

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

“No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.” By Warsan Shire. This quote illustrates the harsh reality refugees face: leaving one’s homeland is not a choice taken lightly, but rather an act of survival. Refugees are individuals forced to flee their country due to war, persecution, or violence. According to the UNHCR (2024), more than 110 million people worldwide have been displaced. They carry emotional scars, loss, and trauma to new countries that may not welcome them with open arms. To understand them humanely, we must listen to their voices, not just look at statistics.

One of the largest and most impactful cases of displacement in modern history was the exodus of the Vietnamese people after the Vietnam War (1955-1975). After World War II, the struggle for independence from French colonialism sparked conflict in Vietnam. This led to the Indochina War (1946-1954) between French forces and Vietnamese nationalist-communist groups led by Ho Chi Minh. After the war, the 1954 Geneva Accords divided Vietnam into two regions: Communist-backed North Vietnam and Western-backed South Vietnam. After the Tonkin Gulf incident in 1964, tensions between the two regions escalated due to US concerns about the domino theory of communism spreading across Southeast Asia.

The Vietnam War also lasted from 1955–1975, and involved major battles between North Vietnam and its allies, the Soviet Union and China, against South Vietnam and the United States. US troops began to withdraw from Vietnam after the 1973 Paris Agreement, but the conflict continued until Saigon fell to North Vietnamese forces on April 30, 1975. This marked the communist victory and the reunification of Vietnam. The Vietnamese people, especially those affiliated with the South Vietnamese regime, fled en masse after the fall of Saigon. The first

wave of refugees was evacuated to countries such as the United States, Guam, and the Philippines through operations such as Operation Frequent Wind. The next wave, known as the boat people, faced great dangers at sea, including the threat of pirates, storms, and starvation. Millions of people died in the war, and Vietnamese refugees around the world experienced ongoing trauma, hopelessness, loss, and silence.

Literature has become an important space for refugees to voice their experiences. LaCapra (2001) states that literary narratives can serve as a means to "rework" trauma, giving voice to wounds that have remained unexpressed in history or formal politics. Nussbaum (1997) argues that literature is a medium capable of cultivating moral imagination, inviting readers to empathize with the lived experiences of others. Refugee literature, in this regard, acts as a bridge between the experiences of marginalized individuals and broader social understanding. Viet Thanh Nguyen, a Vietnamese-American writer and professor who won the 2016 *Pulitzer Prize for Fiction* with his novel *The Sympathizer*, is one of the most important figures to address this issue in depth. He teaches at the University of Southern California and holds the Aerol Arnold Chair in English.

There are several journals that have examined a collection of short stories entitled *The Refugees* (2017) written by Viet Thanh Nguyen. First, Viet Thanh Nguyen's (2012) *Refugee Memories and Asian American Critique* explores the issues in Southeast Asian American studies and its interventions in Asian American, Southeast Asian, and American studies. Using a cultural critique method, Nguyen stresses the importance of war as a framework in comprehending the Southeast Asian refugee experience and its impact on identity politics and nationalism in associated fields. Second, C. H. Nguyen (2018) titled *Welcome to the Family! Hospitality, Kinship, and Grief in Vietnamese Diaspora Literature* (Dissertation, UCLA) focuses on adoption and sponsorship in kinship connections. It examines the inability of refugees to integrate into their families and host nations using critical adoption studies and critical refugee studies methodologies as a critique of French republicanism and American

multiculturalism. It examines the writings of Linda Lê, Aimee Phan, Bharati Mukherjee, Monique Truong, and Angie Chau to show how Vietnamese diasporic stories subvert the perpetually appreciative refugee rhetoric. Third, B. P. Roy and A. Mousume (2018), entitled "*The World Was Muzzled, The Way It Would Be Ever Afterward*": *Representations of Trauma and Memory in "Black-Eyed Women"* by Viet Thanh Nguyen, analyze the connection between memory, trauma, and refugee identity in *Black-Eyed Women*, a short fiction. This study examines how past events mold refugee identities and their efforts to forget the trauma that binds them, using an interdisciplinary method that combines literary studies, psychology, and psychiatry.

