"My Work Is to Show That It's So Much More Beautiful When You Can Mix": An Interview With Kim Thúy

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Kim Thúy Ly Thanh, who publishes under the pen name Kim Thúy, was born in Saigon, Vietnam, in 1968. In 1978, when she was ten years old, Thúy and her family fled their home country by sea as part of the mass emigration of people seeking to escape the repressive communist regime and harsh economic conditions in Vietnam after the end of the war. These refugees, who were collectively referred to as "boat people" due to the many small, overcrowded boats they used to escape Vietnam, often faced perilous conditions on the sea; those who survived the risky journey were initially accommodated in refugee camps in Southeast Asia before being resettled in countries such as the US, Australia, France, Germany, and the UK.[1] Thúy and her family made it to Malaysia, where they spent a few months living in a small refugee camp in Kuantan; they were subsequently offered political asylum in Canada and settled in French-speaking Québec in early 1979. In this interview, Thúy describes the warmth and affection with which she and her family were welcomed in Canada, which marked a sharp contrast to the emotional restraint she was used to within Vietnamese culture. She also outlines the challenges her parents faced in integrating into Canadian society and culture, which was so different from everything they knew. By contrast, Thúy quickly immersed herself in the culture of her new home, learning French and pursuing an education. She studied at the University of Montréal, graduating with a Bachelor's degree in Translation in 1990 and subsequently with a Bachelor's degree in Law in 1993.

It was Thúy's work for a legal firm that brought her back to Vietnam, where she also had her first son; her second was born in Bangkok, after her husband, also a lawyer, was posted there with his job (Hong, "Q&A with Kim Thúy"). In this interview, she speaks about the challenges of mothering her children in a foreign culture, despite the fact that she was living in relatively affluent circumstances and was able to communicate in English and French. Language and communication are also discussed in depth in this interview, as Thúy reflects

1 The appropriateness of the term "boat people" to denote refugees from Southeast Asia from 1975 on has been questioned in recent years, especially since it was also used to refer to refugees from Cambodia and Laos who left their countries on foot: see, for example, Lambert on this point. We note, however, that this is the term that Thúy chooses to use to refer to her own family's experience.

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on her choice—if one can call it that—to use French to mother her sons. Her characterization of French as her "language of love," which she also associates with the openness and effusive affection she experienced on her arrival in Canada, seems especially poignant in the light of her assertion that she wanted to be a "fun mother," quite different from her own strict Vietnamese mother, who valued logic over emotion. This interview offers useful insights into the myriad ways in which a mother's experience of being mothered can shape her own mothering practices.

When Thúy returned to Canada in 2002, she decided to try her hand at a very different career and opened a Vietnamese restaurant in Montreal. In this interview, as in others, Thúy tells of the experience that ultimately led her to writing. Late nights in the restaurant caused her to doze at the wheel on the drive home, and to try to keep herself awake, she started to scribble notes while she was stopped at traffic lights (see, e.g., Isaac). What began as scribbled to-do notes soon turned into more personal reflections, and after she closed her restaurant in 2007, Thúy began to type up her notes and develop them into the vignettes that would eventually come together to form her first novel, *Ru* (Hong, "Q&A with Kim Thúy").

Ru was published in French by Libre Expression in 2009 to great critical acclaim; the publication of the English translation by Sheila Fischman in 2012 sealed its commercial success. The novel tells the story of first-person narrator Nguyễn An Tinh, who was born in Saigon in 1968 and immigrated to Canada with her family at the age of ten. In an assemblage of 144 vignettes, the narrative covers Tinh's childhood in Saigon, the family's journey to Canada via a Malaysian refugee camp, and the narrator's personal reflections on her experiences as a refugee and as a mother in contemporary Canada. Though the parallels with Thúy's own biography are evident from the outset, the author insists that "[i]f the book was only about me, it would have lasted maybe only about three pages" (Hong, "Kim Thúy's *Ru*"). The novel has clearly been read as representing the experiences of many refugees and migrants; in Canada, it has been celebrated for the way it has "brought public attention to Vietnamese Canadian experiences" (Nguyen). As Thúy mentions in this interview, *Ru* was adapted for film in 2023; the film by Québécois director Charles-Olivier Michaud premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2023.

