



## HOME SWEET HOME IN VÕ PHIẾN'S *TUYỆT BÚT*\*



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### [ *Abstract* ]

From being understood as a dwelling, the concept of home is extended to denote belongingness and a sense of attachment in which spiritual, ethnic, religious and historical identities shape a sense of self. Hence, home with its expanded definitions is considered as a cross-cutting and fundamental theme in works by Võ Phiến, one of the diaspora's towering minds who devoted his life to capturing the rich details of Vietnamese culture, its villages and locals. This article pays attention to the cultural space created through Võ Phiến's *tuyệt bút* written when he lived in Saigon and California. Many representations of home were argued as evidence of subtle influences of the historical and social context on the way Võ Phiến perceived and built his own homeland. By observing disruption and continuity through the expressions of the home in Võ Phiến's writing, we shed light on how Võ Phiến managed to create an indigenous cultural space towards social interactions of Western

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\* Since there is no equivalent term in English, *tuyệt bút* can be roughly understood as informal (narrative) essays. In the third part of this article, we will define this term more clearly. However, we intentionally name this genre in Vietnamese to appreciate the uniqueness of Võ Phiến through his creation of a literary genre.

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ideology in South Vietnam from 1964 to 1975.

**Keywords:** Vo Phien, tuy but, Vietnamese diasporic literature, United States, South Vietnam literature, diaspora studies

## I . Introduction

Vietnam, a country with high levels of geographical mobility, has experienced numerous periods of both domestic and international migration. The history of Vietnam witnessed the expansion of regions and the migration of people in various directions, mainly from the North to the South (Tana 2004: 11; Taylor 1993: 42-65; Li Tana (trans.) 2007: 148 - 156; Nguyễn (a) 1970: 25-43; Phù Lang 1970: 45-137) and from south-west to the Lower Mekong (Nguyễn (b) 1970: 3-24). From the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Vietnamese migrated to Cambodia. They were victims of political or religious conflicts, landless people, fishermen, cross-border smugglers, and criminals. Since the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, there have been Vietnamese Catholic villages in Cambodia.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the whole coastal region between the Mekong Delta estuaries and the Malay Peninsula witnessed the “frequent movements of people and exchanges of commodities and cultural practices among Viets, Siamese, Mon-Khmer, and Malays with Chinese settlers, sojourners and junk traders” (Tana 2004: 2) in the later 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Since the first Vietnamese appeared in Cambodia in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, there have been five waves of Vietnamese migration abroad (Tran 2020: 2-6). Currently, it is estimated that there are 4.5 million Vietnamese who live and work in 110 countries and territories (Minh Huy 2018). In general, migration is considered as the main response of individuals to their difficulties and inadequacies or political conflicts in homeland as well as the prospects for economic and educational opportunities in host lands.

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<sup>1</sup> Also, the establishment of military colonies in Trấn Tây (The Western protectorate) resulted in the Vietnamese migration to Cambodia. For further reference on Minh Mạng's orders to expand the state to the southwestern frontier, see further in Viện Khoa học Xã hội Việt Nam-Viện Sử học 2004, *Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn Đại Nam thực lục Tập 4*.

In sociological research on the Vietnamese migration (Dang 1999: 381), home becomes one of the key concepts because it helps to explain the “pull” factor, destination-specific incentives, and “push” factors, those at the places of origin. However, literary studies on Vietnamese diaspora literature were likely to exploit the connotation of home rather than inquire about its denotation. By studying the origins of this concept and how it was understood in studies on human geography and diaspora studies, this paper contributes to systematizing the theory of home in the research on the Vietnamese community abroad. In addition, research on the concept of home supports multi-disciplinary studies on cultural identity and collective memory, which shed light not only on surveys, in-depth interviews, or statistical reports but also on the writings by the Vietnamese in diaspora.

While appreciating space as the indisputable locale for true awareness of life’s values, the geographer Tuan (1998: 145) particularly considered home as the most intimate place, whose inhabitants tend to resent criticism of it, no matter how plain, ugly, or boring it might be. Affect rather than calculating intelligence creates the inhabitants’ connections with their home place and its scents, sounds, and settings. Understanding home as a key element in the relationship between place and identity formation is the theoretical foundation for my argument about the expression of home in Võ Phiến’s *tuỷ bút*. Particularly, home is analyzed not only as a geographical but also as a symbolic space through many concrete and abstract representatives. Especially, home was also shown through Võ Phiến’s use of local languages in describing tiny, simple, and casual things. These subtle and lively representations of home contribute to reconstructing homeland in the diaspora’s memory and turning it to be “home sweet home” forever.

