

## Chaos in “The General Retires” and “Without a King” by Nguyen Huy Thiep

Bac LH<sup>1\*</sup>, Thu Hang DT<sup>1</sup>, and Trung LV<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Hanoi National University of Education, Vietnam

<sup>2</sup>Danang University, Vietnam

\*Corresponding author: Bac LH, Hanoi National University of Education, Vietnam, Tel: +84437547823; E-mail: [lehuybac@gmail.com](mailto:lehuybac@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

This study explores the Vietnamese postmodern literature. Nguyen Huy Thiep is one of the famous Vietnamese writers. He always tries his best to reform short stories. By the time, postmodern theory hadn't appeared in Vietnam. But the renovation 1986 gave Vietnamese writers many good conditions. Thiep's talent had been sighted and his writings had become a phenomenon. Chaos is one of the key concepts of postmodernism. Researchers use it as a core criterion to distinguish the postmodern sense of modernity. This feature is easily seen in any postmodern literary works. While many writers present chaos through the structure and imagery, Nguyen Huy Thiep has shown chaos at once in the titles of two of his short stories: “The General Retires” and “Without a King”. In those he helps us to know a chaos from the family to the society.

**Keywords:** Chaos; The general retires; King; Nguyen huy thiep; Postmodernism

### Introduction

It cannot be denied that there is a Vietnamese postmodern literature. As Vietnam shift to integrate into the world, there is a national desire to create a reputation in fields ranging from economics to science to literature. The appearance of postmodern literature is indisputable. Chaos is one of the main points of postmodernism.

Respecting the chaos of the world, writers look at life as it is. The natural movement of life will answer for itself in all situations. In modernity, artists are seen as using the process of intervention in order to solve the chaos, so they make the situation more complicated. Meanwhile the postmodern aesthetic process is to be described as chaotic discourse. Accordingly, the chaos was nature for all existence so no interventions are taken to escape it. The artists cannot and should not be involved. Postmodern writers have done this well. Characters in their works are built up from fragments, a lack of coherence being the tradition.

### Literature Review

The Oxford Dictionaries has definition of chaos as “Complete disorder and confusion: snow caused chaos in the region”. In nature and social sciences, chaos can be used in some differences.

“Chaos theory is the result of natural scientists' discoveries in the field of nonlinear dynamics (...). While a Newtonian universe was founded on stability and order, chaos theory teaches that instability and disorder are not only widespread in nature, but essential to the evolution of complexity in the universe. Thus, chaos theory, as relativity theory and quantum theory before it, presents another strike against a singular commitment to the determinism of a Newtonian view of the natural realm” [1]. Studying “chaos” from mathematical views, Smith wrote: “Chaos is important, in part, because it helps us to

cope with unstable systems by improving our ability to describe, to understand, perhaps even to forecast them. Indeed, one of the myths of chaos we will debunk is that chaos makes forecasting a useless task” [2].

Gordon Slethaug was interested in history of the chaos. He wrote: “Although conceptions of chaos and order have circulated at least since the earliest narratives of Babylonian, Greek, Biblical, Hindu, and Chinese cultures, it was when James Gleick [3] in 1987 published *Chaos: Making a New Science* that chaos theory became readily accessible to scholars of the arts (...). Chaos theory is identified by Gleick as the product of a genuine American counterculture that only grudgingly was granted a place in the mainline scientific academy” [4].

Chaos is the first. Order is the second. Chaos belongs to the universe. Order belongs to the society. The universal chaos is a creation, but the postmodern chaos is a catastrophe. Everything has disordered. In postmodern American short stories, Donald Barthelme is a master in chaos. His stories combine pictures with words. In *The Glass Mountain*, he puts numbers before the sentences. That makes each sentence which has private content being a text... Nguyen Huy Thiep has other way to build the chaos.

Chaos, in the sense that it is something disordered and not a rule or inconsistency, is a combination of many differences that are not subject to the judgment of others. In *The General Retires*, the general, the son and the daughter-in-law are all aware of an existing chaos. The general is fiercely opposed to this state of being. The daughter-in-law calls the status quo “chaos” but she accepts the general's view and adjusts to his ideas. Meanwhile, the general's son gets a western education and does accept the concept and existence of “chaos”.

