



## Re-writing World Literature through Juxtaposition: Decolonizing Comparative Literature in Vietnam

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### [ *Abstract* ]

Postcolonial critics have criticized Comparative Literature for exclusively studying literatures from the non-Western world through Western lenses. In other words, postcolonial criticism asserts that theorists and practitioners of comparative literature have traced the "assistance" of the classic "comparison and contrast" approach to an imperialist discourse, which sustains the superiority of Western cultures and economies. As a countermeasure to reading through the comparative lens, literary theories have offered a "juxtapositional model of comparison" that connects texts across cultures, places, and times. This paper examines practices of Comparative Literature in Vietnam, revealing how the engagement with decolonizing processes leads to a knowledge production that is paradoxically colonial. The paper also analyses implementations of this model in reading select Vietnamese works and highlights how conventional comparisons, largely based on historical influences and reception, maintain the

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colonial mapping of World Literature, centralizing Western, and more particularly, English Literature and in the process marginalizing the others. Therefore, the practice of juxtaposing Vietnamese literary works with canonical works of the World Literature will provoke dialogues and raise awareness of hitherto marginalized works to an international readership. In this process, the paper considers the contemporary interest of Comparative Literature practice in trans-national, trans-regional, trans-historical, and trans-cultural perspectives.

**Keywords:** juxtapositional model of comparison, decolonization, Comparative Literature, Vietnamese Literature, World Literature

## I . Introduction

Comparative studies emerged in Europe in the context of the discovery of the New World and increased contact with non-Western peoples and cultures that led to colonialism (Cheah 2009: 536). Postcolonial critics have criticized comparative studies for tending towards Western colonialism and producing knowledge about the "other" as homogeneous, rigid, and lifeless. This was all with the aim of constructing the East-West divide where the non-West was constructed as inferior and the West superior. In other words, from perspectives of postcolonial criticism, theorists and practitioners of Comparative Literature recognized the "assistance" of the classic "comparison and contrast" approach to the imperialist discourse that promotes and retains the superiority of Western culture and economy. Instead, postcolonial critics in Literary Studies offered the "juxtapositional model of comparison" in order to move beyond imperialist practices in traditional comparison. This model connects literary texts across cultures, places, and times, moving "toward a *conjunctive* or *relational* model informed by cross-cultural, cross-geographical, and indeed, world-scale contacts, juxtapositions, borrowings, and bartering" (Moraru 2014). According to Susan Stanford Friedman, this manner of Comparative Literature promotes

a “juxtapositional model of comparison” and is determined by accidental contiguity, genealogical isolation, and ethical encounter.” (Friedman 2011: 785). This paper examines practices of Comparative Literature in Vietnam, revealing how they have engaged with the decolonizing processes and paradoxically fallen into essentialism, a tendency in knowledge production that postcolonial scholars identify as a type of imperialism. The paper also analyses some implementations of this model in approaching some Vietnamese literary works. Conventional comparisons, largely based on historical influences and reception, contribute to maintaining the colonial mapping of World Literature, where Western Literature, particularly English Literature, is dominantly visible, with everything else remaining invisible. Meanwhile, ways of juxtaposing Vietnamese literary works with canonical works of the world will reveal and provoke potential dialogues and encounter, creating in international readers, particular those who read in English, an awareness about the literatures from other parts of the world. The perception of World Literature thus becomes ethnically inclusive.

## **II. Decolonizing Orientation in Comparative Literature in Vietnam**

Postcolonial critics opine that Comparative Literature exclusively studies Literatures of the Other or of the Non-Western World from standardized perspectives of Western Literature and scholarship. Conventionally, comparatists are supposed to “defend” Literatures of the Other for “development or democracy.” However, what is problematic is that those goals are only from Western standards—the flag that the West has always held high in its journey to maintain and develop its economic, political, and cultural dominance over the world since the nineteenth century. With this comparison, Western Literature is considered to be orthodox and the standard of literariness (“mainstream or canonical literature”); and, literatures outside Europe are considered not worthy of being the object of literary study (Gugelberger 1991: 505). Moreover, traditional Comparative Literature implies the inequality between the “dominant side and the Other,” the “hierarchical order,” and