## II. Home and the sense of place

As a fundamental and universal concept, home has multiple and layered meanings for different people in a great range of circumstances. Odysseus, the mythical adventure hero of Homer’s

*Odyssey*, through his relentless journey offered the most familiar understanding of home as a place to return and fulfill, where the citizens' loyalty, pride, and love were crystallized into love for a piece of land, its heritage and origin. Despite Odysseus's unbreakable bond to his homeland of Ithaca, it is worth reminding that migration was not a prevalent phenomenon in Odysseus's era; accordingly, home remained concrete and less controversial. In this day and age, the complicated and diversified connotations of home make any attempt at simplifying this concept subjective and one-sided.

Home was used to be understood as a residence mostly attached to a locatable parcel of land. This means home is associated with a fixed asset. However, home means differently in various cultures. To some people, home is where the umbilical cord is buried, while for others, home is wherever the road leads. In Norse mythology, home is Valhalla (the palace of the dead), the abode of the sacred gods and spirits. For the livestock in the Patch of Heaven farm, home is the open space under the stars (Home on the Range); the utopia (New Jerusalem, Utopia), or even Mother Earth herself. Consequently, the formation of the occupants' identity in relation to the home depends largely on their understanding of home. There are people whose identities are intimately intertwined with home as a fixed reference point while others believe that they have no bonds to home. Similarly, some consider home as a sacred place while others encounter home anywhere, everywhere, or nowhere at all (Fox 2016: 6).

The above interpretations of home explores the primitive definition of home mostly encapsulated in the context of "a house" or "a collection of houses and related social facilities" (Easthope 2004: 134). Instead, home is understood as a socio-spatial entity (Sauders & Williams 1988), a psycho-spatial entity (Giuliani 1991; Porteous 1976), an emotional space (Giuliani 1991; Gurney 2000) or a combination of all three (Somerville 1992). While considering home as a place in a certain spatial and temporal context, all of the above approaches agree that it is not sufficient for the physical structures of a house and its surroundings, including the natural or human environment, to be called home. In other words, while home

is clearly located, location is not enough to define a place like home. Instead, it is only when the place is inscribed with meaning that it becomes home. Thus, homes are places that hold social, psychological, and emotional meanings for an individual or a community.

The above definitions also show a close relationship between the concept of home, the concept of place and the concept of identity when home plays a crucial role in shaping a person's sense of belonging to a certain place (Easthope 2004: 135). In particular, the connection with home and homeland plays a decisive role in the formation of the collective memory and cultural identity of the diaspora community. While the topic of home attracted a great deal of scholarly research, mostly focused on its connotation (Easthope 2004: 134), the application of home theory to multi-disciplinary research like diaspora studies has been scarce. Especially, since migration has been understood as both a subject condition and a state of consciousness, whereby home and the idea of returning home have been seen both literally and figuratively (Procter 2007; Kenny 2013; Davis 2018), applying knowledge of home to approach vivid expressions of home in Võ Phiến's *tuỷ bút* is expected to shed light on social and psychological experiences of the diasporic characters, thereby explaining the nature of the home.

Studies show that a sense of place was seen as an important factor in viewing a place like home (Adams 2013). In general, the sense of place is "the ability to recognize different places and different identities of a place" (Relph 1976: 63). Specifically, the sense of place emerged from people's process of making sense of the world around them (which may stem from the occupants' awareness of cultural differences). The sense of place is even a part of the politics of identity. From the above interpretations, it can be seen that the sense of place has many levels, ranging from simple recognition for orientation to a profound association with places as cornerstones of human existence and individual identity (Relph 1976: 63). However, this does not negate the fact that some individuals locate identity by reacting to their surroundings or places and creating boundaries that distinguish them from others, leading to idealizing this group and negating the "other." In addition, a

distinction should be made between the sense of place and rootedness. Rootedness implies an individual's consideration of a place as home either naturally or over time. Meanwhile, a sense of place implies a certain distance between the individual and his surroundings. It is this separation that allows the individual to perceive and appreciate the place.

Even if the sense of place is distinguished itself from rootedness by the relative distance between the individual and his surroundings, the very concept of sense of place is also divided itself into an unself-conscious sense of place and self-conscious sense of place. Generally, these two interpretations of sense of place distinguish each other through the subtle difference between the degree of distance between individuals and places: "In unself-conscious experience, places are innocently accepted for what they are, in self-conscious experience they become objects of understanding and reflection" (Relph 1976: 66). Although the union between individual and place in the latter relationship is not complete, a considerable intensity of association with places is still possible. Specifically, individuals expect to engage consciously with a new place, "an attempt to open one's senses to all the aspects of a particular place and to experience it both empathetically and sympathetically" (Relph 1976: 66). This attempt to experience all the qualities and meaning of a place is somehow a form of "geographical idealism," only be fully achieved thanks to the observers' intentions, expectations, and willingness.