Being aware to the contemporary life, Nguyen Huy Thiep didn't choose to give his story the titles of *The General in the Battlefield* or *The General goes to war*. Instead he chose *The General Retires*. This title says a lot. Immediately readers will form a mental picture of the old general. His gestures will no longer be imposing and must show only a helplessness and bitterness before the world that is moving

quickly in a way that is completely different from that of the past. The problems the general faces are not about war and death but about living, and yet the general's concern is not about his life but that of his descendants.

When talking about "generals", we might imagine a bright, central position from which a majestic general is leading everybody. But this story is about a retired general. This means he has no power and no strength. There has been dissolution of power. This dissolution in a life parallels narratives in earlier chronicles of epic works. Quite importantly, with the dissolution of power, moral values which are no longer appropriate cease to exist.

The general's name is Thuan. The narrator presents his background clearly: "My father, Thuan, was the oldest son of the Nguyen family. In our village, the Nguyens are a very large family with more male descendants than just about anyone except for maybe the Vus. My grandfather was a Confucian scholar, who, later in life, taught school. He had two wives. His first wife died a few days after giving birth to my father, forcing my grandfather to take another step" [5]. Even with that, the general's life isn't presented seamlessly. Mainly, the general is portrayed a short time after he retired.

The title *The General Retires* implies that this is the story of a general who has retired, lost all power and lives in a "labyrinth" of life. But he experiences few problems related to actual retirement. A few events are presented quite simply: At the age of 70 (a high age) the general left the army to return to a house which he built eight years previously in a suburban village. His wife had been senile. The general's son, the narrator "I" named Thuan (and this name is mentioned only once) did the telling. He was 37 years old, married, and he had two daughters, Vi and Mi. His daughter-in-law named Thuy, was a doctor in the maternity hospital. The general's material life was prosperous in a time of renewal in the country. Shortly after he went home, the general's wife died. The general wanted to do the housework but his daughter-in-law would not let him. Later, the general visited his former unit and died on the battlefield. His body was buried in a martyrs' cemetery somewhere in Cao Bang.

According to this sequence of events we will see a picture of a general that is not unlike that of other retired generals. Accustomed to living a military life, the general is seen as having a loving wife and children, and he shows that he can feel the suffering of his servants by wanting to do manual work with them. He wanted to live as an equal to everyone (he gave his clothing away to all equally), he did not accept crime (an event about a fetus) and he had his own view of what is an unethical action (Thuy has an affair with Khong). In short, even after he retired the general continued to be a shining example of morality.

However, he himself is a tragic person. The tragedy derives from his unfamiliarity with the community and the chaotic movement of life. It can be said that the general embodies infinite loneliness. Throughout his life he lived in selflessness for a noble ideal, but when he went to live in the village, the general found himself to be "outside of life". In peacetime, society has its own criteria and people have different goals. As is shown in the work, in peacetime people wish to get rich and acquire material things, and people lose those qualities that were once thought to be good.

The general's helplessness is expressed wherever he goes and with whoever he forms a relationship. That is, of course, except on the battlefield, which has been a full life for him? It is no coincidence that the narrator has the general sacrificing his body on the battlefield. Death in battle also carries postmodern nuances, and thus no one

knows the reason for the general's death or the manner of his death. This is completely different from traditional epic narratives. In *The General Retires*, only a few words are written about the general's death as family members receive the news. Avoiding a grand narrative of death is a method of postmodern writers. If anyone compares the events in this story with the nation's history he cannot know whether his death is related to France, the United States, or China. The death of the general is really tantalizing sociological reading.

Blurring the death, the narrator does not focus on causes or events or the funeral (this is how solemn epic narratives treated heroes), showing that praise for the community is not the main object of this work. Here we can say that Nguyen Huy Thiep is one of the first Vietnamese writers to reject the use of epic in prose. Rather, he poses and solves problems of postmodern individuals.

This view reflects national social rules. During the war, "community" as the ideal always comes first. Before the time of death, before the moment when one has a choice between freedom or death, a true patriot has only one option and that is to die for national independence and freedom – "my death for my country". In peacetime, life is no longer so simple. Earning a living and competing in the activities of daily life it causes human factors to emerge. The "community" does not have a single supreme principle. In peacetime, people have a great many options, and personal choices tend to be pragmatic and benefiting only the individual. However, their choices, positive or negative, depend on how they perceive and assess. If they are embedded in a community, people will have few options and their thinking must conform to local ideals. When living with personal criteria, a wider variation in lifestyle and goals is possible. This manner lifestyle creates chaos in society. In this context it is extremely difficult to find a voice of unity. The general speaks with the voice of power and ideals. The general's son doesn't speak with the same voice. The general's daughter-in-law speaks in yet a different kind of voice, and the children's different still. All of these create the chaos, the "multi-voice" within a house that has "the shape of a barracks" but is not a barracks.

