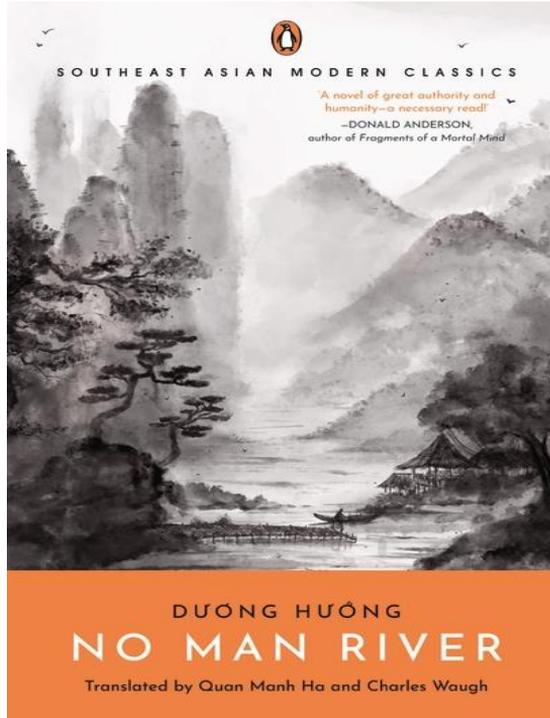


Dương Hương. *No Man River*, translation of *Bến Không Chờ*. Translated by Quan Manh Ha and Charles Waugh. Penguin Random House SEA, 2025, 248 pp. ISBN – 978-9815233834.



Within the corpus of Vietnam War literature available to the English-speaking readership, Americentric narratives and Vietnamese diasporic perspectives tend to dominate, thereby skewing the portrayal of the Vietnam War and its aftermath. Regretfully, there is a dearth of translated Vietnamese texts that delineate the northern Vietnamese people's experience during the Indochina wars, let alone any that center on their rural regions and domestic lives. Dương Hương's *No Man River*, having been set in Đông Village, a northern Vietnamese village, opposes this literary trend by offering an underrepresented perspective. Within this centralised setting, the novel traces the diverse lives of northern Vietnamese villagers challenged by the lasting generational impact of three consecutive Indochina wars. Yet, the author unorthodoxly delivers a war novel with neither a leading male protagonist nor a combat scene. Instead, the novel situates the war in the background, materialising it only through its indirect and far-reaching influence on the operations of the village. Through the unconventional setting

combined with the meticulously wrought linear narrative and diverse characters, *Dương* delivers a harmonised literary product that outlines lofty topics and questions both preconceived ideas of the Vietnam War and enduring social traditions.

The novel begins with *Vạn*'s return to *Đông* Village from the war against the French. He is no longer the feeble peasant serving a colonial landowner; instead, he is now a passionate patriot embodying North Vietnam's socialist ideologies who is lionised by the villagers, both young and old alike. Although *Vạn*'s renewed standing earns him admiration from the villagers, his pervading patriotic rigor and revolutionary ideologies quickly become a disturbance to the village, for, as an extension of nationalism, he imposes patriotic expectations that conflicts with the village's outdated traditional, and therefore rigorously upheld, norms. In such a manner, *Dương* illustrates the permeating influence of war on the traditions and norms of a village, even those located in rural regions of northern Vietnam. Furthermore, while conservative villagers face criticism for their outdated beliefs and traditions, so does *Vạn* face internal struggles. Notwithstanding his renewed social standing in the village, *Vạn* continues to suffer from disorientation, as he fails to acclimate to village life after his victorious war experience. *Nghia*, too, shares this distress caused by an inability to "return home" after returning from the Vietnam War. As such, *Dương* simultaneously exposes the reality of war, namely that the victorious are also victims of war, thereby confuting the fallacy that suffering is an exclusive experience of the defeated.

Although *Vạn*'s patriotism is simply an extension of newly developed North Vietnam nationalism, his fervid propagation of its principles becomes excessive when he distorts war into a glorified cause, as communicated through his parochial views that equate enlistment to the completion of manhood and that deem KIAs as heroic sacrifices. *Vạn*'s pressing national pride is, therefore, a demanding force that coerces village men into enlistment. Yet, simultaneously, the village also vigorously enforces patriotic obligation and clan loyalty to maintain generational roles. What *Dương* ingeniously portrays, then, is the oppression of individuality and the victimisation of the individual in the face of overbearing collectivism. Such oppression is particularly evident amongst the village women. With war claiming all the men, the village women, both married and single, are thrust into a period of social contradiction, where women are expected to uphold dignity and chastity but also to fulfill motherhood. This muddled situation accentuates the psychological complexity of the female characters, as they must navigate through contradicting demands and self-

interests. *No Man River*, therefore, delineates the psychological entrapment and subsequent victimisation experienced by Vietnamese women, and thereby exposes the often ignored “war at home” that is saturated with suffering.

The women in Đông Village, however, in the progression of the plot, transform into the mavericks of society by acting in accordance with their own will and making unconventional decisions. One of them even defies the traditional gender roles, acting coquettishly with her best girlfriend and calling out male village elders for their impertinent views. Hence, the impact of war on Đông Village as depicted in *No Man River* contains an undertone redolent of social reform.

Further enriching the literary value of the novel is the candid treatment of sexuality. Contrary to conventional literary tendency, *Dương* does not render the subject invisible; rather, he situates sexuality at the forestage and exposes the inexorable drive that permeates *all* characters. Being presented as a common human experience, the carnal desire impelling characters to act on infidelity becomes a reflection of human fallibility stimulated by circumstances owing to war rather than targeted criticism and gender-stereotyped prejudice against women. Such portrayal of sexuality not only dismisses hasty criticism of Đông Village women but also urges a reassessment of social attitudes towards the subject and its role in literature.

No Man River offers a poignant and unflinching portrayal of the far-reaching consequences of war, addressing both its broader societal disruptions, such as the breakdown of rural domestic life and tradition, and its more intimate effects, namely the erosion of social relationships. Through this dual lens, the novel reassesses the devastation of First and Second Indochina Wars and challenges the Western-centric narrative that has traditionally framed the latter as predominantly a Western tragedy. At the same time, the text functions as a targeted social critique of postwar Vietnam, particularly in its examination of entrenched patriarchal attitudes towards women. As such, the timely release of the English edition enables a global readership to engage with the Indochina Wars, especially the Vietnam War, from a locally grounded perspective that transcends conventional attitudes.

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