Since the publication of *Ru*, Thúy has produced four more novels: *À toi [Yours]*, coauthored with Pascal Janovjak (Libre Expression, 2011); *Mãn* (Libre Expression, 2013); *Vi* (Libre Expression, 2016); and *Em* (Libre Expression, 2020). Like *Ru*, all four deal with issues of exile and return, loss and longing, motherhood and family connection, and linguistic and cultural translation; as Brian Bethune remarks, Thúy's work tells "the same-yet-entirely-different story of a Vietnamese diaspora everywoman, using the events of her own life as a lens to reflect the modern history of an entire nation" (Bethune). Moreover, Thúy's writing reflects upon the complex interplay of languages and cultures that reflect her experience of

the world; writing about Thúy's third novel, *Mãn*, Natalie Edwards notes that "French and Vietnamese are not presented in this text as two discreet entities in a monoglossic system but as a dynamic, productive dialogue that emphasizes the practices of the contemporary multilingual individual" (Edwards 54). In this interview, Thúy touches upon the ways in which her writing in French is imbued with the musicality of the Vietnamese language and her imagery is inflected with references to Vietnamese culture. She compares this interchange and cross-fertilization to mixing a cocktail, where seemingly incompatible flavors are blended to create something new and appealing.

[*This interview was carried out by Eglė Kačkutė via Zoom in September 2023. The interview was edited for length and clarity by Valerie Heffernan, and a critical introduction was added in October 2024.*]

EK: Reading your work, it's obvious that motherhood is an important theme. Your work reflects many important and subtle aspects of motherhood, particularly mothering in transnational settings. Forced migration has obviously shaped your own life and work in very meaningful ways. You were born in Saigon, and then, at the age of ten, you left Vietnam with your mom and dad and your brothers. How do you remember your mother in those years before you left? What was your childhood relationship with your mother like?

KT: I was very lucky to be brought up not only by my little family with my parents and brothers but also with my aunts, uncles, and grandparents. I've learned a lot not only from my mother but from all the other mothers, all the other aunts, who acted like they were my mothers as well. In my culture, we feel that we have the responsibility to take care of the next generation. One aunt would put all the young ones to sleep; another is a French teacher, so she would teach French to all of us. And if they take on that responsibility, it means that they also have power over us. So, not only my mother, but all my aunts had the right to scold me or to guide me in life.

My grandmother is the queen of all queens. She had this talent to make you feel that you're always her favorite. She could read us in a second. She knew when we were not feeling good; this was the kind of woman she was. My grandmother was all about love. All my aunts and friends who stayed over—they became adopted children. She is that kind of a mother.

My mother was very strict. She gave herself the role of the CEO of the family. She thought that my grandmother was too soft and too kind and didn't understand anything. She was very strict—to all of us, not only me. She would run the whole household: the cooks, the nannies, so

many people to manage. She is not the type of woman who would sing me a lullaby. She never put me to bed; it was the nanny who did that. She would tell me stories, but the story was always about a lesson that you have to learn from. I never associated my mother with the word "fun"—and maybe that's why I decided that I would have joy. Not only fun, but joy.

EK: So, when you say that you decided that you will have joy, is it in relation to motherhood or just in general, in what you do, in life?

KT: In life and in general—and I wanted to be a fun mother. The first two years, every night and every nap time, I read with my son. I have books everywhere. I read with him, making fun with the stories. When he started being able to read the words, he said: "You never told the story like the story in the book!" Because every time I read the story, I would tell a different story. And lullabies, even though I sing really badly. I am not a good mother in the traditional sense of the word, but a good guide, because I didn't want to have too many rules. My son, the first one, is more disciplined than me. When he was six or seven, he said: "Oh, it's time for me to go to bed." I said: "What do you mean?"—"I go to school tomorrow." I said: "It's okay. Let's play. We're having this guest over. Let's enjoy the guest." And he said: "No, I have school tomorrow. I'm going to bed." He's the contrary of me; I tried to be very liberal with him, but it didn't work. He follows my mother's steps by himself.

EK: Can I ask, what language do you mother in? Is it one language or a mixture?

KT: It's in French. With my mother, like I've told you, it's all about learning, all about lessons. And it's also because of the Vietnamese language and culture. You don't say "I'm proud of you" or "I'm happy" or "I'm sad"; it's never about emotions. We were just showing the movie *Ru* (2023) to our family because it will be out only on 13 November. My mother came with my aunt to Toronto for the festival. My aunt cries for everything; she's very emotional. She's like my grandmother, all about love. She saw the movie, and she cried because she was touched by everything—for us, finally, after all these years, to be here at the TIFF [Toronto International Film Festival], on the red carpet, and to be celebrated, to have this movie about boat people. She cried the whole time, and my mother, she said: "Why are you crying? There's nothing to cry about!"