So, there is an implicit conflict between the principles: the first is harmony and equality which is of the general while the other is the practical calculations of postmodern people. As a result of this conflict, we can see that Nguyen Huy Thiep had come to feel the validity of new principles in a new age, that of postmodernity.

The subjects of postmodernism, the "grand narratives" [6], such as living principles and moral and aesthetic models, which were legitimate in social life, have now become obsolete. This is a very important aspect of postmodern awareness. Once an issue is accepted in a community, it becomes a criterion against which everything else can be evaluated. With postmodernists, there is no absolute right or wrong and there is no one thing that is legitimate. There is the risk that once everyone in the community speaks in a perpetual discourse, it will be the only standard of the time. Such discourse can easily penetrate into the unconscious and become a "power of the unconscious" [7]. Consequently, there comes to be little criticism within a society and growth and stability are hard to attain.

Therefore, postmodernists continuously break away with grand narratives. In this case, development within society, literature and the arts occurs on the boundary of grand narrative innovations, and during the shift between petit and grand narratives.

Returning the time of Nguyen Huy Thiep's composition, we could see that Vietnam was undergoing a comprehensive renovation of the

economy, science and technology along with arts and culture. In addition, Vietnam has been importing many foreign products and ideas to raise local living standards. This process has created many crossroads in lifestyle and in the perception of human beings. So, people have come to accept new aesthetic criteria – postmodern criteria, and this is gradually being legitimized in the lives of everybody.

In this context, Nguyen Huy Thiep chose a daring way that soon became mainstream in Vietnamese literature: the vision, the feeling and the writing of postmodernism. An important problem of humans in post-war times is experienced by the general who has lost the untouched majesty of an eagle with wings spread in the open sky. This happened simply because the general grew to be old and power was transferred to another generation. When a command economy shifts to that of a market economy, a new style of management is needed, along with a new way of thinking and living. The general's descendants were able to adapt to the new reality.

Only general's situation is pitiful. When a society makes a sudden shift from a command economy to a market economy, the people of that society will focus on this new possibility: earning money. Hence the villa (a prior symbol of beauty) that the general built after a lifetime of hard battle was transformed into a garden-pond-barn used to raise and sell dogs, fish and plants (the income being the new kind of beauty). The general's family lives on the resource of the garden. Thuy is a householder, so her voice is full of power. She is like a general in that house. Women took the throne and so many paradoxical things happened. Thuy committed adultery almost in front of everyone and her husband did not dare say nor do anything. He wandered through the streets as he waited for his wife to finishing her liaison to go home. In addition, Thuy told people that they should dig up jars in the pond to show her absolute power in the general's house. It should be noted that Thuy is a doctor and therefore an educated person. This is a time when more women are educated. With knowledge and money one has strength and power, and Thuy has both. In this case the story could be renamed *Thuy, the King or Female King*.

Thuy and her husband's generation seem to enjoy life, but the generation of the general thinks that it is disordered. Especially bad is the relationship between Thuy and Khong. The general says to his son, "You're meek. And that's because you can't stand to live alone" [5]. There is serious dialogue between the general and those of the following generations. When a granddaughter innocently asked him about the words of a song, "The road to the battlefield is beautiful at this time of year, Grandfather?" the general shouts. "Your mother! Know-it-all!" [5]. Of course, the general doesn't abuse the grandchildren who are very innocent. Instead he criticizes the author who wrote the song or the teacher who put the song into his grandchildren's mind. The problem here is not about who is right or wrong – it is about perception. The general sees the differences in society after the war is over. He doesn't like it but he can't do anything about it. The new society is operating with its own discourse, not unifying chaos but with chaos being commonplace.

A characteristic of postmodern literature is the listing of events with dizzying speed. Narrators show events and the readers receive and absorb. If the readers don't think, they cannot understand the works. So, in the postmodern time, reading is synonymous with creating. Reading can no longer be enjoyed leisurely, heart to heart, as it could before. One can no longer trust the author to spell everything out clearly in his work. In the flowing lines of numerous events, we get many things to think about.

