, suicide, and displacement. Her exilic narratives characterized by themes also found in other exile immigrant narratives and an experimental style with different registers, multiple narrators and points of view, Western intertextual references challenge her critics’ emphasis on her Vietnamese origins and what Said calls the “Western projection onto and will to govern [the Vietnamese community]” (Orientalism 95).

The Construction of Women in Lê’s oeuvre

In Lê’s works women characters are mostly malevolent. They are neither protectors, nourishers, nor guarantors of traditions, Western or Eastern. All the women blur the
boundaries between the acceptable and the unacceptable. They do not fit the Western nor the Confucian received idea of women as mothers, wives and daughters. The women can roughly be divided into three overlapping groups: i) women as phallic mothers\textsuperscript{19} and "Jocaste,"\textsuperscript{20} ii) dissolute women and, iii) witches or mad women.

The first group is the phallic mother and mother as "Jocaste." The term "phallic mother" comes, of course, from Freud: she is a mother who in the eyes of her child retains the symbolic power of the phallus or the qualities of a powerful man ("Femininity" 126, 130). The phallic mothers include la Mandragore, le ventre rond, Madamère, lady Chacal, the shoe repairman’s mother, the mother in \textit{Fuir}, the aunt in \textit{Fuir} and Tanh. Lê’s mother figures also do not fit the traditional role of women as mothers as guarantors of traditions and nourishers. Lê’s mothers offer no protection nor affection to their children.

In \textit{Les Trois Parques}, in the absence of the father and the mother who died at childbirth, it is lady Chacal, the grandmother, who assumes the role of the mother and matriarch. Like her namesake, the jackal, defined by the 1992 American Heritage Dictionary as “any of several doglike mammals of the genus \textit{Canis} of Africa and southern Asia that are mainly foragers feeding on plants, small animals, and occasionally carrion” (960), lady Chacal (lady Jackal) is a wealthy owner of a funeral parlor in Vietnam and preys on the dead and the unfortunate. She is rapacious and despotic and thus evokes Freud’s phallic mother. She kidnaps the two girls from her son-in-law, le roi Lear, and arranges their escape to France. She then raises the two girls and their cousin. As a ghost, she continues to act like a powerful man and exercize power over the young women. When not invited to the wedding of the oldest daughter, she sabotages the reception, inundating the reception hall and sending it into darkness.
In *Les Dits d’un idiot* la Mandragore also evokes the phallic mother. She is named after a southern European plant with a branched root and is portrayed, like her namesake, as a clinging, manipulative and controlling woman. She is neither a protector nor a nourisher. Instead, she seeks attention from her son and is powerful enough to get him to satisfy her needs. The son/narrator writes, “la Mandragore a des racines robustes elle se cramponnera avec la dernière énergie” (79). Not only is she controlling, she is also manipulative. She calls him three times a day, comes to see him, and then rushes off immediately as soon as she arrives. In order to get him to see her, she invents all kinds of illnesses. The mother makes her son feel responsible for her welfare: “il est dans l’ordre des choses qu’un fils régale sa mère qu’un homme ait des attentions pour celle qui lui a donné le jour” (37). La Mandragore (also known as Ariane) reminds her son that taking care of her welfare is a debt he owes her: “tu me dois des égards” (15). At the end of the novel, the reader learns that the son is so fed up with his controlling mother that he writes an ending to his novel in which she tends to his every need:

> c’est dans mon lit que j’écrirai ma Déploration mon testament sous l’œil de la Mandragore qui montera la garde près des dépouilles opimes elle veillera sur mon corps exténué le temps que je dégorge mon poison que je me purge à l’encre noire de ma haine d’Ariane et que la chiasse sentimentale me vide me laisse pantelant bon à manger les mandragores par les racines. (202-03)

She is finally killed off in his novel for she is a burden.