instrumentalism, all embodiments of imperialist knowledge (Felski and Friedman 2013: 1-30). However, in the 1960s, when the national liberation movements in colonial countries won consecutive victories, the West began to doubt its intellectual hegemony over the world. Western scholarship “[chose] to designate the unfamiliar, but for the limitations of its own perspectives” (Gugelberger 1991: 507). In this context, Postcolonial Criticism emerged and has been “one of the most dynamic areas in contemporary literary studies” (Nixon 2005: 233).

From perspectives of postcolonial criticism, comparative literary theorists and practitioners have recognized the “assistance” of the classic “comparison and contrast” approach to the colonial discourse about the superiority of Western culture and economy. Gayatri Spivak, a pioneer of postcolonial criticism and professor of comparative literature (Columbia University, USA), highlights the “ethical unacceptability of violence” implicit in these descriptions of other literatures and cultures in Western comparative scholarship. It relates to what she addresses as “the unexamined, dull anthropologism of cultural relativism” (Spivak 2009: 613-616). Professor of literary studies and postcolonial theorist Graham Huggan (University of Leeds, UK) argues that portrayals of the alien, the uniqueness, and the superiority of cultures and literatures outside the West—a consequence of the classic “comparison, contrast” method in comparative literature—constitute an effective tool of imperial power. This form of comparison implicitly assumes the inferiority of non-Western cultures and literatures in the developing world set by Western standards (Huggan 2001: 1-30). Similarly, Edward Said, a pioneer of postcolonial theory and a leading comparatist argues that stories about the East are always formatted in such a way that it can become the East of the West, so that “we,” the West, can “possess and control” it (Said 2014: 19).

Theorists of comparative literature, who are also pioneers of postcolonial criticism, argue that it is necessary “to reverse the epistemic violence inflicted on the cultural other that has resulted from the complicity between knowledge production and colonial/neocolonial domination” (Cheah 2009: 536). Comparatists need to overcome the domination of political conceptions of space

and time when approaching literatures outside the West. Walter Dignolo proposes the decolonial methodology of comparison. This comparison points out political biases and interests in traditional comparative methods, analyzing the network of colonial powers in processes of knowledge production (Dignolo 2013: 99-119). Gugelberger asserts that Western comparatists "have to learn to live with" or "become part of" the literatures from outside the West, treating them with respect, as part of the World Literature. He is of the view that by accepting the position of other literatures on the map of World Literature, highlighting significant cultural otherness, "we hope... to end colonialism and neocolonialism, political and mental" (Gugelberger 191: 506).

Comparative Literature, as a science that studies literatures of different languages, has been extensively and systematically introduced and practiced in Vietnam. Evidently, there exist many monographs and edited research books about theoretical issues and implementations of Comparative Literature in Vietnam, especially since the 1990s. Considered to be achievements are the monographs *Những vấn đề lý luận của văn học so sánh* (Theoretical Issues of Comparative Literature, Social Science Press, 1995, 178 pages), *Lý luận văn học so sánh* (Theory of Comparative Literature (Social Science Press, 1998, 227 pages), and *Nghiên cứu văn học lý luận và ứng dụng* (Studying and Implementing Literary Theories (Hanoi University of Education Press, 1999, 262 pages) by Nguyễn Văn Dân. The first decade of the twenty-first century saw the publication of the following books: *Văn học so sánh – Lý luận và ứng dụng* (Comparative Literature-Theory and Application, Social Science Press, Hanoi, 2001, 801 pages), edited by Lưu Văn Bông; *Từ văn học so sánh đến thi học so sánh* (From Comparative Literature to Comparative Poetics (Literature Press, Hanoi, 2002, 371 pages), edited by Phương Lưu; *Văn học so sánh – nghiên cứu và dịch thuật* (Comparative Literature-Research and Translation, National University Press, Ho Chi Minh City, 2003, 343 pages), edited by of the Faculty of Literature and Journalism, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City; *Những bình diện chủ yếu của văn học so sánh* (Main Aspects of Comparative Literature, Social Science Press, Hanoi, 2004, 423 pages), edited by Lưu Văn Bông; and *Văn*

