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Mourning Headband for Hue: An Account of the Battle for Hue, Vietnam
1968

NHA CA. Translated with an Introduction by OLGA DROR
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Literary fiction has long provided some of the most evocative images of warfare, and the struggle for Vietnam is no exception. Indeed, many of the more lasting popular impressions of the Vietnam conflict have been shaped by successive iconic novels. The emergence of a Vietnam War literary canon has echoed trends in English-language scholarship on the war, with early classics like Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) or Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1978) sharing contemporaneous scholars' focus on American policies and experiences. A more recent historical interest in exploring the communist so-called "other side" of the conflict has seen such works increasingly accompanied on Vietnam War syllabi by translated Vietnamese novels like Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* (1993) or Dương Thu Hương's *Novel without a Name* (1995). Notably under-represented in both English-language fiction and scholarship, however, are voices from the non-communist South. Indeed, for all the dozens of volumes published each year on the Vietnam War, there is still no basic political history of South Vietnam after American escalation in 1965.

All of which makes Olga Dror's translation of Nhã Ca's 1968 *Mourning Headband for Hue* such an important and welcome contribution. Combining memoir, journalism, vivid anecdotes, and incisive analysis, Nhã Ca's novel illuminates non-partisan civilian experiences of the conflict, recounting the enormous suffering imposed by all warring parties on the city of Huế during the 1968 Tet Offensive. The author's riveting and relentless account is propelled by her considerable literary skill. Adroit employment of modernist techniques, from multiple interwoven perspectives to a non-linear timeline, creates a deliberately jarring and disjointed narrative, animating the sense of uncertainty and utter panic among the city's desperate inhabitants. Adding to the intensity is the translator's use of the original 1969 edition, written when emotions and memories were more immediate and raw. Beyond merely an informative first-hand account of a critical if still relatively obscure episode in the Vietnam War, *Mourning Headband for Hue* is an impressive literary achievement, holding its own in the pantheon of classic wartime literature.

Trần Thị Thu Vân, better known to readers by the pen name Nhã Ca, is one of South Vietnam's more accomplished authors, acclaimed for her novels, poetry, and journalism. She contributed to a burgeoning Saigon print media scene, which flourished despite recurring if inept censorship, and whose insights are still largely neglected in English-language studies of the war. *Mourning Headband for Hue*, her most celebrated work, begins shortly before Tết, the Vietnamese lunar New Year, when Nhã Ca returns to the Central Vietnamese city of Huế to attend her father's funeral. Her homecoming is interrupted in the middle of the night by the first sounds of gunfire from approaching communist troops, and after a grenade detonates on the roof of her ancestral home,

the family is forced to flee. What follows is a desperate, harrowing scramble for cover from both the advancing communists and the indiscriminate American firepower that accompanies their progress. Arriving at a nearby church, the family takes shelter with hundreds of starving, panicked refugees, including, unforgettably, a woman unable to acknowledge that child she cares for has died until after the stench grows overwhelming.

When the church is engulfed in the crossfire, *Nhã Ca* and her family make another narrow escape. Exhausted, hungry, and under constant fire, they traverse the city for sanctuary before approaching a nearby American airbase, where they finally find respite from the relentless bombardment at its source. Later, returning home to a city strewn with corpses, where the traditional white headbands worn by grieving Vietnamese have become ubiquitous, the author reflects on the futility of the violence: "I am surprised when I think why all the artillery from America, from Russia, from Czechoslovakia suddenly lands in the hands of North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese to pour down on a small city that is as good-natured as is the city of Hue . . . tearing into pieces its innocent flesh . . . oh life . . . why must life still go on?" (p. 233).

All the while, news from communist-occupied quarters trickles through in the form of speculation and rumor, reinforcing a sense of confusion and upheaval for the novel's protagonists and readers alike. Having escaped to the relative safety of an American-controlled zone, *Nhã Ca* here adopts the perspective of eyewitnesses to what devolved into one of the more deplorable events in a vicious war—the 1968 communist massacre at Huế. Encountering communist forces for the first time, the reader may be struck by their organization and discipline, a marked contrast to the novel's trigger-happy Americans and brutish South Vietnamese militia, who desert at the first hint of combat and return only to loot traumatized civilians of their belongings. Equally notable is the prominence of female cadres, who go door-to-door assuring frightened homeowners that "we certainly are people's friends" (p. 113). Taking care to extend the scant courtesy of euphemism, the communists solicit "contributions," "temporarily borrowing" scarce provisions in exchange for notes of credit, and recruiting youth "volunteers." Residents, meanwhile, are introduced to communist ideology and interpretations of the war at neighborhood study sessions.