In *Les dits d’un idiot* la Mandragore is also a "Jocaste." She has a relationship with her son that borders on incest. The son hints at the incestuous relationship by telling the
reader that he calls her by her first name ("Ariane") as a lover would. He describes the meetings with his mother as “des tête-à-tête amoureux ces tête-à-tête qu’elle n’a jamais pu obtenir de son mari…Ariane y traînait sa carcasse diaphane sa détresse de femme trahie abandonnée par son mari son fils” (37-39).

In *Les Trois Parques*, le ventre rond is the matriarch in the absence of the mother who died while giving birth, the father back in the native country and the grandmother, lady Chacal who is already dead. Le ventre rond evokes the phallic mother and invites her younger sister and her cousin to her apartment every Sunday. She is the one responsible for keeping regular contact with their father through letters over the past twenty years. Like a powerful man, she decides when their father should visit France. She is the one who is going to pay for the younger sister's abortion. Le ventre rond is thus the guardian of traditions or "la gardienne du temple" (13). She is the only one who can read, speak and write in the native language. She is the only one who can decipher their father’s letter and grandmother’s recipes. Yet the reader is not certain if she is going to teach her future born their "patois d'enfance."

In *Calomnies*, the mother nicknamed Madamère is the matriarch in the absence of the father. Like a powerful man, she holds the truth, for she is one of the two persons who can answer the female protagonist’s question on filiation. She is a depressive person and is reminiscent of the narrator's mother in *Voix* and *Lettre morte*.

The shoe repairman’s mother spends her day in the corner of the shop, watching her son work. She is reminiscent of La Mandragore. Both the shoe repairman's mother and La Mandragore are burdens to their sons. They are like a dead child and a dead weight, literally and figuratively. The shoe repairman has to carry his mother for she is in a wheelchair.
Eventually in *Calomnies* and *Les dits d'un idiot* the son rids himself of the burden by murdering the mother.

In *Fuir* the mother is neither a nourisher nor a supporter. She kicks the narrator out of the family after a bad omen happens. The aunt assumes the role of the mother and shelters the narrator but is mistreated by him. The aunt also evokes "Jocaste." She is in an incestuous relationship with the narrator:

> Elle m'appelait son 'fils' pendant son sommeil, elle se levait la nuit pour admirer mon corps que la couverture légère dissimulait mal...Moi, son fils?...Sans hâte, avec la lenteur méthodique des filles de joie, ma tante se dénudait devant moi, exhibant son ventre ballonné, marqué de taches rouges, séquelles d'une maladie de peau, et barré d'une mystérieuse cicatrice qui partait du nombril et dardait vers la mammelle gauche. (38)

Maternity is abhorrent to Tanh, the narrator's wife. She does not feel any remorse over the death of her daughter: "La mort de sa fille ne chagrinait pas plus Tanh que si le chien de la maison avait claqué" (167).

The second category consists of women who are considered as dissolute women. They include Belles Gambettes, Madamère, Tanh, and the aunt. They are Vietnamese “Eves” and “Lolitas.” Like Said's Oriental women, they express unlimited sensuality. Unlike them, they are created by Lê to figure the inacceptable. In *Les Trois Parques* Belles Gambettes falls into this category. She is a temptress who has no scruples casting aside men she has seduced. She smokes, flaunts her beauty, and dresses in a provocative manner. She is hence known as “la Lolita d’Asie” and “la nymphe.” Maternity is abhorrent to Belles
Gambettes. As she does not want to be "un champignon déambulatoire à sabot bifide" (58), she wants to have her unborn child aborted and considers him an abscess.

In *Calomnies* Madamère is a dissolute woman. She is a seductress., “un sphinx stupide et capricieux, dont le mystère résidait dans sa capacité à retenir tous les hommes qui passaient en levant les yeux vers eux [,] une poupée tueuse à la peau douce, aux jambes longues, au buste ferme, aux lèvres peintes d’un rouge violacé…” (29-30). She has an affair while married. She is not a model wife. Like Said’s Oriental woman, Madamère expresses unlimited sexuality but contrary to her, she affirms her sexuality.