*học so sánh nghiên cứu và triển vọng* (Comparative Literature, Studies and Prospects, Hanoi University of Education Press, Hanoi, 2005, 439 pages), edited by Trần Đình Sử, Lê Nhâm Thìn and Lê Lư Oanh. The second decade saw Lư Văn Bồng's editing of the 618-page monograph *Văn học so sánh - Một khoa học kết liên phức hợp* (Comparative Literature-An Interdisciplinary Science, Social Science Press, Hanoi, 2017); and Lê Từ Hiến's editing of the 419-page book *Văn học so sánh - Từ ô cửa đến chân trời* (Comparative Literature-From the Window to the Sky Horizon, Social Science Press, Hanoi 2017). Most recently, in 2020, literary theorist Trần Đình Sử published the monograph *Cơ sở văn học so sánh* (Bases of Comparative Literature, Hanoi University of Education Press, Hanoi, 2020, 235 pages). Over and above, there are several articles that introduce, translate and study Comparative Literature in journals from the 1920s to the present.<sup>1</sup>

Noticeably, most practices of Comparative Literature in Vietnam tend towards the cultural, historical, and social contexts of the literary works. In other words, Vietnamese comparatists implement the work of contextualization. Such a method is seen to be useful in examining influences and inheritances among literary works of different cultures. The dominating method is visible in Nguyễn Văn Dân's definition, which identifies three main research objectives of Comparative Literature. These are direct relationships (intercultural influences and borrowings); similarities other than direct relationships (the similarities between cultures arise not from their influence but similar socio-historical conditions); and independent differences" (Luu Van Bong 2001: 44). Trần Thanh Đạm, in the article "Văn học so sánh với chúng ta" (Comparative Literature for Us), also agrees with this point of view, and defines the goal of Comparative Literature "from its birth to the present" as "to study literature as a field of cultural and artistic exchange of people within and between communities through the ages" (Trần Thanh Đạm 2003: 13). Theorist Trần Đình Sử defines Comparative Literature as the research discipline that aims to "determine

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<sup>1</sup> Information of this paragraph is drawn from records at the National Library in Hanoi and in publications by Lư Văn Bồng (2001), Trần Đình Sử, Lê Nhâm Thìn and Lê Lư Oanh (2005), and Cao Thị Hồng (2013).

relationships of exchanges, influences, and transfers among values as well as new creations that are not repeated between different literatures in the world.” He asserts that “no literature can exist without its relationship with other literatures” (2020: 1). These arguments show that researchers in Vietnam focus on the historical connections between the works presented for comparison and focus on the historical and social contexts associated with the birth and survival of the literary works.

Saliently, Comparative Literature theorists and practitioners in Vietnam emphasize what can be addressed as the national mission of Comparative Literature, that is, Comparative Literature is seen to aim at raising the status of national literature in the wake of rising cultural interference and immigration in Vietnam and around the world. Authors Trần Đình Sử, Lê Nhâm Thìn, and Lê Lưu Oanh write that without Comparative Literature, we will miss the chance of recognizing the status, position, and prestige of our national literature in the world communities of literatures. "Without comparative literature," the group of scholars asserts, "we lose the ability to appreciate self-created beauties and potentials of our national literature in the face of constantly migrations of ethnic groups from Europe and Asia to this S shaped-land" (Trần Đình Sử, Lê Nhâm Thìn, Lê Lưu Oanh 2005: 4). In the preface to his monograph *Cơ sở văn học so sánh*, Trần Đình Sử argues similarly: "Implementing comparative literature is first to gain internationally updated definitions of literature and second is to realize the position and identity of our national literature in the world literary map. Thus, comparative literature is particularly essential in the context of present-day globalization which threatens the existence of national cultures, embodied in national literature" (2020: 1).