Thuy is a doctor at the maternity hospital where abortions are done and the fetuses are fed to dogs. This is so shocking that even people who have a good imagination find it hard to accept. However, this could happen in real life and this reappears in the story obsessively. I do not know how many doctors do this (only a few?) but Nguyen Huy Thiep presents this detail in this story to show a moral difference in postmodern times. The writer has made a legend of the "difference" in human life.

Or when telling a story about a poet named Khong, the narrator uses only the name Khong (in Vietnamese the name means Confucius) but behind that there is a terrible collapse of an idol. The name makes readers think of Confucius, the sage and founder of Confucianism, a humanist who specializes in kindness, wisdom and faith. One line that he is famous for is *Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself*. But now, the narrator tells of the poet Khong who charmed the other's wife, and he gives him a job that smells – "he worked at the fish sauce factory" [5]. By associating these things in the readers' mind, this serves to disgrace the saint.

In a poetic manner, the narrator dwells on the "I" who was almost cuckolded by the wife (or had been cuckolded) and gives bitter comments about the randomness and irony of fate. "I went to the library to borrow some books as an experiment. I read Lorca, Whitman, ect. I vaguely felt that exceptional artists are frighteningly lonely. Suddenly, I saw that Khong was right. I was only pissed off that he was so ill-bred. Why didn't he show his poems to somebody else besides my wife?" [5]. "The dedoublement" appears in this review, the narrator admits it right on the one hand and abuses ill-bred on the other hand. It is a state of postmodern sense. The spokesman isn't going to disadvantage of himself by criticizing an opponent. So judgments are not from one view but from many views. The multi-value point of view is also an expression of postmodern chaos.

Returning to the general's loneliness, the house that he spent money to build was designed to be half villa and half barrack. A balance between the two was, of course, alien to him. The nature of strangeness is the difference between unique and multiple. The general's mansion is inhabited, but it became a cluttered mess. It was a good place to run a business rather than a place for an old person.

By looking at the relationships of the neighbors, the reader can also see that things are topsy-turvy. They suggest solitude. The general's villa is far from a rural area but it is not near a city. This type of chaotic space is neither familiar nor unfamiliar. Multipolarity is also seen in people's relationships. The relationships of the general and the children with his relatives have not gone well. Because he was so far away for so long, memories of him in the villagers' minds are only that of a proud general. Meanwhile, the relationship between Thuy, who takes the rich person's view, and Bong, a poor person, is quite complex. Bong rants, "Damn those intellectuals! They look down on working people. If I didn't respect his father, I'd never knock on their door" [5], but whenever needing money he'd come by to borrow. Thus, what the characters do and what they say does not match. This has created a "fragmentary" nature in the character with loneliness being the inevitable result.

In the story, the general isn't the only one feel lonely – even the narrator, who is considered to be a trendy intellectual. He exclaims, "I felt very lonely. My children also seemed lonely. And so did the gamblers. And so did my father" [5]. But loneliness of the "I" seems to be temporary. His words came after the death of his mother. But the biggest threat is to the kids. When Mi and Vi saw Bong open the dead

grandmother's mouth to put money into it (following the superstition that the dead need money to carry them to the afterlife), Mi asked her father, "Why do you still have to pay for the ferry after you've died? Why were coins put in Grandmother's mouth?" Vi said: "Father, does it have to do with the saying, 'Shut your mouth, keep the money'?" I was crying: "You kids won't understand," I said. "I don't understand myself. It's all superstition." Vi said, "I understand. You need a lot of money in this life. Even when you're dead" [5]. The dialogue between the 14-year old child and the 12-year old child shows the face of the times. In peacetime, people have come to pay more attention to money and every family wants to have more money. The two children view life through an innocent child's eyes and they say a thing that adults feel that they should not say.

To think a little further, we see that Vi's questions make metaphors about the way of living (Shut your mouth and keep the money) and the object of daily life (to obtain more money). That is a way of life that is completely foreign to the general who is somewhat of an intellectual like "I" who seems to spend his days buried in scientific topics. As a result, the more strange a person feels, the more chaotic life seems to get. He would have a hard time taking part in daily life and he'd find it difficult to find his direction in society. Feeling strange among people comes from not having the same voice as the majority of people. That must be true throughout the history of mankind.