In *Fuir* the aunt who takes over as the mother figure is not a model wife either. She is a promiscuous woman: she has cheated on her husband, hence, the nickname of “l’Infidèle.” Tanh, the narrator’s wife, is another character who is a promiscuous woman. All these women figure transgression.

The third category consists of women who are witches and mad women. They include Mortesaison, la Manchote, the niece in *Calomnies* and the female narrators of *Voix* and *Lettre morte*. They are like "Antigones" or female rebels who flout patriarchal authority with their perverse mode of desire—incest, madness and suicide. They also figure the inappropriate and the inconvenient. The three modes of desire allow the female subjects to escape alienation and to reclaim their self-determination. Like Cassandre, after having had her hand amputated (i.e., after having her twin brother torn away from her ), La Manchote acquires the powers to predict the future such as the doomed reunion between le roi Lear and the future grandson. Similarly, after Mortesaison is separated from her twin brother, she becomes “une sorcière” (24). The women in Lê’s novels also reclaim their self-determination by committing suicide. The niece in *Calomnies* decides to remain in the margins and cultivate
her outsider status. She vanishes at the end of the novel. In *Voix*, after the Organization rejects her manuscript, the narrator reclaims her self-determination through suicide—she slashes her wrists and vanishes at the close of the novel.

None of these women characters fits the Western or the Confucian received idea of women as mothers, wives and daughters. Lê's women are transgressive, violent, and cruel, and inhabit the space of illegitimacy. They are, also, in the words of Gillian Ni Cheallaigh, mutilated, almost killed, silenced, mad, and finally killed off (“Voyelles mutilées, consonnes aux jambages arrachées: Linda Lê’s compulsive tracing, erasing, and re-tracing fragments of the self in writing” 439). This is because Lê, as a writer of displaced literature, seeks to counter Orientalist stereotypes of the female Vietnamese Other.

**Conclusion**

Unlike the French literary establishment that believes that writers of Vietnamese origins can only perform the stereotype of the Vietnamese Other by writing exotic tales about themselves in a transparent first person narrative, Lê seeks to make the reader uncomfortable with her transgressive works both in content and style. Lê's characters are her twin double; they are exiles and orphans with disparate selves mirroring Lê's French and Vietnamese selves; they are *métèques* writers writing in a "borrowed language." It is through writing that Lê succeeds in bringing together the two selves. One of her characters, Vinh L., best sums up her work: "Ecrire dans une langue qui n'est pas la sienne, c'est faire l'amour avec un cadavre" (Lê, *Les Evangiles du crime* 332). Her literary world is a paper corpse and a pessimistic world characterized by themes of death, madness, incest, displacements, duality, plagiarism and cannibalism. Lê’s fiction and non-fiction works challenge the establishment's will to represent, control and contain the Vietnamese community and to make them into knowable
commodities. Jack Yeager is right to point out that Lê’s works beginning with *Les évangiles du crime*, characterized by their transgressive subject matter and style, show what Lê terms a “literature déplacée” (“Culture, Citizenship, Nation" 263). In short, her works challenge “le ghetto et l’Orientale désorientée” (Lê, "Tangages" 41).
Notes


2 In *Nouvelles écrivaines: nouvelles voix ?* Nathalie Morello and Catherine Rodgers list Linda Lê as one of the new fifteen rising women's voices of the French literary scene in the 1990s (the others being Christine Angot, Geneviève Brisac, Marie Darrieussecq, Agnès Desarthe, Virginie Despentes, Régine Detambel, Anne Françoise Garreta, Louise Lambrichs, Hélène de Monferrand, Lorette Nobécourt, Amélie Nothomb, Lydie Salvayre, Yasmina Reza, and Pascale Roze). See Nathalie Morello et Catherine Rodgers.


Calomnies and Autres jeux avec le feu have both been translated into Vietnamese.

In 2010, Lê received the Prix Wepler for Cronos; in 2011, the Prix Renaudot Poche for A l’enfant que je n’aurai pas; and in 2012, she was shortlisted for the Prix Goncourt for Lame de fond.