Even in implementing the parallel model of Comparative Literature, a model that studies literatures "without actual relationships, the parallel study is likely to place more emphasis on the importance of cross-country literary study" (Cao 207: 40). Vietnamese researchers still aim to highlight national identities that are demonstrated in national literature. Revealing "relations of aesthetic values among communities" and "the commonality in thought, emotion, psychology, and aesthetics" between Vietnamese

literature and others provide Vietnamese scholars with the opportunity of indicating universality and the humanity of their national literature (Trần Đình Sử, Lê Nhân Thìn, Lê Lưu Oanh 2004: 10). Thus, the parallel comparison is seen as a method of promoting the status of the national literature on the world literary map. In other words, Comparative Literature in Vietnam carries a political mission that is to affirm the existence and development of the national literature.

Such political mission is explicit in works that compare Vietnamese Literature with literatures from China and France, the countries that once colonized Vietnam. These works include *Từ văn học so sánh đến thi học so sánh* (From Comparative Literature to Comparative Poetics, 2002) by Phương Lưu and *Việt Nam và phương Tây tiếp nhận và giao thoa trong văn học* (Vietnam and the West: Reception and Exchanges in Literature, Education Press, Hà Nội, 2007) by Đặng Anh Đào. These highlight the identity and richness of Vietnamese Literature. Lưu Văn Bông, in his latest book, quoted above, compares Vietnamese Socialist literature with Soviet Literature, arguing that the former plays an important role in the development of this literary movement in the world, and thus deserves the attention of international readers. In general, discussion and practice of Comparative Literature in Vietnam largely highlighted the uniqueness, difference, and superiority of Vietnamese national literature. In other words, in Vietnam, national literature constitutes the aim of practices and theories in Comparative Literature.

Underlying such national orientation in Comparative Literature is the emphasis on the aspect of context in Literary Studies in Vietnam. Put differently, attaching literary works to their inherent historical, cultural, and social contexts becomes the primary concern of Vietnamese theorists and practitioners of Comparative Literature. They have given comparative literature a political mission, which is to enrich the national culture and literature and make that culture and literature potentially comparable to those from other countries, particularly those from the West. Indeed, the political mission of Comparative Literature in Vietnam engages with ongoing decolonization, a process that aimed to remove the colonial regime and its legacies, by building and maintaining an idealized homogenous and



hegemonic nation. Regardless of historically differing regimes in the Vietnamese government, the fate of the nation, particularly national sovereignty and homogeneity, still constitutes the overriding, ultimate goal of “good” Vietnamese writers, both scholarly and creative. Even in the time of Reform in 1986, political documents of the Party-led government insist that all cultural and creative activities must contribute to the nation’s socialist construction and independence (Đảng cộng sản Việt Nam 1993: 54–55). In general, the quest for national sovereignty and homogeneity remains the central concern of Vietnamese nation-makers, both intellectuals, and officials. In this context, practices of Comparative Literature in Vietnam that aim to construct and promote the existence and value of national literature, reflect and engage with the continuous decolonization in Vietnam.

Paradoxically, this objective demonstrates that Comparative Literature in Vietnam, despite aiming at countering Western hegemony implied in traditional Comparative Literature, still relies on the imperialist perspective that underlies and maintains hegemony. This is the perspective of the political division of space (a division of national territories) and of the hierarchy among those divided territories. Luu Văn Bồng emphasizes that those practices are imperialist, particularly in the context of increasing global migrations. He writes: “We cannot oppose Western hegemony by alternating it with an Eastern hegemony, or Asianism, Africanism, or Latin Americanism.” He suggests that “*we*” should be alert, equal, and sincerely respectful in references and connections with the world, which transforms due to cultural exchanges and the integration of people (2005: 239-240, emphasis added).

