

The Poem “Ordinary Days” by Ý Nhi and the Picture of the “Imagined Community” in Modern Vietnamese Literature

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Abstract

Community discourse in modern Vietnamese literature often expresses the proposition that community is associated with tradition, history and culture, especially in the war and post-war period. Ý Nhi (1944 -) has such a creative poetic style that many literary critics of her generation consider it as a breakthrough amid the general trend. Although she found herself among the poets of the US-Vietnam War period, Ý Nhi soon followed a path of her own, innovating the art of poetry and bringing new ideas into her writings. Ý Nhi is one of the most famous representatives of modern Vietnamese poetry. Her poetry received international recognition from The Swedish Cikada Prize in 2015. The paper going to employ Benedict Anderson’s cultural theory of “imagined communities” proposed in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* as a tool to interpret one of the ideological innovations in her poetry. It is the construction of the community image, predominantly expressed in the poem “Ngày thường” (Ordinary Days). By applying this theory, this paper proves that “Ordinary Days” has built a popular imagined community, in contrast to the imagined community associated with the ideology of official nationalism in mainstream Vietnamese literature. The change in the concept of community as portrayed in the poem has advanced ahead of the Vietnamese literary dominant trend at that time, somewhat preparing the road for the shift of literary style in the later period.

Keywords: Imagined Community, Official Nationalism, Ý Nhi

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Introduction

The image of communities (ranging from family, to village, and to nation) in modern Vietnamese literature is closely linked with the wars between Vietnam and France (1945-1954), Vietnam and America (1954-1975), and with the post-war period. Therefore, discourses on communities in literature are always associated with the revolution and the nation in term of history, politics, tradition and culture. However, in the view of Benedict Anderson (1936-2015) in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, “community” and “nation” do not always go together without self-interests, especially in war, revolutionary and post-war contexts. Anderson’s concept of “official nationalism”, a model of the “imagined community”, suggests explaining the image of community that once dominated mainstream Vietnamese literature.¹

In that general trend, the poet Ý Nhi² has emerged as a particular case because her modern poetic style proves to have done against Vietnamese mainstream literature. Of her contemporary critics, Huỳnh Như Phương (2019) calls her style “predictive” of the times (p. 6), Hoàng Hưng (2019) praises it “rare” (p. 706), and Lại Nguyên Ân (2022) “distinctive.” She became famous inside the country, beginning with the Vietnam Writers’ Association award in 1985 for the collection of poems *Người đàn bà ngồi đan* (A Woman Sits Knitting). Nowadays, Ý Nhi is a well-known poet. Her poetic art is representative of not only modern Vietnamese poetry but also modern Asian poetry as confirmed by the Swedish Cikada Prize in 2015 “in recognition of the way she in her poetry so well has defended the inviolability of life” (according to the letter of notice from the Embassy of Sweden in Hanoi, in 2015).

This paper will attempt to analyze the picture of the imagined community in Ý Nhi’s “Ordinary Days,” in contrast to the idea of a community of official nationalism, according to Anderson’s point of view. The poem is in the poetry collection of the same name, published by Da Nang Publishing House in 1987, but was composed in April 1985. It was an important milestone because the composition had come before the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) began in 1986³ in Vietnam, giving the poem more value in terms of modern thought, content, and pioneering innovation in the modern Vietnamese literature that spanned from 1945 to 1986.

The poem “Ordinary Days” was translated into English and published in the anthology *6 Vietnamese Poets* (Curbstone Press, 2002), along with 12 other poems by the same author. However, the English version of the poem used in this paper that is more consistent with the poem’s contents is an unpublished translation.

¹ The paper only examines the literature of Northern Vietnam, whose ideology had eventually become the mainstream of Vietnamese literature since 1975. Literature of Southern Vietnam before 1975 with a different ideology will not be covered in this paper.

² Ý Nhi’s given name is Hoàng Thị Ý Nhi. She was born on September 18, 1944 at Quảng Nam Province. She had a degree in Vietnamese linguistics and literature from Hanoi University in 1968. For many years, she was a poetry editor at the Tác phẩm mới (New Works) Publishing House (now the Vietnam Writers’ Association Publishing House). She now lives in Ho Chi Minh City. She has published nine collections of poems, two collections of short stories and two anthologies. Her works have been translated into various languages: French, Russian, English, Japanese, and Swedish.

³ *Đổi Mới* is a reform program in many fields (economic, political, cultural, and literary) proposed by General Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh and implemented starting from the 6th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1986. In literature, the *Đổi Mới* period marked the ideological untie for creation, from literature serving politics, and speaking out for the Communist Party, to literature expressing individuality, revealing the personal creativity of writers.