Rey Chow argues that the ethnic writer is coerced into performing the cultural stereotype of the ethnic that keeps her in her place. See Rey Chow, “Keeping Them in Their Place: Coercive Mimeticism and Cross-Ethnic Representation.”

For the role of the institutional practices (critic, education system, media) that confer a literary and economic value on a literary work, see Rey Chow, “Keeping Them in Their Place” 95-127; Leslie Barnes, Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature, 191 and “Linda Lê’s Voix and the Crisis of Representation” 130.

See Kim Lefèvre, Anna Moi, Anne Daurbrun, Jean-Luc Coatalem, Kim Thuy and Kim Doan whose works are listed in the bibliography all set their stories in Vietnam. Most of their works are novels of return in which the narrators relate their journey back to Vietnam and their conflicted feelings when confronted with their families and past in the first person. Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut differs slightly from the others in that her novels are not first person narratives but historical crime fiction set in 17th-century Vietnam. She still panders to the
Orientalist tastes of the French reader as she sets her story in Vietnam, and uses an exotic culinary Vietnamese repertoire.

10 For a good explanation of Linda Lê’s notion of “displaced literature,” see Michèle Bacholle-Bošković, Linda Lê, and Leslie Barnes, *Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature*, 199-228.

11 Lê’s Caliban is an allusion to the slave to Prospero in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and Octave Mannoni’s Caliban, symbol of the colonized and the "dependence complex." See Octave Mannoni, *Prospero and Caliban*.

12 For the concept of duality in which the parts complete, resemble or repel, see Karl Miller, *Doubles*; Otto Rank, *The Double*; Plato, *Symposium*; and Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny.”

13 Lê does not believe in a literal reading of the Vietnamese immigrant story in her works. That said, in order to understand the veiled Vietnamese immigrant experience depicted in her texts, it is necessary to understand the history of Vietnamese immigration in France. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the immigrants were mainly Whites of European and East European origins, consisting of Armenians, East European Jews, Belgians, Spaniards, Italians, and Portuguese. French decolonization in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s brought a different wave of immigrants into France, especially from North African countries, sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia. These immigrants were non-Whites, Muslims, Buddhists and thus less easily assimilable than the immigrants of European origins into French culture. Scholars such as Gisèle Bousquet, Le Huu Khoa and Daniel Hémery divide Vietnamese immigration in France into three different waves. The first wave consists of Vietnamese who arrived in France in the early twentieth century—students, workers, and
military personnel. The second wave consists of Vietnamese repatriated to France after the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. This group comprises Vietnamese of French nationality, Franco-Vietnamese Eurasians, and those who wanted to flee the Second Indochina War. Women and families formed a part of the second wave. The third wave settled in France after 1975 and is subdivided into two groups. The first consists of those who fled Vietnam after the victory of the North over the South and the departure of the Americans. Lê and her characters belong to this group. Upon arrival they were held in refugee relocation centers. They were instructed by French authorities to declare themselves as “refugees.” In comparison to the second wave immigrants, the third wave consisting of nearly one hundred thousand refugees who fled from Vietnam between 1976 and 1979 were more traumatized in that they witnessed the fall of Saigon and experienced the separation of families and the installation of the repressive and corrupt communist regime, and the reeducation camps. This wave, more so than the second wave immigrants, did not believe that it is possible to return to their homeland because of the installation of the communist régime which also explains the feeling of alienation on their part. The second group consists of those from the post-1979 period and came from a lower socio-economic background than the first group who came from an urban middle class background. In Les Vietnamiens en France: Insertion et identité (1985), Le Huu Khoa, a French sociologist, points out that the “refugee category” does not apply to the Vietnamese immigrants who left Vietnam after 1975 but have been used by the media for political purposes. He explains that the so-called “refugees” did not flee their country only for political reasons as the media has led the public to believe. They feared persecution by the communist regime and did not want to face the problems at home such as unemployment and a low standard of living. According to the
French government, Lê is technically considered a “refugee” as she came in 1977. She, however, considers herself one of “les rapatriés” as her mother’s family has French nationality, which she states in an interview with Thierry Guichard in 1995. For more information, refer to Le Huu Khoa, Les Vietnamiens en France, 9-110; Gisèle L. Bousquet, Behind the Bamboo Hedge, 71-105; and Marie-Paule Ha, “Vietnamese Diaspora in France.”

