



Natalie Hynh Chau Nguyen. *Voyage of Hope: Vietnamese Australian Women's Narratives*. Victoria: Common Ground Publishing, 2005. xvi + 207 pp. \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86335-591-9.

Reviewed by Glenda Bonifacio (Women's Studies, University of Lethbridge)

Published on H-Minerva (July, 2006)

## Gendered Ordeal

War is the greatest human tragedy. It creates lifelong scars that only time, if ever, heals. The unfathomable consequences of full-blown ideological conflict clearly reveal a gendered ordeal. Women and girls, largely in noncombative roles, are the silent victims of war whose experiences at the hands of state and nonstate actors are often ignored.

Natalie Hynh Chau Nguyen's book about the personal accounts of twelve Vietnamese women refugees' "voyage of hope" is a compelling read. Drawing on different life experiences of these women now successfully resettled in Australia, after their harrowing escape from Communist Vietnam in 1975, Nguyen succeeds in showing that the state of war, civil or otherwise, is gendered. The fate of displaced women, like the narrative of Phoung in chapter 1, who escaped captivity from senseless marauding Thai and Malay pirates, are likened to Eve Ensler's *Necessary Targets: A Story of Women and War* (2001) about Bosnian refugee women who were raped and abused during the civil war in Yugoslavia.

In Nguyen's book, the most vulnerable population from both sides of the conflict is often subject to intense intimidation to break familial loyalty. While the men are detained or imprisoned, or venture into an escape route with uncertain outcomes, the women are left behind to hold the family together, using diverse ingenious ways to survive. Nguyen's narrative of Hong as "nguy" (renegade) reveals that women endured the most to keep the social unit intact (p. 109). In patriarchal cultures like Vietnam, Hong's experiences also illustrate how traditional gender roles shifted in the process of reconstructing new lives amidst the social and political dynamics within and outside their communities.

The thematic approach in organizing the personal stories of Vietnamese women referred to only by their first names reflects the continuous negotiation of women's roles in differing contexts. Chapter 1 describes the women's escape by sea, which became the "defining

narrative for the Vietnamese diaspora" (p. 17). Chapter 2 focuses on women's lives in refugee camps in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Yen's narrative of camp life expresses the emergent role of women as economic partners with husbands to secure the basic necessities of the family. Chapter 6 provides a vivid description of settlement experiences in Australia and the ways in which traditional gender roles were challenged by new economic and social realities. As Ruth Krulfeld avers in her essay in L. A. Camino and R. M. Krulfeld's *Reconstructing Lives, Recapturing Meaning* (1994), gender roles and identities in refugee communities change in response to life altering circumstances like the "process of uprooting and resettlement."

Nguyen's style of presenting the chapters with narratives of the Vietnamese women first, followed by a concise discussion and analysis of the events that took place, points to the relationship between individual experience and the collective memory of the Vietnamese diaspora. By doing so, Nguyen broadens the scope of the narrative and contextualizes refugee women's experience. Albeit lacking in critical theory to tie the narratives of forced migration together, the chapters logically link the different phases of searching for a place to call "home." In each phase, the women hurdle a myriad of challenges for their families, children, and, lastly, for themselves. The collectivist orientation of Vietnamese society places the women's own personal interest and safety last. But, in each phase of adversity there is personal triumph.

According to Nguyen, the "episodes point to the individuality of women's experiences in the context of war as well as to that of their own responses" to trauma and loss (p. 95). The women's experiences are, however, defined by ethnicity and class. Chinese-Vietnamese women and their families were targeted by the communists in their campaign against private property and commerce. Class also permeates in the Vietnamese women's recollections of their life before the fall of Saigon, where the majority

lived a relatively comfortable life as daughters of businessmen (Anh, Qui, Cam), wives of academics (Hong), and professionals (Yen, Loan, Tien). Whatever class privilege they may have occupied in pre-Communist Vietnam, they all shared the same “transition from the status of citizen to that of refugee” (p. 46).

Race and class also shape the Vietnamese women’s experiences of settlement and integration in Australian society where their entry into the labor market is limited to a manufacturing sector mainly dominated by immigrant women. In fact, deskilling is not exclusive to refugees but also to immigrants, especially from non-white communities. The Vietnamese women in Nguyen’s work, now successful in their own fields of endeavor, appear forgiving of the racial slurs and treatment they received from the Australian public. Probably grateful for the chance to rebuild their lives, the Vietnamese women remain optimistic and firm about their identity as “Vietnamese Australians.” As Thy in her narrative aptly states, “Australia ... is a young country, it doesn’t have a set of identity itself ... it’s already confused anyway” (p. 143). Australia’s attempts to move beyond racial exclusion to a policy of inclusive immigration and multiculturalism has allowed these Vietnamese women to integrate their identities within the nation.[1]

Nguyen’s *Voyage of Hope* is timely in the face of the growing displacement of women and children in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, brought about by human political failings and the world’s delayed response. It is only recently, through works like Nguyen’s book, that women’s shattered lives during and after conflict has come to fore. Presented in clear language, this book intricately weaves the roles of government and non-governmental organizations in processing the settlement of Vietnamese refugees. Nguyen’s work sheds light into the dismal response in averting the current refugee crisis. The discourse of gender and forced migration remains, according to Doreen Indra in *Engendering Forced Migration* (1999), “highly fragmented and diverse” and apparently poses great challenge in the international community in the protection of displaced women and children. Yet, the book also shows the capacity of many people along the path traveled by refugees for compassion, and this gives us all hope (p. 17).

#### Note

[1]. See Jock Collins, “Asian Migration to Australia,” in *The Cambridge Survey of World Migration*, ed. R. Cohen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 376-379.

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**Citation:** Glenda Bonifacio. Review of Nguyen, Natalie Hynh Chau, *Voyage of Hope: Vietnamese Australian Women’s Narratives*. H-Minerva, H-Net Reviews. July, 2006.

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