Ordinary Days

Sounds of children cheering in the garden
Neighbors passing by the front gate
Early water morning glory climbing
While late spring flowers drop in prices
Someone opens an art gallery on Ngô Quyền street
A snake seller sits by Thuyền Quang lake
Dumbfounded people at the lottery counter
Others queuing to buy Sa Pa cigarettes

Swirling old book pages
Comments from the past years
Thick piles of collaborators' poems
Read from sunny season to rainy season
Child's pants hem needs letting down
Rice all out, busy lining up for more
Foliage drawing images on the window curtain
From day to night all green

The heart suddenly yearns
An unexpected knock
From behind the door.

4/1985

1. Official nationalism as imagined community in modern Vietnamese literature

According to Anderson, modern national communities are all imagined. "It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 2006, p. 6). That is, a community is an idea created for members to associate with each other. Therefore, there is no right or wrong community identity, only how we envision that community. It can be seen clearly in Vietnamese literary works that reflect particular historical periods, such as war-time literature. This literary tradition exalts patriotism and praises heroism. In literary works, the concepts of the nation and foreign invaders help to connect the characters to form the image of the national community. In addition, a community is also understood as readers, authors and characters sharing the same language, territory, culture, and history. A literary work evokes in the readers those same images, helping them connect with the characters, the author, and each other even though they have never had the same experience as the characters, do not know the author, and do not know other readers.

It was the national spirit that was highly promoted during the war that created favorable conditions for the birth of "official nationalism". According to Anderson, it comes about when dynastic and aristocratic groups are in danger of being marginalized in the popular imagined communities (pp. 109-110). Therefore, these power-groups have attached national issues to the governance of the state to preserve their interests and maintain their power. By the time of the revolution and post-revolution, a new model has taken over, whereby revolutionary leaders control the state and the people based on the "imagined" national

mentality. For example, in Vietnam, it is patriotism, personal sacrifice for the common good, collective interests that stand above the individual, and individualism is counter-revolutionary. These social values are “serving the interests of the state first and foremost” (Anderson, 2006, p. 159), which is to keep the ruling party system afloat in the case of Vietnam. Therefore, according to this model, imagined communities, although ostensibly “the masses”, are actually the means of discourse by a powerful small group. This can be illustrated with the following two typical verses:

- (1) The country is the land where I went to school
The country is the water where you bathed
The land-water country is where we dated
The country is the place where you dropped the handkerchief in my silent
nostalgia⁴
(Nguyễn Khoa Điềm, “Mặt đường khát vọng” (The Road of Desire), 1971)⁵
- (2) The country follows you to the alley alone
The garden areca palm sheds an old leaf sheath
The country fifty million people tonight do not sleep
Peeling off the last calendar sheet
(Hữu Thịnh, “Đường tới thành phố” [The Road to the City], 1979)⁶

Although the two poems were composed in two different periods, the (1) during the American war and the (2) after the war, their ideas are still the same: the lovers’ feelings are placed in the frame of reference to “country” or nation. Stanza (1) is the nostalgia for a lover nestled in love for the homeland, and stanza (2) is the longing of a wife waiting for her husband to return from the battlefield, which is identical to the expectation of liberation of the people. Writers often use historical and national facts to express personal things because they are influenced by socialist realism. This communist ideology promotes collectivism and criticises individualism. It was the mainstream of Northern literature from 1945 and lasted until before Đổi Mới in 1986.

The next feature of an imagined community, according to the model of official nationalism, is thinking about time. In order to tie members of a community of many generations to a national ideal, historical awareness – i.e. thinking about time along the vertical axis – plays an important role. Anderson calls it apprehension of time in a “simultaneity” (p. 24), especially evident in religious communities. Anderson cites Auerbach’s example: the sacrifice of Isaac in the Old Testament and the sacrifice of Christ in the New Testament are explained as related in the following way: the former prefigures the latter, and the latter fulfills the former. This relationship is established by Divine Providence, so the events not only take place in a sequence, but are “simultaneous” always (p. 24). Simultaneity, in this sense, is “a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present” (Anderson, 2006, p. 24). That way of thinking about time is prevalent in Vietnamese revolutionary literature, for example, the image of Autumn in revolutionary poetry:

⁴ In Vietnamese the word “country” (đất nước) is a combination of two words “land” (đất) and “water” (nước).