14 Sabine Loucif argues that by using aspects of the fantastic literature and allegorizing the exile story (the American Heritage Dictionary defines allegory as a literary, dramatic, or pictorial device in which characters and events stand for abstract ideas, principles, or forces, so that the literal sense suggests a parallel, deeper symbolic sense), Linda Lê moves the story from the literal to the universal level in Les Trois Parques. See Sabine Loucif, “Le fantastique dans Les Trois Parques de Linda Lê.”

15 In his 1919 essay on “The Uncanny,” Freud defines the “uncanny” or the “unheimlich” as “everything...that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (225); and also as “often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes, and so on” (244). See Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny.”

16 For one of the many versions of the “legend of the betel leaf and the areca nut,” see Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet, La femme au Viet Nam, 317-19.

17 For articles on the theme of food in Linda Lê’s works, see Tess Do, “The Vietnamese Cooking Legacy” and her “Entre salut et damnation.”

18 There is a dearth of articles on the role of mother in Lê’s works. For the role of the mother, see Michèle Bacholle-Bošković, Linda Lê. L’écriture du manque, 163-86;

19 For the concept of "phallic mother," see Sigmund Freud, “Revision of the Theory of Dreams,” and “Femininity.” In his essay on "Femininity" in New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (1933), Freud formulates the term “phallic mother” to refer to a pre-oedipal and powerful maternal figure who has escaped castration in the child’s mind (126, 130). Freud’s concept on the subject of the uncastrated imaginary mother can be traced to Karl Abraham who situates the phallic mother in the realm of fantasy and dream work in his 1922 essay “The Spider as a Dream Symbol.” Freud’s concept of the phallic mother can also be traced to his 1910 biographical study of Leonardo da Vinci in which da Vinci remembered an incident in his early childhood (“Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood”). When he was still in his cradle, a vulture came down, opened his mouth with his tail and struck his lips many times with his tail. Freud turns to Egyptian mythology to support his case for reading the vulture as the child’s phallic mother. He points out that the mother is represented by a picture of a vulture in the hieroglyphics of the ancient Egyptians. The Egyptians believed there was no male in the vulture species and hence the vulture-mother becomes a representative of partenogenesis or of asexual female reproduction in Freud’s text. It has been suggested that the artist was born out of wedlock since his father married another woman. The child must have spent the first years of his childhood alone with his birth mother without a father. Freud identifies the artist as having had an empowered mother, one who had to perform parental roles for the child (112-35).
In Greek mythology, Jocasta is the wife of Laius and then the wife of their son, Oedipus. In psychoanalytic theory, the “Jocasta Complex” refers to the incestuous desire of a mother towards her son. See Raymond de Saussure, "Le Complexe de Jocaste," 118-22.
Conclusion

For centuries Vietnam and the Vietnamese perspective have been outside Western history and outside discussion. During the Chinese domination (111 B.C.-939 A.D.) the history of Vietnam recorded in Chinese annals, and the French colonization in the works of the scholars of the Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient relegated the Vietnamese perspective to the margins and to the history of the vanquished.\(^1\) Annam (signifying "pacified south") was the name given by the Chinese victors of the Tang dynasty (618 A.D.-907 A.D.) to the vanquished Vietnamese and the name was used by another victor, this time, the French, to designate the country. The Vietnamese did not have any right to call their country by its proper name and think of themselves as Vietnamese during French colonization (1858-1954). They had to use the names of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina and refer to themselves as "Annamites" or "indigènes." The term "Annamites" was used by the French to refer to all Vietnamese people and "Annam" to all of Vietnam until 1945.\(^2\)