The story has created a labyrinth for human perception. The funeral scene of the general's wife had wrapped in it the tragi-comedy of fate and the variety and polyphony of life: "My house was only five hundred meters from the cemetery, but if you took the main road through the village gate it would be two kilometers. On the small road it wasn't possible to push a hearse so the coffin had to be carried on the pallbearers' shoulders. There were thirty of them taking turns, with many men my wife and I didn't recognize. They carried the coffin casually, as if it were a most natural thing to do, as if they were carrying a house-pillar. They chewed betel nuts, smoked, and chattered as they walked. When they rested, they stood and sat carelessly next to the coffin. One man, who was all sprawled out, said, 'It's so cool here. If I weren't busy, I'd sleep here until nightfall.'" Bong said, "I beg you guys. Hurry up so we can all go home and eat" [5]. There is a panache and slowness of modern men as well as an innocence of postmodern people. The death, a tragic loss for the family, is to strangers only a death like any other and the funeral work that they are doing is just common work, too.

Above we mentioned that the general was somewhat unfamiliar to the children. Now, we will discuss something that is an Eastern characteristic. The general had only two granddaughters and that was thought to be a tragedy. His son had no sons. The narrator did not explain this but, in the Eastern way of thinking, when a man has no son, the family will likely not be able to care for the older generation and there is a meaningless sense of striving. In addition, when the general asked his granddaughters to bring him some easy-to-read books, he was told that there were no easy-to-read books there. This indicates that the general was feeling loneliness. The house was not for him, and life was not for him. His place was on the battlefield and he fell down on it. This was the first death of a soldier in Vietnamese postwar literature of postwar to have occurred without fighting.

But this is not unreasonable. Soldiers have difficulty adapting to post-war life and, even when they are alive they seem to have died as Ernest Hemingway's soldiers had been. The general's death was also legendary, perhaps a metaphor for the death of a lifestyle to show the

transformation of people. A new generation is born while the intense wars have been fought, and values change as life changes.

Thuy became a general. Thuy represents that which is postmodern. It is important that Thuy has accepted the changes of the new era in her life. In this work, Thuy is a *dedoublement* character, a peculiar kind of postmodern character. Thuy's bad behavior as exemplified in the story of fetus, her affair with Khong and her indifference to the death of her husband's mother, shows a variation of a way of life which is practical and existential. But readers cannot deny that Thuy has virtues. The general disliked dogs and so she stopped feeding them, she gave money to Co and his daughter so they could move his wife's grave, and she gave money to Bong too. But behind these good deeds there is a subtle coldness associated with the postmodern lifestyle. It is also a fact that Thuy hesitated before she made a decision. Thuy is unhappy that her husband's father did not like the way she got her money. Thuy regrets the relationship she had with Khong. Thuy did not like when her husband gave money to Bong. The woman who felt many moods also experienced many emotions. She is an active person. In this view, Thuy suffers the most and is a typical example of a postmodern person.

The main reason for her turmoil is that Thuy helped support the family. In this role, Thuy is thorough. In the house, everything large and small is managed by Thuy. The husband was only a shadow figure. When mourning the mother, or when there was anything to be solved, "I" always had to rely on Thuy to do it. That is completely contrary to custom of "respecting men" in Vietnamese tradition. Thuy has really become the "king" of the story.

When the general runs out of time the king will die. Is this the message that is presented in *The General Retires and Without a King*?

Obviously the author wanted to say something else but it was never about the king in that short story. The story seems to echo a masterpiece of the Theater of the Absurd, Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*. Nguyen Huy Thiep's *Without a King* did not have a king just as there was no bald soprano in the play of the French playwright. *Without a king* are the general spirit of the story and also the soul of postmodernism in literature.

The title *Without a King* is taken from a song of Ton, who is "half-witted, with a puny, weird-looking body" [5]. The narrator does not know the origin of the song which Ton "learned from the drinking crowd":

*Aha! Without a king*

*Drunk from morning 'til evening*

*The days and months are nothing*

*Me and you together*

*Love and character: aren't they a great pair?* [5].

The word "king" also referred to a dialogue when Ton asked, "What is money?" Khiem replied, "Money's king" [5]. This is the idea of Khiem, a butcher.