⁵ Nguyễn Khoa Điềm (1943 -) is a poet, politician, and former Minister of Culture and Information. The excerpt from the epic poem “Mặt đường khát vọng” (The Road of Desire) was composed in 1971 and first published by the Liberation Literature and Art Publishing House, Hanoi, in 1974.

⁶ Hữu Thịnh (1942 -) is a poet and former President of the Vietnam Writers’ Association. The excerpt from the epic poem “Đường tới thành phố” (The Road to the City) was first published by the People’s Army Publishing House, Hanoi, in 1979.

August comes in a fresh Autumn
Clouds lightheartedly float away
Today is such a beautiful day
Our clouds, our blue sky
The Democratic Republic of Vietnam!

(Tố Hữu, “Ta đi tới” (Let’s March Forward), 1954)⁷

Autumn is different now
In the middle of mountains and hills, I am listening with joy
To the wind blowing through the bamboo forest in rhythm
Autumn’s skies are putting on new clothes

(Nguyễn Đình Thi, “Đất nước” (The Country), 1948-1955)⁸

Those Autumns are always associated with joy and a bright future because they remind a specific Autumn in the past: the Autumn of the August Revolution of 1945, when the Viet Minh victory established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. This type of time simultaneity connects generations into a shared history and creates a happy national destiny, regardless of reality. In other words, official nationalism has tied public thought to an imagined future in identification with the glorious past.

Paradoxically, the simultaneity-along-time, according to Anderson, belonged in the medieval period in religious communities and has been superseded in the modern communities (this paper will present the thinking of time in a modern community more clearly in section 2); it is still the dominant type of time in Vietnamese revolutionary literature. Vietnamese literature needs the next development step to change the apprehension of time in a modern way.

That development step can be found in Ý Nhi’s poem “Ordinary Days”, with innovative ideas of imagined community and time compared to mainstream literature at that time.

2. Imagined community in Ý Nhi’s “Ordinary Days”

After the *Đổi Mới* period, Vietnamese literature partly showed the escape from the old paradigm in the works of many talents such as Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Bảo Ninh, Phạm Thị Hoài, and Dương Thu Hương. It will not be unusual for an innovative writing style to be born in that new atmosphere. However, the paper recognizes another milestone, the poem “Ordinary Days” by Ý Nhi, which appeared before *Đổi Mới* but was anti-traditional in how the author built an imagined community. The poem is a typical work for the picture of a new type of community.

The poem’s context is a general atmosphere of Hanoi during the subsidy period, with pale people, petty actions, and small events. And covering this whole social picture is poverty. Poverty makes two seemingly opposite images “early water morning glory climbing/ while late spring flowers drop in prices” have the same logic: water morning glory is a popular

⁷ Tố Hữu (1920-2002) is one of the most typical revolutionary poets in Vietnam and was a member of the Politburo. The excerpt of the poem “Ta đi tới” (Let’s March Forward), from the collection of poems *Việt Bắc*, was composed and first published by the Literature Publishing House, Hanoi, in 1954.

⁸ Nguyễn Đình Thi (1924-2003) is a poet, writer, playwright, and former Secretary General of the Vietnam Writers’ Association. The excerpt of the poem “Đất nước” (The Country), from the collection of poems *Người chiến sĩ* (The Soldier), was composed from 1948-1955 and first published by the Literature and Art Publishing House, Hanoi, in 1956.

vegetable, but the poor must pay attention to the price increase, and the price of flowers at the end of the season had to be lowered because they are probably listed as luxury goods that few people buy. Poverty also haunts “dumbfounded people at the lottery counter” looking for a chance to change their luck and people in long lines to buy Sa Pa cigarettes, the cheapest brand of cigarettes at that time. Poverty reduces the value of intellectual and noble activities such as opening galleries, reading books, and editing poems to the level of ordinary activities such as selling snakes and queuing to buy rice. True to the title “Ordinary Days”, the poem does not focus on building something big; on the contrary, it focuses on petty and trivial activities. But the new thing lies in connecting those little things to form a community picture.

The three stanzas draw two small pictures: (1) The first stanza is a group of characters appearing from near to far according to the persona’s observation position, from narrow to vast space (garden - gate - street - lake), with various activities (children playing, people passing by, exhibition, buying and selling, people watching and queuing). (2) The latter two stanzas return to the observer’s present position with personalized actions (reading, editing, looking) and thoughts (about sewing, lining up to buy rice, and a knock behind the door). At a glance, they are discrete pictures with details placed next to each other randomly: the characters have no relationship, appearing in the same segment of time and space according to the method of collage. But looking closely, the only connection between the objects is the gaze of the persona (observer). That look shows the attention to see the “dumbfounded” state of strangers, hear the cheering of children, notice a newly opened gallery, and be familiar with snake sellers and queue people. Therefore, it is an “omniscient” view, connecting individuals into a community in the observer’s imagination.