After the French conquest the name of Vietnam was therefore practically forgotten by the rest of the world. In literature Vietnamese writers of French expression and colonial writers alike used the name "Annam," "annamite," and "Indochine" in their works. Hence numerable collections of folktales and novels such as Thi-Bâ, fille d’Annam (1905) by Jean d’Esme, De la rizière à la montagne: moeurs annamites (1920) by Jean Marquet, Indochine la douce (1935) by Nguyen Tien Lang, Contes et légendes d’Annam by Le Van Phat (1925), Rêves d’un campagnard annamite (1940) by Tran Van Tung, La Tortue d’or: Contes du pays d’Annam (1940) by Marguerite Triaire and Trinh Thuc Oanh and L’Indochine à travers les textes (1944) by Marguerite Triaire. After 1945, authors begin to use "Vietnam" and "Vietnamese" in their works. Trinh T. Minh Ha pays tribute to Vietnam by reminding the
American public of her country's name and history in her 1992 documentary, “Surname Viet Given Name Nam.”

The Vietnamese had been constantly reminded that their country was backwards and they had no culture, literature and history of their own by Orientalists such as Giran, Bonnetain, Pujarniscle, and Pouvourville. This ideological domination, that is, control of the mental structures of the populace was further carried out in the Franco-Vietnamese schools that consisted of the two-tiered system of education beginning in quốc ngữ and then in French and that aimed at eradicating the ancestral values of the Vietnamese and replacing them with French ones. The new curriculum ended up by inflicting what Spivak calls “epistemic violence” on the indigenous population. The Franco-Vietnamese schools created a French educated elite who were from a privileged class and represented a very limited cross-section of the Vietnamese population. The majority of colonial Vietnam was neither francophone nor bilingual. The French-educated elite often collaborated with the colonial power and formed part of the structures of the colonial power but were denied access to French society on all levels. Alienated from their own values and culture, they were still not quite French and were in the words of Homi Bhabha, “mimic men.” Still, some among the French-educated elite felt the need to affirm and safeguard their literature, culture and values. This resulted in the creation of a literature of French expression or what is known in the U.S. today as Vietnamese Francophone literature. This literature includes the prose novel in which the writers participate in the construction of knowledge about their culture and literature, question the fundamental assumptions of Western subjectivity, and reverse the French gaze. This literature is a response to Orientalism or the French style of looking at its Other and producing knowledge about it.
In their collaborative work *En s’écartant des ancêtres* and its sequel *La Réponse de l’Occident*, the first two female Vietnamese Francophone voices, Marguerite Triaire and Trinh Thuc Oanh, wrote about their Vietnamese experiences in a transparent narrative. Like early Vietnamese Francophone writers, 1913 to 1954, their primary mission was to safeguard their culture and customs and provide a faithful mirror of Vietnamese society and its conditions. To redress the vagueness that had been leveled against them and the superficial Orientalist clichés propagated in colonial works, they de-exoticize Vietnamese culture with detached and lengthy descriptions of their customs. These descriptions come across as catalogues of ethnographic accounts of Vietnamese customs intended for an implied French public and give the impression that the authors are making themselves the object of the French gaze, thus re-exoticizing their culture. The bilingual heritage of the authors, that is the two different literary traditions, results in the production of works which imitate French models and styles while keeping certain Confucian themes (filial piety and wifely obedience).

Ly Thu Ho is the only female Vietnamese Francophone woman to write about the Indochina Wars during her times (1954-1975). With her trilogy—*Printemps inachevé, Au milieu du carrefour* and *Le mirage de la paix*, she presents an often neglected South Vietnamese perspective of Vietnam during the Indochina War years from the 1930s to 1970s. Her works offer a corrective to the silence of the South Vietnamese perspective on the wars. Vietnamese scholars such as Hue-Tam Ho Tai and Nathalie Nguyen point out that today in Vietnam the South Vietnamese perspective is still silenced. South Vietnamese participation in the Vietnam War is not included in the state narratives of the war and worse still, the historiography of war narratives. In her novels Ly Thu Ho's goal is to challenge the
Orientalist myth of the South Vietnamese as pro-French and pro-American disseminated by the American and French media. It is for this reason she writes in a propagandist and didactic style and fills her narrative with long digressions that come across as mini-history lessons on the complex politics of her country. Her lengthy explanations of the different political factions and the complex politics in Vietnam between the 1930s and 1970s are examples of self-representation by the Vietnamese Other and the construction of knowledge about itself. Like all Vietnamese Francophone writers she inscribes her cultural difference and includes Vietnamese customs in her works.