### III. Home as the cross-cutting theme in Võ Phiến's *tuy bút*

Diasporic literature usually deals with the social contexts of both the migrant's country of origin and their arrival, their mixed experiences of these places, their sense of uprootedness and their search for identity. The tension between the self and the other, between the diaspora's safe zone, including their homelands, languages or cultures, and the foreign others' zones, could be seen as a prominent feature of diaspora literature. Through illustrations of migrant's ambivalences towards conflicting zones, diaspora writing

demonstrates how the diasporic characters affirm and restructure their new selves and identities based on the others' selves. The varied and multiple conversations and manifestation/representation of diasporic characters, which constantly revolved around their "being," as well as their "becoming" within globalized societies, are indeed the very essence of what diaspora literature is (Tran Tinh Vy 2020: 279).

The year 1975 could be seen as the time when many were uprooted, leading to the Vietnamese refugee crisis. The collapse of the Republic of Vietnam in South Vietnam caused many Vietnamese to flee to many foreign countries, forming the current overseas Vietnamese communities and Vietnamese diaspora literatures all over the world. Coming to the United States around his fifties, Võ Phiến (1925-2015, real name is Đoàn Thế Nhơn) belonged to a group of writers who sought refuge in the United States in 1975. But unlike many artists who either did not produce much writing after their arrival in the US or take up writing until they came to the US, Võ Phiến wrote productively before and after 1975. The journey to the US was not the first migration route for Võ Phiến. Born in Bình Định, a province in Central Vietnam, Võ Phiến first left Bình Định for Saigon, then for California. Through his long life of diaspora in several places, homeland became a fundamental and pervasive theme in Võ Phiến's works. Though the state of diaspora prevented him from physically returning, Võ Phiến made mental journeys back to his homeland(s) through writings.

Widely regarded as major literary figure, Võ Phiến wrote his first works in Vietnam in the 1950s, during the First Indochina War. He contributed to many major literary journals in Vietnam at that time, such as *Bách Khoa*, *Mùa Lúa Mới*, *Thời Mới*. Living in diaspora first in Saigon, then in California, Võ Phiến showed his enthusiasm and talent in writing about and for his homeland(s) in many essays, such as "Mưa đêm cuối năm" (Night Rain at Year's End), "Nhớ làng" (Remembering My Village), "Về một xóm quê" (Returning to a Country Village). Seeking refuge in California with his wife and children after the Fall of South Vietnam in 1975, Võ Phiến continued to remember Vietnam in many collections of essays such as *Ly hương* (Exile), *Thư gửi bạn* (Letters to a Friend) and *Lại*

*thu gửi bạn* (Again, Letters to a Friend).

Võ Phiến's *tuỳ bút* presented home not only as a geographical but also as a symbolic space. Geographically, Võ Phiến accurately described Bình Định, while mentioning many other different places in his travel. In his descriptions of home, specific places were often associated with specific people, sounds, or objects. Moreover, homeland was symbolized through many intangible images through which readers can visualize the place and regional characteristics related to these images. Võ Phiến's way of expression somehow showed his affection for the places where he lived, at the same time showed the writer's awareness of his surroundings. In short, home in Võ Phiến's *tuỳ bút* was both a geographical and cultural space.

Many places were mentioned in more than 20 Võ Phiến's essays. The places, consisting of where he was born, grew up, and visited, appeared emotionally in his writing. Võ Phiến highlighted the peculiarities of the places, where simplicity was praised as true beauty. For example, Bình Định was depicted with simple, rustic lines through the scenery of landscapes and people. He called this place a "trivial land" where stories of the rise and fall of history turned out to be "insignificant stuff"; he focused on the wilderness of the villagers' daily ("Về một xóm quê" (Returning to a Country Village) (Võ Phiến 2011: 7).<sup>2</sup> Or in "Nhớ làng" (Remembering My Village), the village was shown in its lonely, gentle and shabby appearance (Võ Phiến 1992: 9). The village was even described in its desolation and fierceness after the bombings during the wars. Remembering the lands he traveled, Võ Phiến flashed a glimpse of a dry tree on the top of a hill in a mountainous highland or "a line of a lazy smoke, as if it reminisces about hundreds of thousands of magical stories of mountain life" ("Đô thị hoang sơ" (Wild City) Võ Phiến 2011: 80). The local markets were also the favorite places he described because they displayed regional culture and specialties. Local products, or "rich variations" as called by Võ Phiến, included "rat meat at Vị Thanh market, snakes at Ca Mau market, and honey at Ban Me Thuot market" ["Gắn, gùa, gu" (Snake, turtle and wine)

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<sup>2</sup> The essays used in this article were collected from both printed and online materials. For works circulating online, we provided links to the works in the "References."



Võ Phiến 2011: 96]. Each locality had a specialty, and each specialty has regional characteristics. In short, homes, whether located in a particular land or generalized through many different localities, were remembered for their different features. These differences helped to distinguish one place from another, and at the same time create a mark, or meaning, for each place.