There is a transition in the second stanza: the persona looks at herself; that is, the subject becomes the object like the characters appearing in the first stanza. The most obvious is the detail “queuing”/ “line up” repeated in the first two stanzas, connecting each other into a common picture where the members have the same activities. Although the actions are more private (letting down the child’s pants hem), more personal (reading and editing poetry), and more psychological (the move is “swirling” that seems busy but still worry about other things that have not been done), but the persona in the second stanza has the same ambiguous identity (who is this person? what is her personality? what are her feelings?) as the characters in the first stanza. The verses in the second stanza continue to list activities that, like the rhythm of the first stanza, compel the reader to read it (and visualize it) in meaningful continuity with the first stanza.

This type of look can be explained as follows: The observer does not pay attention to the personal identities of the people appearing in the picture because what she looks at is not individual people but is typical activities of a specific context (Hanoi in the subsidy period), of which she is also a member. That is how the imagined community is formed: not by grand narratives relying on tradition, history, and culture like that of Vietnamese literature at the same time, but by random, collaged mini-narratives, no specific connection between one person and the others.

In addition, the community cohesion here is also supported by the idea of “homogeneous, empty time” (Anderson, 2006, p. 24). Anderson says: “[S]imultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar” (p. 24). “Prefiguring and fulfilment” is the type of time of religious communities with a dominant centre of power. “Homogeneous and

empty” time of clock and calendar is characteristic of the modern imagined community. Returning to the poem, the events in the two pictures occur at a certain time, appearing together in a brief gaze of the observer. This time is also absolutely not “simultaneity-along-time” with a past and a future. It is a regular, repeating time of the calendar “from sunny season to rainy season” and of the clock “from day to night”, so it has a completely “empty” meaning. As such, one connects with the others through the same activities, day by day; even though they do not know each other. But they know in certain days and hours, there are people doing the same things as they do. That connection differs from the simultaneous connection of the past, present, and future, which revolutionary literature often uses (as described in section 1).

Although the connections are “empty” and randomly collaged, the imagined community in “Ordinary Days” is still very closed and tight, causing the subject to transform herself into a character or member in the general picture. Here comes a second look – the reader’s look. Because when the subject becomes the character, the reader becomes a second omniscient view, far enough away to see the whole picture. As Anderson says, it is “the doubleness of our reading about [...] reading” (p. 32). Viewing or reading the picture created by the subject who now is the character makes an imagined community between the author, the characters, and the readers.

Community is almost broken in the last stanza when a “yearn” appears. A “yearn” is a feeling that belongs to an individual. It signals the subject from merging into the general picture to revealing a separate identity through her feelings. But it was only “almost” because the verse ended quickly with only 12 words split into three lines – too short and abrupt compared to the big picture covered above. Personal life is still engulfed in a common pattern, and no one has a name or face, only repeated actions, just like the title “Ordinary Days.” Unlike “A Woman Sits Knitting” – the most famous poem, shaping the poetic style of Ý Nhi – “Ordinary Days” does not place an imprint on individuality. Therefore, if comparing the “yearn” of “Ordinary Days” with the dichotomous mood of “A Woman Sits Knitting”, the latter poem has a more personal breakthrough. However, the purpose of “Ordinary Days” is not to express individual feelings but to imagine a society in miniature that is probably very familiar to anyone of the time since it is just “ordinary days.” And that visualisation pushes to the brink of breaking down the image of an old-fashioned community that belongs to official nationalism.

Conclusion

The paper does not analyze the poem Ordinary Days’s uniqueness in terms of content or poetic style, as previous researchers have done. Still, it identifies the ideological innovation in a new cultural way: how to build an imagined community. This concept of modern culture can shed a strange light on literary analysis, particularly in this poem, when placed in the context of the poem’s composition: It disrupts the traditional community built up by official nationalism. On the surface, people and activities are depicted in the old way. Still, the idea of a popular community is new, especially in connecting members and thinking about an empty, homogeneous time. These innovations paved the way for new writings later, changing an era.

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Resources

“Ý Nhi, từ thơ đến truyện (Ý Nhi, from poetry to stories)” by Lại Nguyên Ân:
<http://baovanngh.com.vn/y-nhi-tu-tho-den-truyen-24667.html>

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