Ostensibly, Comparative Literature in Vietnam takes national literature, not the “trans-, inter-cross” or accidental, random interaction between literary works of different cultures and languages, as the object and purpose of research. In other words, *contextualizing* literary works in their historical, social, cultural, and textual contexts remains the principle for Comparative Literature in Vietnam. According to Christian Moraru (professor at the University of North Carolina, USA), such tendency embodies the colonial vision of space. Under this vision, the world is dichotomized and

segregated into the world of "us" and the world of "others," "developed, modernized" and "backward, undeveloped." In the field of literature, such vision echoes in the way of a "separation pattern" based on the divide of central and peripheral texts, the texts here and out there, the texts of our culture and other cultures (Moraru 2014).

### **III. Juxtaposition as a Way of Decolonizing Comparative Literature**

In the decolonizing mode of Postcolonial Criticism, international practitioners and theorists of Comparative Literature have proposed methods of re-approaching "world literatures" to overcome the imperial hierarchical relations of knowledge. According to Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, "world literature" is a thematic approach to literature, whereby it is possible to include authors of various periods and cultures, unaffected by political spaces such as center and periphery or Europe and non-Europe (Thomsen 2008: 61-102). Likewise, Vilashini Cooppan considers "world literature" a product of globalization; each literature has echoes of another literature and from another era. Therefore, there is no spatial and historical division between literatures of different languages (Cooppan 2004: 10-36). Pascale Casanova defines "international literary space" as a way of looking at texts in relation to collections of texts, literary works, and aesthetic debates. In this space, a given work enters a harmonious relationship with other texts and finds the foundation for its originality and uniqueness; further, it not only uncovers similarities and differences but also finds patterns and models to which all texts belong (Casanova 2004). This is a way of looking at the interactions and interdependencies between texts belonging to different localities; these interactions and dependencies transcend traditional boundaries of language, culture, and history. Thus, under Postcolonial Criticism, recent discussions and implementations of Comparative Literature have formed an attempt at decolonization; they desire to end the dominance of Western culture and knowledge by promoting the appreciation for non-Western literatures.

In this context, the juxtaposition model is one of these efforts to decolonize traditional Comparative Literature. The model is one of the strategies of comparatists in escaping imperialist and colonialist concepts and knowledge about World Literatures. The model is proposed by Susan Friedman in her article "Why Not Compare" published in *PMLA* 126.3 (2011). Friedman appears to be influenced by Gilles Deleuze' and Félix Guattari's concept of "rhizome" when she emphasizes the method of the *decontextualization* of comparison. This comparison does not consider the different geographical-historical and cultural associations of the texts. Instead, this method analyses connections of texts from different cultures, places, and times; bringing texts from one context to another without being concerned with their geographical-historical and culturally unrelated adherences. Based on Derrida's view of "unconditioned" attachments and the "non-closure of contexts," Friedman explains that a literary text has many potential contexts unrelated to the language, ethnicity, era, or species to which the work belongs. Decontextualization—by placing the work in relation to other unfamiliar works—is a way of revealing other latent contexts of an object, as well as explaining that a literary text has many *potential* contexts which are not just linguistic, national, temporal, or generic; comparisons based on decontextualization are a way of making visible other potential contexts of a text usually made invisible through a comparison based on contextualization. Ways of "transplanting," "writing anew," "cutting" or "pasting" a text in another text and context will bring about changes of rethinking familiar and initial assumptions of texts being compared, suggesting alternative appreciations of the texts, and thus making them forever new. With the juxtaposition model, she argues that texts are capable of continuously generating new meanings, depending on interactions and the parallels that arise when texts are randomly placed beside each other.