Home in its expanded sense implies a primitive homeland where people always longed to return, feeling that place as an inseparable part of themselves. In this sense, Võ Phiến revealed his understanding of home through various and subtle symbols. Home was depicted through the image of the womb, through the sound of the seller, through the moments of meeting a lover, or even through the memories of conversations.

In “Xem sách” (Viewing the book), Võ Phiến built a very special home for the protagonist. Overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle of urban life, the protagonist felt safe only when he read books. Books were his shelter where he experienced the bitterness and joys that he lacked in his life. Thus, home was a place where the character “experienced a lonely time in a warm embrace” and felt safe (Võ Phiến 2011: 21).

Similarly, the memories of meeting and being close to a lover is compared to being home for the male protagonist in “Một chỗ thật tịch mịch” (A Truly Quiet Place). By recalling old memories, the character re-experienced peaceful and warm feelings. Reviewing the words and feelings between him and his girlfriend, he was “like a cow chewing on his own feelings. He lived again in the nighttime, in a corner of the garden, in the passionate hours of midday.” (Võ Phiến 2011: 69). Home, in this example, emphasizes the emotional element that people experience, which can create a sense of belonging that home often evokes.

Sound becomes an important trigger in evoking an occupant’s sense of place. Sound is not only vibration that travels as an acoustic wave, as in human physiology and psychology, but also a reception of such waves as perceived by the human brain (Western Electrical Company 1969: 21). The examples of sound in Võ Phiến’s *tuỷ bút* showed the ability to shape and create meanings of sound,

and associating it with an imagined home for the Vietnamese. For instance, the sound of the street vendor “*ê ị*” suddenly reminded of the main character’s rural space [“*Ê ị*” (The Cry of a Street Peddler)]. That sound evoked the entire cultural context that the listener perceived; he even considered the vendor’s selling products to be more valuable than any historical evidence displayed in a museum because “it existed alive” in the midst of modern life: “Strictly speaking, this is actually not just a relic of the past; this is an intact element of the life that remains in the present” (Võ Phiến 2011: 35). The sound of advertising re-enacted the homeland; even, the vendor’s voice represented an old homeland in the past that was revived in modern times. Sounds of daily life also reappeared in other *tuỳ bút* by Võ Phiến, where sounds of casual activities played the role of restructuring geographical space in order to visually stimulate readers. The colors and images of the scenery in the rural scenery were also mentioned together with the sounds of daily life, evoking a lively feeling about the places that Võ Phiến used to travel. For example, he described “the jingling sound of chasing cows every afternoon along the banks of the Ba River,” “the shade of a cloud that, in the quiet of noon, leisurely glides from one hill to the other in Gia Nghĩa City,” “the sound of the Lào wind in Quảng Trị, the sound of the wind “*nam cồ*” in Phú Yên,” or “the color of golden shower tree in highland provinces” [“*Những đám khói*” (Clouds of Smoke), Võ Phiến 2011: 77]. Even the image of clouds of smoke in burning grass at the midday was also reminiscent of the ancient past, playing a role as the author’s flashbacks of some afternoons in the countryside. Hence, the sounds, images and colors recreated the rural scenes in the heart of the city. The way of creating homelands in the mind has also become a familiar technique in Võ Phiến’s compositions, effectively supporting the process of creating homeland-in-memory in his migration later on.

Not only sounds, colors, scenes but culinary culture also contributed to creating a place called home. Võ Phiến paid special attention to depicting regional cuisines as the embodiment of local souls and cultures. Homeland, as described by Võ Phiến, was crystallized and revealed through the subtleties of preparing and

enjoying local cuisine. It was these subtleties that characterized each region, forming the cultural identity. The creation and enjoyment of tea foam in a cup of tea was an illustrative example [*Hạt bọt trà* (Bubbles in Tea)]. Võ Phiến especially treasured bubbles in tea, which cannot be drunk, can neither smelled nor tasted. The tea foam revealed the skill of the tea maker as well as the talent of the connoisseur. According to Võ Phiến, the habit of drinking tea even revealed the personality of the tea drinker in each region. For example: “The taste of Chinese tea is the delicate taste of the refined and noble class, a formal and sophisticated taste—a touch of flavor on the tip of the tongue, a little fragrance passing the nose, etc. The taste of Huê chè is rougher, more common, but it is a strong taste, appropriate to the nature of farmers and laborers” (Võ Phiến 2011: 128).<sup>3</sup>

The creation of tea foam showed the feat of the tea maker from keeping the fire to the appropriate use of tea utensils. In the case of Huê tea, the tea utensil was a teapot. The result of this feat of preparation was a qualified cup of tea, which “must be frothy, full of bubbles, almost covering the surface of the cup.”<sup>4</sup> Thanks to that, tea drinkers enjoyed the “stroll” of drinking tea with soft and dense bubbles in tea. However, Võ Phiến expressed his regret at the disappearance of the tea-drinking custom in daily life, which showed the change of collective consciousness in defining local cultural imprints:

It seems that braising tea will disappear without any trace. Substitute for tea, then there will be other things. Can't you see those who preserve national culture are using plastic pipes and sucking up the cups of Pepsi, Coca, etc.? So good, so hygienic! (Võ Phiến 2011: 134)

Võ Phiến paid special attention to building home as both a physical space and a state of consciousness that was imbued with national and cultural identity. The tangible objects in this cultural space had symbolic meanings for the country. In this sense,

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<sup>3</sup> This translation was taken from John Schafer's *Vo Phien and the Sadness of Exile*, 132.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

homeland can completely be represented through specific objects, as long as the objects are recognized by the community as a cultural symbol. While both the tea foam particles and the tea-drinking custom were the identifying characteristics of the regional culture, the Ao Dai was recognized by the majority as a cultural symbol of the Vietnamese people (Leshkowich 2003). Võ Phiến considered the Ao Dai to be a rare object that helped to create national consciousness and to affirm the common cultural identity (of course, Võ Phiến's concept of "nation" was likely to refer to the Kinh people's viewpoint instead of that of the remaining 53 ethnic minorities. However, this does not deny the importance and popularity of the Ao Dai in Vietnam.). In "Ao Dai", the characteristic of the Ao Dai, according to Võ Phiến, was reflected in the harmony between nature and culture: "The Vietnamese Ao Dai is a harmony between nature and culture. Its upper part emphasizes the human body, sexuality, and vulgarity; in contrast, the lower part is elegant, completely covering the human body. Looking at a woman wearing Ao Dai, after being excited by the upper part, looking down, we could only see... winds!" (Võ Phiến 2011: 87) Considered as a cultural symbol and "an attempt to transform nature" by the Vietnamese, the Ao Dai marked the development in the material and spiritual life of the Kinh community. The Ao Dai fluttering in the wind was recognized by Võ Phiến as a symbol of the nation's serenity, a worthy reward for women after their days of working hard: "When people were still busy working, Ao Dai has not appeared yet. Only when new land has been cleared, living conditions were fully equipped and people were relaxed, then the two flaps of a Vietnamese woman's clothes hung down, fluttered, and cheered with the wind" (Võ Phiến 2011: 87). Suddenly seeing the Ao Dai in a foreign land, Võ Phiến encountered a nostalgic hometown where the sense of place was not only attached to a specific place but was also associated with the imagined community.

#### **IV. Home in transition**

The concepts of imagined community and homeland came from my reading of Võ Phiến's narratives of home in his state of diaspora.

According to Safran (1991: 83-84), the diaspora is those who were dispersed from homeland to two or more foreign regions. In addition, they had collective memory of their homeland, had a belief that they would always be outrageous in their host state and idealized their putative ancestral home. Finally, members of the diaspora community were believed to commit to the maintenance or restoration of the homeland and strong ethnic group consciousness with a belief in a common fate. Although homeland was repeated frequently in Safran's definition of diaspora, the geographical territory was not the only determining factor for a dispersed community. It is not what land we live on, but rather where we belong spiritually that determines the state of being diasporic. Belonging to a diasporic community means living among many different spatial networks: the network of diasporic fellows, the spatial network of the host country, and the spatial network of the homeland. Belonging to a diasporic community means living in-between these interlaced spatial networks (Tran 2020 : 377).

Focusing on the sense of place rather than the place itself, Bruneau emphasized the role of memory in establishing a place called home:

Through migration, diaspora members have lost their material relationship to the territory of origin, but they can still preserve their cultural or spiritual relationship through memory. Territory or, more precisely, territoriality-in the sense of adapting oneself to a place in the host country-continues to play an essential role. Memory preserves part of territoriality, whilst the trauma of uprooting creates conditions of mobilization that can play a substantial role in integrating and unifying various family, religious or community sub-networks into a real diaspora (2010 : 48).

Bruneau's interpretation also proposed a sense of place (specifically home), along with the memory of that place as important components in establishing a place called home (the memory of that place is often accompanied by psychological trauma, which is both cause and effect of the emigration of the diasporic community.) This understanding inspires me to conceptualize home not as a stable location but as a place-in-transition. Although Võ

Phiến emigrated and lived in the United States for the rest of his life, home became an enduring theme in his *tuỳ bút*. Understanding home as the state of consciousness helps us see the subtle manifestations of home through the way Võ Phiến associated things in the United States with similar objects and events in Vietnam. I argue that this association is Võ Phiến's way of creating an imagined community, thereby establishing a place called home and a sense of identity. After all, cultural identity is always a matter of becoming rather than being, said Hall (1993 : 225).