From the previous studies above, the writer sees that no one has discussed Refugee Voices in Viet Thanh Nguyen's short stories. The work is important because it reflects the real experiences of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants in facing trauma, loss in a foreign country. Through *The Refugees*, Nguyen not only documents the history of Vietnamese refugees, but also encourages readers to understand the complex and evolving diaspora voices, showing characters who live between two worlds: the haunting past and the present that requires change. Through the analysis of the author's writing, we can see how literature can be a powerful tool for examining shared experiences, giving voice to underrepresented groups, and examining how memory and history influence the identities of individuals and entire communities.

This study focuses on how refugee voices are portrayed in three short stories by Viet Thanh Nguyen in the collection *The Refugees* (2017): *Black-Eyed Women*, *War Years*, and *Fatherland*. These three short stories feature characters who experience trauma and loss due to forced displacement from their homelands and new homes or new countries. These short stories demonstrate that literary works can be a space to elevate the voices of refugees, a group often marginalized in literary texts. Through an analysis of these works, this study aims to understand how Nguyen portrays refugee voices in three short stories, the emotional and psychological dimensions of the refugee experience, and how the characters

respond to the suffering they experience. In addition, this study highlights the significance of literature as a means to give voice to underrepresented groups, documenting the historical and personal experiences of Vietnamese refugees.

1.2 Statement of the Study

Based on the research background, this *Skripsi* seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How are the refugees' voices portrayed in these three short stories?
2. How do the refugees react to their struggles?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purposes of this study are:

1. To find out how the voices of refugees are depicted in these three short stories.
2. To find out how the refugees react to these struggles

1.4 Significance of the Study

This research is expected to make significant contributions both theoretically and practically to literary studies, particularly those related to refugee literature and post-war studies. Theoretically, this research provides a deeper understanding of how refugee voices are represented in literary works. By employing concepts such as refugee voice, this research can enrich the body of literary studies that discuss humanitarian issues, the experiences of forced migration, and the cultural tensions faced by marginalized individuals and communities. This research also emphasizes the importance of listening to the voices of groups often silenced in mainstream literature.

1.5 Methodology of the Study

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method to analyze how refugee voices are represented and how refugee characters respond to the struggles they experience in three selected short stories by Viet Thanh Nguyen: *Black Eyed*

Women, War Years, and *Fatherland*, included in the short story collection *The Refugees* (2017). The qualitative descriptive approach is suitable for examining complex and profound themes, such as trauma, loss, hopelessness, alienation, silence, and survival mechanisms, as depicted through the experiences of characters in literary works.

The primary data in this study are the literary texts of the three short stories, which are analyzed in depth using close reading techniques to identify elements of the literary works that depict the voices of refugees and their responses to various forms of hardship. The analysis focuses on linguistic elements, narrative structure, symbols, and themes that illustrate the psychological, emotional, and social realities of refugees. In addition to primary data, this research is also supported by secondary data, including academic journals, scientific books, theses, articles, and literary studies relevant to the study of refugee literature, trauma, diaspora, and cultural representation.

The theoretical framework in this study consists of two main perspectives. For the first research question, Gayatri Spivak (1988), through her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* is used, which categorizes refugee voices into three main aspects: trauma, loss, and despair. For the second research question, Judith Herman's theory in her book *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) is used, which identifies three main responses to trauma: fight, flight, and freeze. This research process was conducted through several stages. First, the researcher repeatedly read the short story collection *The Refugees* (2017) to understand the context, narrative style, and main themes of each story. Second, three short stories were selected that were strong in representing refugee voices and demonstrating the diverse ways their characters cope with adversity. Third, relevant quotations were identified and classified based on Fanon and Herman's three theoretical frameworks. The classified data were interpreted within the context of the text or refugee dialogue, connecting the fictional text to real-life issues currently facing refugees. Finally, a conclusion is drawn to answer the research questions and highlight the significance of Nguyen's work in representing the refugee experience.