Friedman synthesizes three ways of juxtaposition in Comparative Literature: "collision," "reciprocal defamilization," and "collage." Collision is a way of reading out connections and differences that arise from the disparate and different historical and geographical contexts of two works. In this comparatists must

"listen, speak, and live with" diverse communities and new ways of thinking that emerge when "extremely juxtaposing" disparate, non-conflicting but not compatible works. Reciprocal defamilization accepts the unfamiliarity or the strangeness that emerges in comparison, thereby developing a sense of symbiosis and coexistence of different cultures. According to Friedman, breaking away from familiar meanings derived from familiar contexts makes the compared texts parts of a larger system of meaning; these texts themselves have the potential to open their doors to other influences and scopes that emerge in the comparisons. In this way, the compared texts enter a dialogue with each other because they acknowledge the existence of things different from them. Thus, this approach has the potential to untangle the antagonistic relationship between "We" and the "Other" that sustains the imperial domination of knowledge. Lastly, Collage, Friedman writes, is borrowed from dadaism and modern poetics, which juxtapose unrelated sentences. This method maintains the distinct specificity of each compared work, rejecting hierarchical order and instrumentalism, all with the aim of confirming new generalizations based on points which the texts share with each other. Friedman uses the equivalent terms "cultural juxtaposition" or "cultural collage" to refer to extreme juxtapositions of texts that come from different cultural, geo-historical regions. Putting texts side by side—studying their comparability and incomparability—gives rise to both new textual and contextual meanings.

Friedman and other comparatists believe that the juxtaposition model helps to escape from the imperialist knowledge implied in the classic "contrast and compare." In another article, Friedman (2013) highlights that such substitution is necessary because traditional Comparative Literature has its roots in the ambition to acquire encyclopedic knowledge shaped by nineteenth-century humanistic thought in Europe. The way of reduction ignores the uniqueness of the compared texts, making these texts only variations of a common normative framework and relying on an underestimation of these cultures in relation to other cultures. The juxtapositional model will help to avoid the assessment that Western Literature is the standard when considering literary works outside

the West. Besides, this model helps to make literary works, regardless of regions and cultures, visible and audible on the map of World Literature.

Comparing unrelated literary texts conforms to the postcolonial politics of space that Sara Upstone highlights in her book *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel* (2009). According to her, spatial politics has been deeply rooted in the politics of the nation; an awareness of territorial boundaries involves colonial control. Postcolonial reading, as a way of postcolonial resistance, offers a fluid and open form of space in attempts of re-envisioning the colonial divide of the world. Or in the words of Morau, the postcolonial re-envisioning of space aims at revising residual imperialist visions of the world embodied in "a separateness-based model shaped by the center/margin, "in here"/"out there," our culture/theirs, and other similar *disjunctions*" (Moraru 2014). Accordingly, spatiality in postcolonial reading is seen in a widely divergent definition, which refers to not only physical aspects (such as politically-bound locations) but also to conceptual aspects (such as texts themselves as spatial entities) of space. Upstone's postcolonial reading of space potentially provides this special issue the possibility of reading across culturally different texts for potential communications and connection. All aim at making marginalized literary works visible to world readers.

Traditional Comparative Literature—dominated by the context-based approach—has become powerless in the face of global migration—crossing political, geographical, and conceptual boundaries—of literary currents, flow of ideas, and flow of people. Furthermore, as said, comparison in general, and in Comparative Literature, in particular, have been re-evaluated by postcolonial critics. Accordingly, the comparison is unable to escape from judgments that conform to hierarchical binaries such as center-marginal and developed-undeveloped. Scholars of Comparative Literature start feeling the "complicity" of comparative literature with colonialism and ethnocentrism. Friedman and her collaborator, Rita Felski, emphasize that the "contradiction and comparison" model has led to the condemnation of Comparative Literature as a "collusion" or unity with colonialism and European

centralism (2013: 1). Specifically, Comparative Literature resembles the process of assimilation in colonialism as it assumes of a common ladder for the development of all human cultures, where countries outside the West is always on the lower rank and all its diversities are cut, molded, and reduced in order to conform to Western standards. Meanwhile, the juxtaposition model respects the random and uncertain interaction and dialogue between unfamiliar literary works. With respect for difference and unfamiliarity, and an emphasis on the meaning of interaction and dialogue between unfamiliar works, this model contributes to dissolving Western intellectual hegemony and imperialist judgments about foreign literatures that are implicit in the traditional "comparison and contrast" practices of Comparative Literature.