In several *tuỳ bút* composed by Võ Phiến in the US, the nature of the US, including flowers, birds and the weather at the change of seasons, were reflected in relation to the landscape in Võ Phiến's hometown. Building a home in mind was the migrant's attempt to connect foreign scenes with familiar cultural spaces, which also revealed the migrant's disintegration in the host land. Since the place is called home when it is inscribed with meaning, home in Võ Phiến's descriptions was characterized by its "transition" across many different geographical spaces. However, as long as Võ Phiến compared and contrasted the landscapes in America and those in Vietnam, he remained a longing for returning home, albeit in consciousness.

Home-in-transition was imagined in many different shapes and characteristics in Võ Phiến's *tuỳ bút*. In an effort to build home in the mind, the author's senses became sensitive to all sounds, colors, and atmospheres in the US. For example, the chirping swallows passing branches in the early morning reminded the character of his hometown's spring ["Mùa xuân, Con én" (Spring and the Swallow), Võ Phiến 2011: 139]. The rare sunshine in the early winter or the bright sunshine in the clear summer was also reminiscent of tropical weather in the hometown ["Giã biệt mùa nắng" (Saying Good-by to Summer), Võ Phiến 1977: 39]. The leaves of the lilac reminded the character of the leaves of the bougainvillea at home because they have the same colors ["Một mùa xuân an lành" (A Spring of Quiet and Peace), Võ Phiến 1977: 14]. Or a sound resounding in the street also made the character think of the sound of a child in his hometown:

It was thought that the sound of a child in the past poured into his cottage from a hill in the village. It was thought that the sound of children playing on a street echoed into the classroom when he was a teenager... Something vibrated and shook inside him. He stirred his whole person (“Mười giờ” (Ten o’clock), Võ Phiến 2011: 164).

The expression of moving home in the mind or the character’s attempt to recreate his hometown with memories may be seen in the way he compared the yellow color of the American cottonwood tree to the yellowness in his native landscape. The protagonist even wished to “move” the shiny autumn of this current place to the other [“Một mùa thu” (One autumn), Võ Phiến 1977: 52]. Or, among many diverse animals in America, the character felt the most familiar with squirrels, ducks, and sparrows because they looked like animals in his homeland: “Only the squirrels by the roadside, the sparrows in the trees, and the ducks on the lakes are familiar, which are nothing different from their tropical counterparts. I feel as if they follow me from my hometown” (“Lạnh” (Cold), Võ Phiến 1977 : 68). The more splendid the scenery in the foreign land was, the more nostalgic the character was for the old hometown. The “moving” between natures in the mind of the beholder showed the profound influence of the memory of the homeland in shaping the migrants’ identity. In addition, it marked the migrant’s dilemma to integrate into the foreign land.

Consider, for instance, how excited the protagonist was when he encountered the presence of zinnia in Utah, which was the same as its species in Vietnam (which was not an alternate version like the above-mentioned bougainvillea). Võ Phiến called this flower Chinese Guava like his townsmen. The protagonist’s unexpected encounter with Chinese Guava was seen as an emotional reunion with the homeland because, in the protagonist’s mind, this wildflower was the symbol of the homeland in a foreign land: “A little bit of my hometown was already found here” (“Ổi Tàu” (Chinese Guava), Võ Phiến: 1987: 361). The naming of a flower contributed to affirming the character’s identity that was ironically the character’s humiliation mixed with an implicit pride in having a special name for a flower. The presence of Chinese Guava in Utah not only embodied a piece of homeland but also embodied a part

of the character's identity: "In the guava grove I see only the image of mine" ("Ổi Tàu" (Chinese Guava), Võ Phiến: 1987: 362). Through the presence of Chinese guava, the character felt himself, an expatriate in a foreign land, become less lonely. However, because of the Chinese guava, the character questioned his minority identity as well as the ability to "re-root" in the foreign land. Unlike the character, the Chinese guava demonstrated its adaptability and integrated well in the US.:

To be honest, since the day I left the country, many times I've felt humiliated, feeling how fragmented I was. As for guava, in that reunion in the sunset, it is sitting in the middle of a splendid flowerbed. It is solemnly standing side by side with many colorful flowers. [...] Strictly speaking, it is well-nourished here: manure, water, insecticides; regular pruning and care make its leaves greener, its flowers more beautiful, its shape shinier than when it was in the wild. In short, it looked pleased. It fits the United States more than my hometown. It's very satisfying. It is very satisfying due to its lost identity ("Ổi Tàu" (Chinese Guava), Võ Phiến 1987: 361).

Thus, through the presence of a flower in the homeland, Võ Phiến raised the ontological problem of the representatives of the homeland, ranging from physical to mental objects, in the foreign land. Specifically, he touched on how these representatives acclimatized and acculturated into the new socio-cultural environment. However, even if the homeland, with its physical and spiritual representatives, is relocated to a new place, will migrants easily have a sense of belonging, an important factor determining a place as home? Another example in Võ Phiến's *tuỳ bút* showed that the problem of adapting, integrating and recreating a place called home in a new land was never easy for the immigrants.