The topsy-turvy atmosphere of the family is recognized first by embedding too many men with all sorts of characters and careers into the story. Old Kien is a father, widower and bicycle repair person. Can, a barber, is the eldest son and Sinh's husband. Doai is an educated person who works for the Ministry of Education. Khiem works in a slaughterhouse. Kham is a student in the university. Ton was a congenital, deformed idiot. These names are taken directly from the *I*

*Ching* (also known as *Book of Changes* and *Zhouyi*), one of the oldest Chinese philosophy books. Giving characters philosophical names, the author intended to build faithful characters in the story. But, all of them have almost no faith. Each character is a universe in itself and they constantly shift in their own way. Together they are a family with many lifestyles and many different ways of acting.

At first glance the characters are divided into two camps, intellectuals and manual laborers. The manual laborers, people like Old Kien, Can and Khiem, live frankly and somewhat rudely. The intellectuals, such as Doai and Kham, are subtle but they use deception and cunning (Doai flirts with Sinh, his sister-in-law, and Kham steals rice). The various ways of life that are gathered under one roof make for a chaotic, topsy-turvy existence – with no king because each person is trying to represent himself and their peculiar nature before everybody.

These people were tortured by the question of how to earn a living. To them, earning a living is not simple and they are rude, as when they grab a bowl of rice or clothing. The chaos of the story starts with the attempt to survive after subsidies are eliminated.

It is easy to see the loss of order, and also the intellectuals' loss of their prior nobility of action. If we point to the worst people in the story, that would be intellectuals. It is they who have learned, but who therefore also feel shame. Doai is a disgusting person when he did not only forces Sinh to have sex with him but also attacked My Trinh, a daughter of the rich man, in order to make money. For such people, love is far less important than the material things that marriage to a person can bring. In addition, there is Kham's sneaky way of stealing rice: "He went into the back room, looked around to make sure no one was looking, then shoved a can and a half of uncooked rice into his bag before sneaking out again" [5]. This manner of behaving seems to exemplify the misery and moral destitution of intellectuals during Vietnam's time of renovation.

This is more of this chaos in the text. The characteristics of no king are not only the conflict between the new lifestyle and the old; it is also in the chaos which is to be found within each individual. This feature makes the postmodern aspects of the characters show up clearly. Accordingly, each character itself is a combination of many unconventional aspects. They themselves do not even try to hide how they are. Rather, they flaunt and are sometimes even proud of things that they do that are not traditional. However this makes the characters appear very ordinarily and simple. They are living just for themselves. These traits in the new culture are revealed in depth in the dialogue. The multiple of each character, action and thought makes Nguyen Huy Thiep's images multicolored. It is difficult to judge what it was and still is the norm.

What is more pathetic than Old Kien peeking at his daughter-in-law while she is bathing? But in the dialogue between Old Kien and his son Doai, this same action is seen under a different light. It is presented as reasonable and the readers are encouraged to accept it, and even view it as an expression of humanity. It seems that with the use of this dialogue, Nguyen Huy Thiep wants to give a new outlook on life, that peeking at naked women is not so bad. When reading the dialogue between Old Kien and Doai, we can remember that earlier the narrator described Doai as a foul person, but now Doai is the judge. Doai, judging his father's behavior, said: "I have no manners either, but I don't peek at naked women" (...) Old Kien said: "You're educated but still stupid. Now I'll talk to you man-to-man." Doai said: "I won't forgive you." Old Kien said: "I don't need your forgiveness. A man

needn't feel ashamed that he had a peak." Doai sat in silence, drank another cup of whisky. After a while, he sighed. "True enough." Old Kien said: "It's humiliating to be human." Doai asked: "Then why didn't you remarry?" Old Kien cursed: "Your mother! If I'd only been thinking about myself, would you guys have all this?" Doai poured another cup, "More whisky, Father?" Old Kien turned his face into the shadows and shook his head. Doai said, "I'm sorry, Father" [5].

A shift was made when a core value was challenged and then dismissed and even turned upsidedown. From a person who has done something which is commonly accepted as wrong, Old Kien is forgiven because he is able to make his son feel sorry for him. Old Kien turned the light from his voyeurism to his sacrifice for his sons – and his son took the bait. A person of evil himself, Doai shows his softer side when he realizes the essence of problem and finds fault with his father. Postmodern narrative is known for building characters that are ambiguous. In such characters there is a lot of ambiguity. A man is himself but there is something of him in others. In this way it can be seen that the characters are neither all good nor all bad.