Through this methodology, this study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how Nguyen's short stories represent the strategies they use to survive and navigate the struggles of forced displacement.

1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Study

This research is limited to an analysis of refugee voices and their reactions to the struggles they experience in three short stories from Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Refugees* (2017): *Black-Eyed Women*, *War Years*, and *Fatherland*. The focus of the research is to identify refugee voices based on the categories proposed by Gayatri Spivak (1988), through her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* namely trauma, loss, and to analyze their reactions to the struggles using Judith Herman's (1992) concepts of fight, flight, and freeze.

This research does not aim to draw general conclusions from the findings across Nguyen's entire work, other literary texts, or the experiences of all refugees beyond those depicted in these three short stories. Despite its limited scope, this study is expected to serve as a reference for further research examining the representation of refugee voices and their responses to the struggles they experience in literature.

1.7 Status of the Study

The study of refugees in literature has become a topic of interest for many researchers. Previous studies have examined the refugee experience from various perspectives, such as the trauma of war, forced displacement, and life in exile. Many of these studies emphasize how social and historical conditions shape the representation of refugees in literature. For example, research conducted by Jonathan Clark (2019) study "*Voices from the Displaced: Narrative Strategies in Contemporary Refugee Literature*," explores the narrative strategies used by writers to represent refugee voices. Its focus is on the use of language as a tool of resistance. Devi Amalia's (2020) thesis entitled "*Trauma and Silence in Viet Thanh Nguyen's The Refugees*" highlights how the traumatic experiences of Vietnamese refugees are presented in the short story collection. However, this

study emphasizes the expression of trauma and silence, rather than the in-depth narrative construction of refugee voices.

Ratih Lestari (2021), a student in the English Literature Study Program at Semarang State University, entitled "*The Representation of Refugees in Khaled Hosseini's Sea Prayer*," examines how the suffering and trauma of Syrian refugees are represented visually and narratively in this short work of fiction. This research highlights the emotional aspects and experiences of loss, but does not delve deeply into how refugees' voices are constructed and voiced in the text. Reni Marlina (2022), entitled "*The Image of Refugees in the Novel Exit West by Mohsin Hamid*," explores the depiction of refugees within a political conflict setting and how characters struggle to survive. This study analyzes the journey and social context of refugees, but does not yet focus on narrative techniques that convey their experiences. Recent research by Maria Fernandez (2023), titled *Echoes of Asylum: Listening to Refugee Narratives in Asian Diaspora Fiction*, highlights how diasporic Asian novels frame refugee voices in different cultural settings. While resonant, this study does not analyze the essence of refugee voices within short narrative stories.

After a thorough literature search, no studies have been found that specifically discuss the representation of refugee voices in Viet Thanh Nguyen's three short stories, *Black-Eyed Women*, *War Years*, and *Fatherland*.

1.8 Organization of the Study

Organization of the Study. This thesis consists of four chapters:

Chapter I: Background

This chapter presents the background of the study, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, the research methodology, the scope and limitations of the study, the status of the study, and the organization of the study.

Chapter II: Review of Related Literature

This chapter presents relevant theories and previous research to support the analysis. The discussion includes theory on refugee voices Gayatri Spivak (1988), through her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* and Judith Herman's (1992) theory on responses to trauma. It also discusses the concepts of trauma, diaspora, and refugee literature, as well as previous studies related to Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Refugees* (2017). This chapter provides a theoretical foundation for analyzing the representation of refugee voices and their responses to struggle in the selected short stories.

Chapter III Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents the results of the data analysis related to the research questions. Each finding will be discussed and interpreted within the theoretical framework and relevant previous studies.

Chapter IV Conclusion and Suggestions

In this chapter, the writer presents conclusions and suggestions based on the research findings of the previous chapter to answer the research questions on the selected Indonesian translated short stories. This chapter describes the conclusions from what has been discussed previously and some suggestions regarding this research.