Initially, the communists' orderly comportment comes as welcome relief from the turbulence. "The first several days," one observer recalls, "are very joyful" (p. 194). But before long, rumors of hastily-arranged show trials followed by on-the-spot executions begin to surface. Local children are marched into the mountains for training, never to return, while long-vanished townspeople suddenly reappear, transformed into vengeful zealots. One-time street-vendors, taxi-drivers, and even town drunks are revealed as sleeper agents eager to settle old scores. Ultimately, it is precisely their ruthless efficacy which *Nhã Ca*'s contemporaries come to fear most about the communist forces. And as their enemies slowly but surely advance, the communists' discipline breaks down, with arrests and executions becoming more frequent, arbitrary, and wanton. Only gradually does the enormity of the horror become apparent to *Nhã Ca* and her readers. By late 1969, some

2,800 thousand bodies had been exhumed from mass graves (p. xxxi).

Although central to energetic if not particularly effective South Vietnamese propaganda campaigns, events in Huế made little impact in the United States, overshadowed by the broader impact of the Tet Offensive, President Johnson's shock withdrawal from re-election, a series of high-profile assassinations, and, not least of all, the American Mỹ Lai massacre. Nonetheless, the carnage in Huế saw debates erupt between pro- and anti-war camps over the scope and purpose of massacre. Here the introduction provided by translator Olga Dror, a history professor at Texas A&M University, proves especially insightful. Dror provides a lucid and concise overview of the ensuing controversy, both in the United States, and, notably, among pro- and anti-communist Vietnamese-language commenters. A valuable scholarly contribution in its own right, the piece also details the political fallout of the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam, adding context which heightens the novel's historical significance. While virtually all South Vietnamese cities and towns were subject to communist attack, the destruction of Huế, a former capital, was especially poignant given its unique historical and cultural importance as a locus of scholarship, arts, and cuisine. The shock of the Tet Offensive also had an unprecedented if fleeting rallying effect on anti-communist South Vietnamese, who suspended political, regional, and religious animosities for the sake of unity, only to resume their quarreling after the spectre of impending violence waned. A substantial military failure, the Tet Offensive also exposed tensions between its Hanoi-based architects and the southern cadres who bore the brunt of the casualties. Forced to regroup, the Vietnamese communists opted to prioritise political organization ahead of military confrontation, helping the Saigon government stage a qualified recovery in the countryside. Less appreciated but equally decisive, the Huế massacre forever disabused the insurgent Central Vietnamese Ấn Quang Buddhist movement of the notion that it could prosper under communist rule.

But for all the political import of the events she describes, Nhã Ca takes a decidedly non-partisan stance on the proceedings. Instead, *Mourning Headband for Hue* elegizes the city and its people, set upon by successive indifferent aggressors, Vietnamese and foreign. Võ Thành Minh, a renowned anti-colonialist poet, is one of the novel's more symbolic characters, targeted by communist cadres for refusing to attend their neighbourhood gatherings. "I am against both Americans and Communists," he declares, defiantly if quixotically encamped in his cellar writing letters to Hồ Chí Minh and President Johnson demanding that they stop the war (p. 126). Nhã Ca's sister Oanh explains that Võ Thành Minh also "decided to appeal to young people and students to go down to sit under the bridge on a hunger strike to oppose." "Oppose who?" someone inquires. "Oppose the war, which is inhuman and atrocious," Oanh replies; "There is no justice in war whatsoever" (p. 128). An avatar of decency and the transcendence of dialogue above partisan violence, Võ Thành Minh, we learn from Dror's footnotes, was later killed while assisting civilian victims. Elsewhere, the book describes a stray dog wounded by American gunfire and knocked into a river by the blow. The soldiers torment it by firing into the water, preventing it from swimming to the shore. Amid

much laughter, the exhausted animal eventually succumbs to the current. Contemplating the metaphorical significance of their cruelty, Nhã Ca considers hurling at stone at the soldiers. “But no,” she finally decides; “what will the stone achieve?” (p. 268).

A paean to the common humanity that the war seemed destined to destroy, Nhã Ca’s plea for peace and mutual compassion challenged the crude binary platforms that both rival combatants sought to instill. Accordingly, like many fellow South Vietnamese intellectuals, she suffered the unfortunate fate of political imprisonment at the hands of both the South Vietnamese military government and its communist successors. A 1973 film adaptation of *Mourning Headband for Hue* was likewise banned on both sides of the North-South demarcation line. With the war’s belligerent parties all worthy of censure for outrages in Huế and beyond, the book shows little interest in reductive moralizing or apportioning specific blame. Instead, Nhã Ca writes, “our generation, the generation that likes to use the most beautiful and showy words: not only must we tie a mourning headband for Huế and for our homeland, which are being destroyed, but we must also take responsibility for Huế and our homeland” (p. 10). This, Dror explains, proved a controversial proposition among Nhã Ca’s contemporaries, to say the least, with many South Vietnamese readers disappointed by her reluctance to single out the communists. But it is precisely this audacious restraint which makes the novel so remarkable, both during the heat of the war and for readers of any background today. A work of great historical and literary value ideal for use in the classroom, *Mourning Headband for Hue* highlights overlooked voices and facets of the Vietnam War, meriting inclusion among the classics of wartime fiction.

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