On the other hand, sticking to the traditional "compare and contrast" mode of Comparative Literature brings a methodological crisis in an era where cultures are brought closer together than ever before due to the proliferation of new media and forms of migration (Felski and Friedman 2013: 1). In other words, traditional Comparative Literature becomes powerless in the face of global migration, crossing the political, geographical, and conceptual boundaries of flows of texts, ideas, and people. By making it possible for unfamiliar works to interact, collide, understand each other's differences, and create new meanings from those relationships, the model reflects the movements and interactions that appear to be unimpeded by geographical and political boundaries. The juxtaposition model makes Comparative Literature essential in the age of globalization. Friedman (2009) asserts that Comparative Literature increasingly becomes urgent than ever in many fields, including Literary Studies, where the process of globalization has developed comparative analyses of literature and culture at the transnational or planetary level (2009: 753).

The juxtapositional model of Comparative Literature has not been studied in Vietnam. The juxtaposition of Comparative Literature—a way of separating works from their adherent contexts, placing them next to unfamiliar works in search of new meanings and potential contexts—has not been introduced yet in Vietnam.

Randomly placing Vietnamese literary works with those coming from different cultures will generate new and potentially significant dialogues in multiple literary or non-literary contexts. The aim is to reveal meanings and contexts that are latent within their pre-existing, conventional contexts. The attempt by scholars of Comparative Literature to juxtapose canonical and non-canonical texts adds visibility to hitherto invisible non-Western literatures. This way of “reading without maps” would revise the colonial *canonization of world literatures* (Den Tandt 2005: 17-32). For instance, putting the novel *The Soul Factory* (*Nhà máy chế tạo linh hồn*, 2020) by Nguyễn Nguyên Phước (1976) next to the long story *Castle* (1926) by Franz Kafka (1883-1924), regardless of their historical and geographic disconnections, exposes them to a discussion about ways of discussing hidden, invisible powers. The character Lâm in *The Soul Factory* applies for a job at the Soul Factory. He receives the job without providing any identity-related documents. Right from the beginning, he has been full of doubts about the factory’s work of producing souls. Lâm tries his best to find out about the factory’s strange works. He even approaches a girl working in the factory, and another girl residing nearby to get information and provoke them to escape, all while satisfying his sexual needs. However, like all the other workers in the factory, the girls, either intimidated or satisfied with their existing lives, refuse to run away with Lâm. In the end, Lâm exits the factory alone, anxious about the threat of terrible punishment awaiting him. The juxtaposition of *The Soul Factory* with Kafka’s *Castle* provokes thought about the existence of invisible powers across temporal and spatial boundaries, which unreasonably threaten the peace and safety of human beings. These invisible powers imprison human souls, destroying their aspirations, and demotivating their efforts. They are omnipresent, knowing everything, controlling everything, and making people fearful, inferior, complacent, and silent. The two novels remind human beings about their eternal anxiety, confusion, and insecurity living in a modernized world.

Secondly, juxtaposing the Vietnamese novel *Primordial Stage of Beings* (Thoạt kỳ thủy, 2004) by Nguyễn Bình Phương (1965-) and the American novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1926) by William