With my mother, I didn't have tender words; I didn't learn it from her. If I want to be tender with my children, all of that came from the culture of Québec—the people who don't mind telling you, "ah, je t'aime" ["I

love you"], "ah, t'es belle" ["you are beautiful"]. That's very typical of Québec; it's more open, more emotional. If I want to express that kind of love to my children, I have to do it in French. Of course, it exists in Vietnamese also—but not from my mother. Those tender words like "ma chérie" ["my darling"] or "mon coeur" ["my sweetheart"] exist in Vietnamese. My aunt, the one who cries a lot, uses these words for her loved ones. But my mom with me—I didn't have that. And so, if I want to be tender with my children, I don't have a choice—I have to use French. And that's why I use French with my children.

EK: You were saying how your mom had the role of a CEO of the family. What was her role in the family decision to leave?

KT: It was her idea. Because she is tough. Inside, she is as soft as everybody, but she has this front where she wants to make it look like, I'm not scared of anything; I'm courageous, and I'm brave. That's why she could say that we'll go. My father followed because, logically, it was the right thing to do—to leave—but if it were only up to him, I don't think we would have left. She was the one who led the whole group. She insisted on taking her younger brother and her younger sister, who were seventeen and eighteen. She didn't want them to end up on the battlefield, and she knew that they would. So, she convinced my grandmother, saying: "Let go of your seventeen- and eighteen-year-old children; they're going to come with me on a boat with my family." My grandmother said, "Oh, you know, there are so many boats sinking." My mom said, "Yeah, but your son is already dead. You have to choose where you want him to die. Do you want him to die on the battlefield or at sea? At least at sea, maybe he will survive."

So, the strength of my mother helped a lot during these extreme circumstances. She was a strong one to say, "No, let's do this. Let's go." She's very emotional, but she thinks that she's only rational. She will try to make her decisions based only on her rational side.

EK: In your books, there are many mother characters, including refugee mothers, who employ different mothering strategies to prepare their children for life to come. I wonder how you see that kind of mothering in the context of forced mobility. Could you talk a little bit about this?

KT: Mothering is already so difficult, right? You have to be a model for your children. You have to make decisions for them, and you always hope that you're making the right decisions for them. It's very difficult to have this kind of responsibility, and most of the time you're blamed for any decisions you make, even the good ones! There's no winning! It's a catch-22; damned if you do, damned if you don't. So, how do you keep the balance? You have to be close to your children, but not too

close and not overshadowing; you have to be engaged. So, how do you deal with all that?

When you are an immigrant parent, sometimes the parent no longer speaks; the mother doesn't speak the language, and the child becomes the adult in the room. You're not so sure of yourself, and the language barrier makes even more fragile what you think mothering should be. All of a sudden, you find yourself in a new culture, and your children can adapt to this new culture quicker than you. You want your children to find their own place in a new society as quickly as possible, but at the same time, every time that they make progress in the new culture, they get a little bit further from you. You cannot have the same rhythm because you're just working and you're just trying to survive. You have to stabilize the situation for the whole family. So, it's very, very difficult.

I was not in that situation at all. I have lived abroad with my children, but I could speak French or English in Thailand, and people could understand me. Most importantly, I was fine financially. I was not in need; I was only working abroad with all the perks and the care that the company would give you. And even then, it's hard! You hear the nanny speaking to your child in a different language, and you don't understand. They're creating a new relationship that you're not part of. An immigrant mother has to live that every single day. My son is a lawyer, but I can be part of his world. Many of his older colleagues or bosses, we've worked together, or we've crossed paths. So, I'm still inside his world; he's growing into this world and making his own space, but I'm part of it. His girlfriend is from Québec for many, many generations, but I can speak to her, and she understands me. But imagine an immigrant mother: If the child has a partner who is not of your culture, you're blocked and disconnected once again. If you have, for example, your child's friends coming over for a birthday party, you know that the party that you're planning is not like the one that everybody else was planning because you don't have the money or you don't have the knowledge. All those little children are speaking a language that you don't understand, playing games that you never knew. You have to learn to give up a bit of all that every single day. Your children prefer a ham sandwich instead of a box of rice for school, and they are ashamed when you make them eat the food from your own tradition. How should you feel about that? You are happy that they are adapting to the new culture, but how sad you are that they are ashamed! As an immigrant mother, you have that one more layer to deal with.

