

DOCTORAL THESIS IN BRIEF

VU HOANG HIEU. *Homosexuals in Vietnam's contemporary society: From repressed memories to narratives*

Major: Cultural studies

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In Vietnam, homosexuality has been known only about ten years ago. In Vietnam's contemporary society, lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (LGBs/ homosexuals) are still considered the minority, marginalized and invisible. The social stress has caused them to face many problems in life, of which their repressed memories are considered a fundamental and specific one. The LGB people use various ways to deal with social pressures, free their repressed memories, assert their identity and empowerment, in which narratives are regarded as a powerful 'weapon'. As long as prejudice and discrimination against the LGBs still exist and negatively impact their lives in particular and the progress of the whole society in general, it is absolutely necessary to boost basic research on this subject. From a cultural perspective, the thesis studies narrative methods and its role in helping the LGB people fight social stress, thereby learning more their hidden corners and key issues, while also making it clearer about the multi-dimensional movements within contemporary Vietnamese society.

In addition to Introduction, Conclusion, References, Literature review and theoretical basis in Chapter 1, the main content of the thesis is presented from Chapters 2-4.

Chapter 2: *Repressed memories of the LGBs*
Repressed memory, a fundamental and

specific issue of the LGBs, is a situation where a memory, emotions, thoughts and desires, etc has been unconsciously blocked by an individual due to the high level of stress or trauma contained in these. In other words, the repressed memory is the repression and suppression of an individual's heterosexual orientation as well as the need to show his/her homosexual identity, which has a negative effect on the lives of the LGBs. They are often in such a state of anxiety, suffocating and distress that they not only have to control their sexual desires, hobbies and habits, but also hide their sense of beauty and lifestyle in exchange for a safety, even if it is temporary, unstable and artificial. Long-term repressed memories are the cause of trauma, psychological disorders, and bipolar feelings in many cases.

According to the research results of the thesis, most of the surveyed people were the direct victims of community stigma and discrimination, which led them to self-discrimination and self-marginalization. The thesis affirms the social constructionism of suppressed memories by interpreting the major and specific cultural and social causes that have formed and nurtured these memories in the LGB people. From a constructivist perspective, the suppressed memory is said to be the product of a system of heavy discriminatory discourses, ie., biological, health, social, legal and communicative ones considers homosexuality to be against the laws of nature, the main cause of the widespread HIV/AIDS epidemic, a kind of social evils like drugs and prostitution,

illegal same-sex marriage and unusual, tempting, addictive and depicting behaviors of the hedonists and immoral people with a life of gross self-indulgence, respectively. The thesis also points out that these discrimination and prejudice stem from the gender binary system and the standard concept of heterosexuality, which is clearly shown in the recognition and determination of true values of men in the ability to breed and the greatest value of women in the “natural position” to give birth. This system is legalized and reinforced by the unique cultural, social, and political conditions of Vietnam.

Chapter 3: *Narratives of the LGBs*

In this chapter, the thesis deals with the typical narratives of the LGBs to fight the social stress that have created their suppressed memory. As social stress pushes the LGBs to hide their sexual identity and become a marginalized minority having no voice, they have used narratives as a means to create their own identities, form a community and empower themselves, which also means their attempt to free suppressed memories. Accordingly, the LGBs turn to literature and art, *lên đồng* ritual performance and social networks to talk about their life stories.

The literary and artistic works have brought a new and progressive perspective on the LGBs. The stories of homosexuality, homosexual love and pain, the process of self-positioning, protest efforts, struggles and desires for freedom and liberation are reflected through the lens of literature and art. In this narrative mode, homosexual people appear to be normal one, who have a need for sex, have sincere love, a simple life, strong energy and a strong desire to live, not those who are strange, perverted,

mysterious, and associated with social evils. Despite the struggles and torment with sexual differences, they dare to face challenges, barriers, dare to resist the raid of prejudice, discrimination, dare to fight for a life true to themselves. Literature and art narratives about this minority people have brought about positive and humane stories and messages about them.

In addition, the worship of Mother Goddesses and *lên đồng* ritual performance are also a way for the LGBs to confine and express their identities through induced trance to legitimize the image of feminine men and masculine women in a special space of belief and art. The ups and downs of life, the deep confessions, the torments and the intense desire to live true to one's ego are both the material, the inspiration, and the content and message of the “transgender performances”. Through the experience of attending induced trance sessions and understanding the life stories of the mediums, the thesis clarifies the stories of the LGBs with concerns about their status and lives and points out that *lên đồng* ritual performances has partly freed them from their memories, helping them to live and experience with their true sexual identity.

Moreover, the LGBs have tried to normalize the issue of heterosexuality in the community by sharing their daily stories on social networks, especially facebook. In that space, they can easily express things that are considered sensitive, taboo, etc., meanwhile their stories are also heard more, discussed more lively, which creates the interaction. This narrative mode breaks gender norms, challenges prejudices and proves that the “subject” position of homosexual people in a society with many prejudices against them.

Chapter 4: *From repressed memories to narratives: creating identity, community, power and references from the context of contemporary Vietnam*

In the context of contemporary Vietnam, the homosexual people have shared their narratives through three specific methods, namely, writing and performing arts, *lên đồng* ritual performances, and activities on social networks, which is a key source of materials to form the homosexual identity of each individual and the whole community. Behind those narratives are those who have a lot of sexuality, anxious to find their “self” and the burning desire to live true to their egos. The LGBs would like the society to recognize themselves with a new image (joyful, optimistic, proactive, inclusive, energetic and daring to live). The transmission, dissemination and interaction between homosexual narratives, to a certain extent, helped them to have a special connection and sympathy with each other. Therefore, as a meaningful system, these narratives play a key role in the formation and development of the LGBT community which is first a fantasy community, then a virtual one and finally a real one.

Based on narrative analysis as a mode of releasing memories in homosexual people, the thesis generalizes the process from suppressed memories to narratives is actually a journey of creating a LGBT identity and community. In other words, it is a journey of “empowerment” and the “subjectivity” in this particular social

group. Thereby, it continues to lead these people to the struggle for truth and power. The thesis clarifies the references from the contemporary Vietnamese cultural and social life through the analysis of social and cultural basis for the proper existence of heterosexual great narratives (product of a patriarchal culture), cultural and social context for the emergence of homosexual narratives (literary and artistic works, *lên đồng* ritual performance, and homosexual stories shared on social networks). The heterosexual grand narratives and homosexual petit narratives are essentially a battle between a closed trend, introvert, conservation and promotion of traditional values to ensure the stability and discipline of society with the trend of integration, openness, modernization and inevitable democratization under the influence of globalization and the power of digital communication, towards new universal values.

The emergence of homosexual narratives in a heterosexual matrix reflects the trend of integration and democratization in contemporary Vietnamese society, under the strong influence of globalization in the era, despite the persistence of the conservative heritage of a traditional Confucian culture with the dominance of collectivism as an essential feature of the socialist ideology.

The thesis is successfully defended at the Academy-level Examination Council, held at the Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences in 2019.

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