

# Huong's characters and the suffering of women under confucian ideologies



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Traditional ideals, particularly in Asian culture value male superiority in the household whilst the women, has to assume secondary roles in the family. Confucianism as the foundation of most Asian regions since the Han dynasty in China has defined the mainstream discourse on gender onwards. The Three Obediences and Four Virtues defining the social codes for a virtuous woman and specific gender roles became the cornerstone of the kinfolk and society in general. Consequently, the majorly patriarchal ideologies in Confucianism has been regarded as sexist and historically damaging to Asian women.

In Duong Thu Huong's Paradise of the Blind the motif of one's identity being defined for them is explored through the three main female characters from two generations Hang, Que (Hang's mother) and Aunt Tam. The bildungsroman narrative focuses on Hang's character charting her progression from a submissive girl to familial and cultural expectations to an individual who develops a fuller sense of who she is. Hang's mother Que as a stereotypical character fits into the traditional side of Vietnamese society while the character Aunt Tam defies gender roles. Que suffers from the clutches of Confucian ideologies in that she is subjugated to the traditional female roles and familial loyalty that puts the male interests as the priority always. Whilst Aunt Tam despite defying the roles also suffers as an educated woman since she is not perceived by men as desirable, moreover, she is entangled in familial obligations to the dead. The Confucian ideologies teach that a virtuous woman obeys the men in the family; the father in childhood and before marriage; the spouses after they marry; and their sons in widowhood. Furthermore, social stigmas were placed on factors such as

remarriage or education for women leading to the decline of status of woman. Thus, through the Vietnam backdrop, Huong expresses the suffering of women under Confucian ideologies due to the traditional gender roles, familial duties and loyalty, and societal expectations.

Through the female characters, Huong highlights their suffering under Confucian ideologies through the traditional roles that warrant self-abnegation and self-sacrifice. Que asserts " 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" (Huong). Que continually accentuated the act of being self-sacrificing as a woman in Vietnamese culture according to the maxims and traditional practices of Confucianism. As a street vendor in Hanoi only making measly earnings, Que takes pride in the suffering in which traditions have enacted upon them. She fortifies Hang to express the same kind of selflessness showing the extent to which generations of women are bound to the traditional roles. The teachings threaten female autonomy as mothers convey the ideals of passivity and subjection in the Vietnamese culture. At a young age after witnessing a peasant woman vending barley sugar Hang ponders, " I was mesmerized by her huge, splayed feet...scored with tiny cracks, encrusted with gray patches of dead skin. Decades before her, another woman, just like her...plodded along with the same feet" (Huong). Huong highlights that peasant women have been trapped in traditions which exacted extreme hard work and great suffering from them, and are passed down from mother to daughter.

Furthermore Hang watches as her mother, Que, honors his brother and blinded by her loyalty to him even at times neglecting her own daughter.

Consequently, women around Hang specifically Que and Aunt Tam lead lives that are dependent on honoring the patriarchy and the dead thus suffer through familial loyalty and duties. As Hang is welcomed at the ancestral home as the heir she feels “ as if I were drinking to some solemn, merciless vow, some sacred, primitive rite” (Huong). Hang alludes to the self-sacrificing familial loyalties she has witnessed through her mother and her foster mother, Aunt Tam and she is unsure of adopting the same position. Hang witnesses Que's self-denying steps of devotion to her brother Chinh and her Aunt Tam's loyalty from the bitterness of her wronged family. Throughout Hang's childhood, Que is portrayed as consumed in servicing her only remaining family, her brother Chinh; she struggles and suffers to provide for his family which also entails two sons. The Three Obediences of Confucianism asserts that the maiden or married woman has an obligation to the males in the family her entire life. Thus, Que even neglects her own daughter to cater to his remaining brother and his sons as males are considered more important. The shackles of familial loyalty are also seen through Aunt Tam who is devoted to continuing the bloodline and tending to the wrongdoings imparted on her dead family. She even supports Hang's studies not for her sake but in order to honor the memory of her grandfather and father. In traditionalist Vietnam culture, the people are defined by the rules set by their preceding generations hence the living must serve the dead. Hang who intends to separate from the bounds of familial devotions asserts, “ We can honor the wishes of the dead with a few flowers on a grave

somewhere. I can't squander my life tending ... shadows, the legacy of past crimes" (Hương). By the end of the novel, she realizes that this path will not bring her happiness and takes the risk to leave behind her familial duties in pursuit of her own happiness.

Additionally, Huong suggests that women in Vietnam have to fit a very specific criterion to be considered a real and virtuous woman, eligible for marriage. Hang states, " My aunt was very beautiful but since she was educated and aloof she couldn't seem to find a husband" (Hương). It suggests that the sole role of a virtuous woman is to get married and domesticity, any other endeavors are against societal expectations. Being educated is frowned upon rather than celebrated. Moreover, the assertion suggests that the woman should only be beautiful and nothing else. Aunt Tam as an educated woman and aloof individual are main reasons she fails to attract a husband. In traditionalist Vietnamese culture, women have to abide by certain standards and social codes placed by centuries-old ideologies. Henceforth, women who subvert the norms but are still traditionalists, in essence, suffer the wrath of the ideologies. Essentially, the reasons why Hang's decision to subvert the traditions is followed by complete detachment from the culture.

Accordingly, Huong illustrates the suffering of Vietnamese women under Confucian ideologies as a result of its traditional gender roles, familial devotion and loyalty, and cultural expectations. Huong explores this motif by describing Hang's struggle against following the customs and being unhappy and broken and her quest to find happiness. Through her eyes, the customs has subjugated her mother Que and other peasant women into a life of self-

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sacrifice, unhappiness, and self-abnegation. The traditionalist culture fosters the veneration of the patriarchy and the dead at the expense of the women preventing thinking for oneself if one is female. The rigid social codes for women also nurtures an unfortunate life for women who challenge the norms while still imbued with the ideologies. Fundamentally, the thoughts allow for patriarchal devaluation and oppression through the obligations and expectations they demand from women.

## **Work Cited**

Hương, Dương Thu. Paradise of the Blind. 1988. Web.