

Setting, title, and the
central theme of
"paradise of the blind"



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The novel *Paradise of the Blind* by Duong Thu Huong is a work that represents postwar Vietnam quite well, with the author holding nothing back in terms of her home nation's virtues and ailments. So much is her unbridled frankness that the work has long since been banned in its country of origin, yet this largely seemed necessary for the author as the novel's clear intent revolves around exploiting the glaring issues with the era's imperialistic regime and the profound effect this had on its citizens. Perhaps the best way that the issues the author sees with her country can be summarized in the varying significance of the novel's bold title, giving a stinging retort to her nation's misguided leadership before one even commences the novel. This truly is a story reminiscent of the country in question, the setting invokes the aura of the cultural and natural landscapes, its variety of peoples, and the war-torn incoherent leaderships of the after years of conflict. Through the use of these unique characteristics the author is able to convey her dissatisfaction with the system which so wholly caused the suffering of the general populace and chained them down with mere illusions of confinement and rightful duties.

Truly, Huong has an insatiable respect for her homeland apparent in such personal and nostalgic passages as "Evening sounds filled the air : rice being rinsed...women beating laundry on rocks at the edge of the pool, children shrieking and tussling"(75), the novel as whole characterizes the troubles that prevent the enjoyment of her beloved homeland. Of course, this is not her story but rather a young Hang and her experiences in life, the most significant moments being characterized by the time political and social climate (which for a time were very closely intertwined) Nevertheless

because the stories of the author and that of the character are so seeped in similar circumstances that one would remiss not to believe that Huong poured her soul into the character of Hang projects her feelings of Vietnam through this character in what otherwise may have been a shameful way of expressing those controversial views. This is a country with a toxic political history marred with crimes against its populace the country itself was in dismay and suffering because of it, truly the circumstances and cultural views make this a one of a kind historical evolution with echoes of similar injustices throughout time. Though Hang views Vietnam's landscapes and people and their quirks with a childlike passion she learns through the acts of her brother and aunt the kinks in the idealistic façade she wishes her home would be.

The setting serves as a contrast to the themes, at least in Hang's eyes, that is, the pure and eternal, " The indestructible purity of a countryside in peace. This was a world apart. This was a world apart, like a great lake. Even a tempest could only ripple its surface"(75). This description is the Vietnam, which Hang so desperately aspires to be a true one that is untouched by external or internal wrongs. It is perhaps a disillusionment to the hopeful reader that even this great gift that she keeps near her heart is slowly dissolved through the eager and conflicting endeavors of her uncle and aunt, " filtered through the dawning sun, an exquisite green that would only exist once, in one place in the universe. I'll never know why this beauty was so painful to me"(83) an account that should have carried the same endearing weight that the prior example overflowed with, yet it is filled with a different emotion, a somber kind, for one may infer that the dissatisfaction with the

leadership of Vietnam directly coincide with the sadness Hang feels with even the most beautiful parts of her home. It is in this paradise of the blind that Hang would seem to yearn for the sweet bliss of ignorance that her nostalgic childhood brought her.

The title of the novel is certainly a unique one and borders on being an oxymoron: how can a location be considered a paradise to those that cannot see? Some readers may say that one would have to be blind to sincerely call any place on this earthly realm a paradise. That certainly holds true for the overarching themes of the novel as Hang struggles to come to terms with her supposed ancestral duties she is ordered to do, “when you mature, remember this and fulfill your duties”(74), the speaker here is Hang’s aunt, a hardboiled woman who she both reveres and despises, Hang feels this way because regardless of her aunt’s achievements in life her obsession with the memory of her brother and the insistence she gives toward Hang achieving the status that her blood had in her eyes is all that Hang would come to hate in adulthood. Hang’s ancestry follows her like a shadow, yet how does this relate to a “paradise of the blind”? Well, the fallout of the Vietnamese war sparked radical social and political change on account of the paranoia of the people they for a time decided to strip the landowning class, no matter their economic status, of all they owned; the nation was a communist state.

Before they realized the error of their ways the people had already experienced great suffering and the tarnishing of their dignity and all import pride, this is characterized nicely in the advice given to Hang by her mother, “To live with dignity, the important thing is never to despair. You give up once, and everything gives way. They say ginger root becomes stringy, but

pungent with age. Unhappiness forges a woman, makes her selfless, compassionate”(14). Hang's mother is not the only member of her family that suffered as her father was forever taken from her and her aunt becomes the counterexample to Hang's mother's words. The closest link that Hang's family has to the whole situation is her own uncle, who may very well characterize the significance of the title better than even the town's own blind man. Through his anger and contempt for the higher classes he like so many others become lose sight of their goal, the reconstruction of their people's lives. Though this may seem subjective it was not so long after this that the nation began a righting of errors movement, their way of admitting the rash system that was the prior movement. And so because of the folly of man Hang suffers a weakened and dysfunctional family, one crippled on account of the aftermath of the nation's journey towards paradise, their ardent belief that they could caused the literal and spiritual deaths of so many of Hang's relatives.

Yet this is not the only example of metaphorical blindness present in the book the other is much more of a cultural “ issue” that Hang and surely many of her peers see with the country one that in her eyes has caused her an equal level of suffering than the aforementioned case yet at a much more personal level. Hang's Aunt is responsible for this turmoil as she so vehemently seeks to mold Hang into a woman worthy of her brother's bloodline that she loses sight of the pure unbridled spirit that she aspires to be. It is apparent that this fact is not lost on Hang rather she secretly adheres to do the opposite of her Aunt's wishes and what becomes apparent at novel's end is that Hang chooses not to be subjected to the whims of

neither her aunt nor any one of her forlorn ancestors, “ Forgive me, my aunt: I’m going to sell this house and leave all this behind. We can honor the wishes of the dead with a few flowers... I cant squander my life tending these faded flowers, these shadows, the legacy of past crimes”(258). The reader may come to the conclusion that Hang represents not only the innermost feelings of the authors but can also be considered a representation of Vietnam as a whole, subjugated to countless horrors on account of the past’s folly and the present’s blindness towards this “ legacy of past crimes”. A somber conclusion, yet one must consider Hang’s declaration as symbolic of the chance that Vietnam’s people may yet acknowledge the mistakes of their past and set their sights on a vision of tomorrow.