The ill-adaptation of the immigrants can be the first sign of their being isolated, uprooted, and alienated in a new cultural environment. In the *tuỳ bút* "Lạnh" (Cold), the character expressed his frustration with the language and the weather in the US: "Zero degrees Celsius? The language here is not familiar to us, it sounds like it can't be... real! The way to measure here is confusing, weird, like no other. A bunch of feet, pounds, inches, miles, etc? Then 12



inches equal one foot, but 3 feet equal a yard; it just makes no sense" [{"Lạnh" (Cold) Võ Phiến 1977: 67}]. In particular, his suffering to adapt to the coldness made the character feel his life as a serial day of physical and mental torment without end: "But I can't talk about the return. We still have a few decades left to struggle: waking up every day while it is still dark, taking shiveringly to the car, going to the office. At four-thirty in the afternoon, when we leave the office, it is dark again, the snow is falling heavily, the sky is sad and miserable!" [{"Lạnh" (Cold) Võ Phiến 1977: 82}]. In another essay, "Một mùa xuân an lành" (A Spring of Quiet and Peace), the sense of uprooting from the homeland was felt by the diaspora character along with his own disorientation in a foreign land, which caused his life to become empty and meaningless:

My country chose long journeys, it will continue these journeys. This spring, next spring, and many more springs, my compatriots will still worry and get crazy: uprisings, repressions, purges, corrections, diversions, emulation, leaps, and so on. Personally, I was kicked out of this circle. From now on, I only have peaceful springs. Painful peace. That realization makes life suddenly become empty. Dreadful, horrible emptiness. Suddenly, there was no future in front of me, but I stand outside of all worries. Alas, the peace of life without a future. (Võ Phiến 1977: 34)

In general, homeland is featured as an important element in restructuring the migrants' identity and culture. The longing for home by the members of diaspora communities leads to their retaining a collective memory and identity of their original homeland. Also, with the sense of shared identity, the diaspora community is likely to preserve their homeland's cultures and customs, rejecting assimilation into a new land and maintaining contacts with the homeland in various ways (Cohen 2008: 4). However, while home is a locality's lived experience, it is also a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no-return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of "origin" (Cohen 2008: 4). Without mentioning much about the causes of migration, the characters in Võ Phiến's *tuyệ bút* were portrayed more by their dualities between cultures. The consciousness of being in-between

causes the tension “between the consciousness of diaspora-dispersal and affiliation and the distinctive modern structures and modes of power orchestrated by the institutional complexity of nation-states” (Cohen 2008: 4). This consciousness of being diasporic makes homeland become a concept, the place of imagination, rather than a locale. Homeland and the idea of returning to the homeland are thereby both literal and metaphorical (Procter 2007; Kenny 2013, Davis 2018).

## V. Home in the act of writing

Writing is no longer reduced to being just a means to express reality or convey a message. To Võ Phiến, writing was seen as a journey to seek his “voice” and freedom; it was the act of self-expression and self-consciousness. Through writing, he could live with himself and capture his other at the same time, experiencing his “two-side” ego albeit in exile. In this sense, writing about the homeland is often little more than a vehicle of sentimentality in which the diaspora chose to travel to an outside place. With the sense of belonging, the region is inside the writer, and the significance of what the writer writes goes beyond this locality, which even speaks to the actual or potential loci of everyone (Relph 1976: 67).

In Võ Phiến’s *tùy bút*, home was expressed firstly through the language of composition, and secondly through the author’s thoughts about writing. It is also worth reminding that writing for Võ Phiến was much related to his migration, which also led to the shaping of his identity. In “Cái suy tưởng” (Thoughts), Võ Phiến admitted that his artistic creativity was really improved since he left Interzone V: “After 1955, I read a lot, dazzled, and enjoyed everything I saw. Writing at that time became a riot. So for a few decades, then I was thrown out of Vietnam. Everything was renewed: I am a stranger, I am lost, I live in a strange place, I think differently... What is written is even more strange” (Võ Phiến 2021).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For works that do not have page numbers, I will provide links in “References.” The year of publication is the year I have accessed the materials.

Võ Phiến praised language as a representative of the national identity: “Each language has its own identity and aesthetic standards” (“Viết lách” (Writing), Võ Phiến 2021). He believed that even if it was possible to translate a literary work from one language to another, it was difficult to convey all the beauty of the source language into the target language. Writers should “appreciate the language they use,” and Vietnamese, according to Võ Phiến, which has been in use “for thousands of years,” has been made “fresh, bold and vital” [(“Viết lách” (Writing), Võ Phiến 2021)]. The emphasis on the national language was shown by Võ Phiến in the way he performed a “regional Vietnamese party of language” in his *tuyệt bút*. For example, he used the word “rụp rụp” to describe a quick and passionate way of preparing a bowl of noodle by the vendor (“Rụp rụp”, Võ Phiến 2011: 107). Moreover, he observed and analyzed the language used by local people. The noodle seller said “rồi” (already) to finish his preparation of a bowl of noodle soup (“Rụp rụp”, Võ Phiến 2011: 108). The driver’s assistant often inserted the word “luôn” when signaling the driver to move in “tới luôn.” According to Võ Phiến, “luôn” was more of a cry than a voice. It sounded to urge people, it said nothing about its meaning: “It works for tone, not for meaning” (“Rụp rụp”, Võ Phiến 2011: 109). In other essays, Võ Phiến also used local words to describe things and phenomena. For example, he called zinnia as Chinese Guava or intentionally mispronounce “gấn, gùa, gu” to refer to “rắn, rùa, rượu” (snakes, turtles and wine). (Vietnamese people in Mekong Delta region prefer pronouncing /g/ to /r/.) The subtle differences in regional language reflected the personality of the natives.