Linda Lê is one of the rare female contemporary Vietnamese voices who declines and deconstructs the existing metropolitan Orientalist stereotypes about Vietnamese Francophone writers. Since her ancestors have inherited the genre of nineteenth-century realist prose from the French, Lê has outdone her predecessors such as Nguyen Phan Long, Marguerite Triaire, and Trinh Thuc Oanh, her Vietnamese contemporaries such as Kim Lefèvre, Anna Moï, Kim Doan, etc. and her French contemporaries such as Christine Angot, Amélie Nothomb, and Anne Wiazemsky in interrogating the narrative prose form in terms of content and style. Notwithstanding her claim of being a métèque or foreigner writing in French, she has shown that she is "à la hauteur des indigènes" (Argand 5) and not an "épigone de Cioran" (Argand 28): she uses a highly experimental style with polyphonic narratorial voices, stream of consciousness style of narration, flashbacks, different tones and registers, different spatial and temporal frames, neologisms, argots and intertextual reference in her fiction. Unlike her predecessors who believe in providing a faithful mirror of contemporary Vietnamese society—Marguerite Triaire, Trinh Thuc Oanh, Ly Thu Ho, Lê rails against such representations of reality. Unlike her Francophone contemporaries who
fulfill the French literary establishment's expectations with an authentic representation of their experience through the use of a transparent style and a classical syntax and an affirmation of their cultural and linguistic difference, such as Azoug Begag, Calixthe Beyala among others, this contemporary woman writer refuses to practice self-confessional writing and be the native informant for her (Vietnamese) community. She suppresses her origins and refuses to address the Vietnamese experience on a concrete level—most of her characters are unnamed and come from an unnamed country. She hides her experience behind metaphors, myths, legends and allegories, thus bringing a universal dimension to her stories. Her works of fiction and non-fiction challenge the authority and literature of the native country and that of the host country. They are not “paroles d’exil” celebrating the pathos of the displaced Vietnamese championed by the French literary establishment. Lê’s works disorient and destabilize the reader with their inappropriate content and style and challenge the will of the French literary establishment to dictate the content for the writers. Lê refuses to be a "Vietnamienne de service" (Argand 28) and to participate in the “Indochina” consumerism.

In their works Marguerite Triaire, Trinh Thuc Oanh and Ly Thu Ho contribute to the new genre of prose novel in French which they use to reflect their society and propagate the values of their people. In her texts Linda Lê goes beyond by deterritorializing contemporary Vietnamese Francophone immigrant narratives in universalizing their stories through the use of myths. All these women writers participate in the construction of knowledge about their culture and the condition and experience of women, question the fundamental assumptions of Western subjectivity, reverse the French gaze, reinvent their culture and values so as to reinscribe authority in Vietnam. In addition, they redress the Orientalist images of women of their period. In short, they challenge Orientalism as a body of knowledge about the Orient,
that is, the Vietnamese community produced by and for the Occident as well as Karl Marx's famous statement about the Other "they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (Orientalism) which inaugurates Said's Orientalism.
Notes

1 For the history of Vietnam under the Chinese and French rule, see Joseph Buttinger, *The Smaller Dragon*; Henry Kamm; and Hue-Tam Ho Tai.

2 The name “Vietnam” made its first appearance in 939, again in 1802, and 1945.

3 See ”Introduction” in *New Perceptions of the Vietnam War*, Nathalie Nguyen, ed.
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