*Faulkner (1897-1962) reveals complex evocations about the psychological world of human beings. Both works center around characters who are mad. The Sound and the Fury includes continuous internal monologues of members of the Compson family: the youngest brother Benjy has been suffering from a mental illness since childhood, while the eldest Quentin is always entertaining thoughts of suicide; the third son Jason is cruel and selfish. Following the ambiguous, disconnected, and chaotic stories of each of these "psychologically disturbed" characters, readers gradually unveil a world full of sounds and fury, of mysteries intense but deep. The world visualized by the insane Benjy, one this is filled with sounds, images, and scents perceived by primitive instincts, becomes timeless, confusing, and hazy (Anderson 1990, 311-324). Similarly, the world of the mad in Primordial Stage of Beings by Nguyễn Bình Phương is filled with psychological flows of Tính, character with an unusual mentality and mood. Born to a family where the father is alcoholic, rude, and grumpy, Tính has evolved a habit of gnawing dishes, killing insects, and looking at knives and fire. Around Tính are also unusual people—the former soldier Hung with a traumatic brain injury; the eccentric writer Phùng; among other crazy people. Comparing The Primordial Stage of Beings and The Sound and the Fury reveals the social criticism of the former, as the latter is widely perceived as a reflection of American society in an era of turmoil and social decline. Considering The Sound and the Fury in this manner makes Primordial Stage of Beings a reflection of war trauma prevailing post-1975 Vietnamese society. Nguyễn Bình Phương explores the depths of the unconscious, tracing the evil and violent identities of people through haunting images, like the owl being swept away in a river, a dog's eyes as yellow as the moon, and the color blood red. The shadow of war appears shortly in narratives of the veteran Hung, in memories of people, and through the atmosphere of enlisting in the army. However, it lingers in people's mental and material worlds, in the sequelae of Hung's wounds, in the sobs of those who sent their loved ones off to the battlefields, and in the unjust deaths. Placed side by side, the two novels potentially provoke conversations about the decline of values that tie people to their families and society, and the reemergence of threatening wild human instincts.*



Thirdly, the play *The Blue Chrysanths over the Marshland* (Hoa cúc xanh trên đầm lầy, 1988) by the nationally-recognized playwright Lư Quang Vũ (1948-1988) includes elements of science fiction: the invention of robots to fulfill human beings' lack of lovers and companions, as well as robots' journey to escape from the humans to turn to the natural world. The play ends with a message that the land where the blue chrysanths grow and blossom is the homeland of robots. The story about modern robots with true emotions and love and fighting against people's domination provokes dialogue with the canon of science fiction by Jules Verne, Robert Anson Heinlein, Herbert George Wells, and Alexander Romanovich Belyaev. Comparing *The Blue Chrysanths* with the Czech play *R. U. R. (Rossum's Universal Robots, 1920)* by Karel Čapek provokes a dialogue about the invention of robots and how it reflects humans desire for mental and physical freedom. It is possible to read through the works the familiar critique against scientific discoveries and associated industrialization and scientific materialism, both engaged by science fiction (Ball 2011: 163). On the other hand, the two can be read as a record of human desire to escape the world of suppression and surveillance brought up by modern science. In *The Blue Chrysanths*, the character Hoang creates a robot in the image of his former lover (Liên B) and also of a friend (Vân B). Both reflect Hoang's desire to obtain the love and the friendship he lost in a love triangle that involved him and real Liên and Vân. Moreover, in inventing two robots of different functions, Hoang shows his ambition to live differently than those around him who are common and miserably enslaved. In creating robots who are "completely new, noble, loving, and merciful" (Lư Quang Vũ 1997: 400-401), he intends to transcend his situation. Presenting Lư Quang Vũ's play in this manner offers a new way of reading Čapek's depictions of robots awakening into the uniqueness of humanity. Humans have the capacity to feel and to create. Juxtaposed, both works discuss human existence as they cross historically-bound critiques against science and industrialization.

Conventional comparisons, largely based on historical influences and receptions, contribute to maintaining the imperialist mapping of world literature, where Western Literature, particularly

English Literature, is dominantly visible and the other literatures are invisible. Juxtaposing Vietnamese works with those that are not geographically, historically, and linguistically related to or influenced by them helps to deconstruct forms of hegemony, and guides reading towards equality and mutual respect for knowledge production across the world. Vietnamese Literature, when placed beside classic literary works, produce new meanings that can even converse with those canonized in World Literature. More interestingly, when placed next to Vietnamese works, these classic literary works are exposed to new contexts and new meanings. Thus, with the juxtapositional model, the map of World Literature becomes more inclusive and dynamic, taking into account literary works from diverse cultures around the world.

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