The sense of home was also reflected in Võ Phiến’s thoughts about writing. In the essay “Một người, một người” (One person, one person), as he commented on the expression of homeland in Tô Thùy Yên’s thought, Võ Phiến burst into exclamation at the indifference of his literary friend: “Oh! Beware of Mr. Tô’s composure. It’s indifference. It’s coldness. It’s a disaster. He denied the past, forgot old years and all big and small things in his life, lost his homeland. He already forgot himself” (Võ Phiến 2021). According to Võ Phiến, the book was a carrier that reflected the author’s mind: “The book is the place where the work is visible in written form.

Letters are just symbols” (Võ Phiến 2021). For writers, writing is a matter of survival. In other words, writing is the way to express identity: “The pen in my hand immediately fell off. Suddenly, I disappeared. The collective of writers and readers was bewildered for a moment.” (Võ Phiến 2021).

So, what do the topics of simple, small, and familiar things in Võ Phiến’s *tùy bút* say about Võ Phiến’s identity? What is *tùy bút*? And why is *tùy bút*? According to Shafer (2006: 126), *tùy* meant following and *bút* meant pen or writing brush. *Tùy bút* meant the writers of the custom pen may follow where their pens led them. They can pursue sudden bursts of inspiration. *Tùy bút* is a casual, instinctive, and anti-rational genre. Its looseness and scatteredness seem to fit the writer’s pursuit of memories and nostalgia for the lost homeland.

In addition, the fact that simple, small, and familiar things became the theme throughout Võ Phiến’s compositions was the most noticed by Shafer and Nguyễn Hưng Quốc. Taking this from a Marxist point of view, Shafer (2006: 111) believed that Võ Phiến’s interest in unimportant things stemmed from the author’s origins, a “small-scale village landowner group,” which “realized themselves defeated at the hands of ‘progressive forces,’ members of this group had no glorious topics to write about, no heroes to praise.” However, in Nguyễn Hưng Quốc’s view, Võ Phiến’s focus on villages and villagers came from his author’s distance in time and place from his homeland (Nguyễn 1996: 145), which could be explained by Võ Phiến’s diasporic state. However, both Schafer and Nguyễn Hưng Quốc considered Võ Phiến’s focus on details in his *tùy bút* as the author’s beliefs about “concrete things” (Shafer 2006: 115). Hence, Võ Phiến’s writing on simple and casual things reflected his attempt to construct his homeland. His effort to return “home” by writing simple things with new love and eyes could be seen as his way to preserve traditional values. Every little particularity of homeland in Võ Phiến’s *tùy bút* was presented beautifully and precious because they are flooded with his love, care and affection.

## **VI. Conclusion**

From being understood as a place of dwelling, the concept of home is extended to denote belonging and a sense of attachment in which spiritual, ethnic, religious and historical identities have formed a sense of self. Hence, home, with its expanded definitions, is considered as an enduring and fundamental theme in works by Võ Phiến, one of Vietnamese diaspora's towering minds and who devoted his life to capturing the rich detail of Vietnamese culture, its villages, and locals. This article explored how the concept of home was applied in diaspora literature to create a cultural space for diaspora community in which Võ Phiến's essays were a case. The homelands in Võ Phiến's essays were built up through tiny but sophisticated details of people, lands, languages, and cultures, which were not colored by a collective memory of the far away land but were permeated with love, nostalgia and memories for specific places and days. Many representations of home were argued as evidence of subtle influences of the historical and social context on the way Võ Phiến perceived and built his own homeland. Diaspora literature has been usually considered as literature of minorities. Through several essays about homelands, Võ Phiến showed his effort to speak up for marginalized communities. By observing disruption and continuity through the expressions of the home in Võ Phiến's writing, we were able to shed light on how Võ Phiến managed to create an indigenous cultural space towards social interactions of Western ideology in South Vietnam from 1964 to 1975.

## **Acknowledgement**

This research is funded by University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City under grant number T2021-01.

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Received: Mar. 13, 2022; Reviewed: May 2, 2022; Accepted: June 30, 2022