The situation of Khiem stealing meat in the slaughterhouse is similar. The act of stealing is wrong. If it was true that the family would have become ill or died without the meat, the acts of stealing were not inherently wrong. If the stealing simply improved their quality of life, the theft is tainted. Khiem stole meat many times and was never caught. Doai said, "its weird how they've left him alone so far, stealing half a ton of meat annually!" [5]. The observation implies that either Khiem is a skilled thief or every worker in the slaughterhouse has been stealing, and they helped each other do it. This is a description of the behavior of employees of companies who receive government subsidies.

The chaos is found in many aspects of life. The problem is not simply that the affairs of one family will become common in society. Actions of an individual are generally accepted and defended by the family in Vietnamese society but due to the importance of face and an extreme aversion for blame, such acceptance is also common in extra-familiar social relations. Chaotic layers mean increased confusion. Old Kien's sickness is related to the quality and delivery of medicine in the country. Eastern and Western medicine function using different premises. Furthermore the diseases within an inch of his life were related to the problem of regards to euthanasia, a religious enters into the question of making use of it when a core religious belief forbids killing. Old Kien's sons had different opinions. Doai was a progressive: "What a waste of time. If you agree that father should die raise your hand? I'll count the votes" [5]. The vote itself is tragi-comedy chaos and could enter every disagreement over what constitutes moral and immoral behavior. Traditionally, voting for death is felt to be unacceptable behavior. But, a postmodernism precept is that if a person is not healthy and is slowly dying a painful death, to kill that person would be the best action. So, Doai's words are not merely those of an unconscionable person.

The conversation turned from outside antitheses between men and society and between men, to the reflexive awareness of the individual. For people who are constantly on the move and constantly questioning and seeking answers, the postmodern narrative helps readers see heretofore unseen aspects of life and existence. When there is chaos and people are fatigued, readers may feel that they no longer know well from bad or right from wrong – or good behavior from better behavior. Each character is shown to have both positive and negative traits.

It is noteworthy that the author creates the scene at a time when society is undergoing many changes. The market economy is emerging and replacing the subsidized economy. Old Kien and his sons all had jobs and everyone worked hard. Everyone wanted to get more money and work was one way to do that. And, of course, there's also the possibility of getting ahead through the use of theft, lying and trickery. When the value system erodes, both means take on the light of forms of "labor" and thieves and corrupt managers gain respect for the income that they obtain.

The story is full of events. When told chronologically, which exposes a great many minor events without any central major event upon which a plot can be based, there remains the unique theme that all exists *Without a king*. This means that each event itself has fullness and the alignment of events is based on the principles of "peer". Previous events are mostly not a "cause" for following events and later events are not a "result" of previous events. We can trace the events of "chaos" in this story: Sinh married into Old Kien's family. She then entered the men's world of "mediocrity and rudeness" of men who live strong, fair and somewhat wild. For the death anniversary of Nhon, Old Kien's wife, people gathered together. Kham's friends were also there. Doai took liberties with Sinh. Can look up Ton. Khiem released Ton and beat Can. Sinh lost the ring, then found it. Old Kien peeked at naked Sinh. Doai wanted to sleep with Sinh but she refused. On New Year's Day, everyone was happy. A neighbor came. Doai spoke about thefts. He commented on "disorder". Sinh got pregnant. Old Kien became ill and was hospitalized to have brain surgery. Old Kien died. Sinh had a daughter. People held celebrations. The family atmosphere was warm and happy.

The chaotic narrative in *Without a King* presents coherency in appearance but disorder in depth. For example, in the second part *In the Morning* in the story: Khiem got out of bed at one o'clock in the morning: "Doai, disrupted from sleep, muttered, "Truly those are the working hours of a criminal" [5]. Three o'clock in the morning, "criminals" is referred to when Old Kien got an electric shock as he was boiling water for tea. He blurted, "Your ancestors! You guy want to get rid of me, but there's a God about, with eyes, and I'll be around for a long time!" [5]. The narrator used the word "criminals" because Old Kien thought that his sons wanted "to get rid of him". When Doai answered his father, that made him synonymous with the "criminal". Dialogue between Old Kien and Doai presents the idea of criminal behavior more: "Who hired you to work for the Education Department, anyway?"

Doai laughed: "They checked out family history for three generations back. It was spotless, as clear as a mirror."

Old Kien mumbled, "Of course it was. I don't know about your guys, but starting with me and going backward, no one has ever done anything uncharitable in this household."

"Oh, that's for sure," Doai said. "To jack up the price of patching a tire to thirty dong when it's worth ten is very charitable."

"Your mother! What thoughts go through your mind when you lift that bowl of rice to your lips every day?" Old Kien demanded" [5].

On the surface it is about criminal behavior and the son talked rudely to his father. But in depth, it is also about "bandits" of the concepts and mores of societies which are changing constantly. The profound meanings of the story are hidden deeply between the lines where many fractures suggest many of directions to direct one's thinking: creating a resume, doing business in a market economy and

inheriting property, for example. The incoherence in *Without a King* has the effects of creating meaning in the text.

This is a negative view, but if one were to take a positive view there is also no king and it is still the same. The most positive character is Sinh, a daughter-in-law who enters Old Kien's house from the outside world. Sinh was a big contrast for that world of chaos. When Sinh arrived, the house had acquired a new look. A "king" then seemed to be present and order seemed to be established. Old Kien and his sons were less vulgar and rough. But before long Sinh felt the consequences of the stifling lifestyle and she had to pick up a knife and threaten Doai when he tried to rape her.

Sinh herself accepted that life. Bearing the name Sinh, which means life, Sinh is not only a focal point (almost as Thuy is in *The General Retires*), keeping warmth in the family, she also created life by giving birth to a girl shortly after Old Kien's death. This detail is given to affirm that life always keeps flows in its own way. No human intervention could prevent or change the flow. The only thing is to survive and accept that this is a chaotic rule of God, as well as a chaos in which others live and create. Sinh's dialogue at the end of the story shows that multifaceted look: "Of course it's rough. And very humiliating. A lot of pain and a lot of anguish. But I also love it" [5]. It is a dramatic event when people are celebrating the birth of the baby and information of Uncle Phuc's death arrives. Perhaps without a king is also a metaphor for "no happiness in life". In the story, human beings are always miserable and disasters will happen to themselves.

Metaphors in Nguyen Huy Thiep's short stories are also kind of chaos. It is similar with a lot of famous writers in the world, especially Haruki Murakami. In the story *The Elephant Vanishes* the Japanese writer gives us many hypotheses of cause of the disappearance, but nobody knows exactly the way the elephant has gone [8].

Many literature critics in the world have been interested in the chaos theory. Gordon Slethaug gave some conclusions about characteristics of chaos: "In exploring the writings of Barth, DeLillo, Dorris, Maclean, McCarthy, Morrison, Pynchon, and Stone, I have suggested that they use chaos theory in various and complex ways as fact, concept, literary structure, and metaphor. They do so in small part through their metaphors of chaos and order; in greater part, through structural principles drawn from new physics; and, in greatest part, through their conscious articulation of facts and ideas drawn from chaos theory" [4].

## Conclusion

Nguyen Huy Thiep is a typical Vietnamese postmodern writer. While he has not written many stories, most show a certain expression of postmodernism. Two most notable concepts imbedded in his stories are the *dissolution of unique centers* and *nonlinear determinism*.

Once the unique center dissolves, chaos is inevitable. The kind of title appeared spontaneously in the literary world during the time Nguyen Huy Thiep was writing even though the concept of postmodernism was unknown to Vietnamese researchers. Thus, through use of his intuitive genius, Nguyen Huy Thiep captured the essence of the era and the general trend of literary development.

Nguyen Huy Thiep has addressed "respecting women" in his writings. His heroines are always bright spots, albeit they are very small in a busy life. Nguyen Huy Thiep seems to believe in women who live in a vast, chaotic and disorderly life. Reading *The General Retires and Without a King*, we can see that besides the hustle-bustle of life, there seems to be groundwater flowing which is forming a new criterion for

life. That flow gets a good deal of its energy from Thuy. The woman has many mistakes (according to the traditional view) but at the same time she is also a person who proposes the beginning of postmodernism for a new era of the nation.

After the general retired the world did not have a "king" anymore. The unstableness of values and lifestyles proposed a neutral solution between the old and the new, between right and wrong and between good and bad. A world without kings shows the chaos of that era and it asserts new values which are similar to the old values in that existence is both independence and dependence, with each breaking the other. Of course there will be no principles or ultimate truths in the realm without a king of chaos. However, chaos would be a premise for a new order, one which would be better and more useful.

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