And then there are moments where your children will tell you, "You don't understand. You're not a Quebecer; you're not from Québec, and I am a Quebecer." It's already a conflict of generations, but you never use culture to say that. You just say: "You're too old; you don't understand,

Mom. I'm young, and we're a new generation. We don't listen to your music." And that's right. You don't take it as a culture. For an immigrant mother, it's "I don't listen to your music because it doesn't touch me anymore. A Vietnamese song? That's uncool. I listen to Taylor Swift." I think it's extremely difficult. You die every time a little tiny bit. You probably have to wait until the children are forty or fifty, like my age, when we get older and we realize, "I'm still Vietnamese. I *am* touched by Vietnamese songs. I love Vietnamese food. And I'm proud to present Vietnamese food to friends." But it took forty years—a long time!

I'm lucky that my parents spoke French. They could follow us, follow the integration, even though they were not integrated as much as we were, of course. Because they didn't go to school here, they worked right away. They worked in manufacturing and these kinds of things. You don't really make friends in these spaces. You don't do sports or go on outings or to parties, where friendships become possible; most of the time, they're just colleagues. Their friends are, I would say, 99% from the Vietnamese community. They eat the same, they love the same songs, and they like to discuss the same issues—because you cannot really discuss the conflict in the South China Sea with a Quebecer, really. Unless they are historians and politicians, they don't really care. You can have one evening, which is fine, but it's not a long-term friendship.

And I want the migrant mothers to be heard; I want that pain to be seen, for it to be acknowledged how difficult it is.

EK: That's one of the reasons why I love your work. Because it says what you have just described, it says it in a creative way; it's so subtle.

KT: I think it was in *Mãn* where the mother seemed to be very strict, but she allowed her daughter to be with someone who is more open and less conservative. Because to do so, you have to think about your child. You say, my child needs to be more open in a society like Canada, in the Western world. She has to learn. The mother knew that she didn't have that set of skills. You have to say, what's best for my child? It takes a lot of humility to say, I cannot do it; I'm not the best person for my child. The other person will be able to bring up my children better than me. In *Mãn*, the [female] monk who gave the baby to the next person knew that she was limited by her religion and by her social constraints. So, she said: no, this child has to go with another mother so that the other mother can help her bloom. It's always about giving up.

I know that I have repeated it many times, but it's a true story: When I went back to Vietnam the first time, I was there on a little canoe on the water, and this woman was rowing, and her little child was with her. I remember her telling me that I should adopt her child and that she was

ready to give me her child. My first reaction as a Westerner was: What kind of a mother is that?! Who would give up her daughter?! I judged her from that point on; I said, oh, what a bad mother! But actually, no. She knew that she would spend the rest of her life just rowing for tourists, making $2, and her daughter would maybe have a brighter future if she was taken care of by me in the Western world. She was ready to give up her child to someone who would give her better opportunities. That, to me, is a greater love. It's love without ego, without selfishness. It's only about her daughter. It's extraordinary!

And you see refugees just give up children to people on a train, for example: "Take the child, take the child! Leave! If I cannot be helped, at least my child can—and they will survive." That takes a lot of love! How hard is it to give away a baby knowing that you're giving it away and that it's not a baby that you don't want at all? I learned from the experience in Vietnam with that woman who wanted to give me her daughter that if you really love your children, you have to pull yourself back and let them be loved by as many people as possible. I learned it from that scene and from the immigrant experience of all these mothers. We have to say, it's better for my children to be with other people. If not, they cannot learn fast enough or take root fast enough so that they can be stabilized and soar.

EK: I was going to ask you next about how you came to writing. Were you already a mother at that point? Can you tell us more?

KT: I think I fell in love with writing the first time I read *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras. Of course, her writing is beautiful—the language, the images—but most importantly, she gave me the possibility to see Vietnam differently than just a war. Vietnam became this place where romance is possible. She changed my point of view about Vietnam, and she gave me the right to love Vietnam differently from the fact that I lost Vietnam. Before Marguerite Duras, I loved Vietnam because I lost it; I longed for Vietnam because I had lost the country, the culture. When I read Marguerite Duras, I just loved Vietnam because it's beautiful. It can be seen as a beautiful place and a beautiful culture. That's why she plays a very important role not only in my literature but in my relationship with Vietnam. My relationship with Vietnam changed because of Marguerite Duras.

Then, because I loved the book so much, I wanted to write—but of course, you need to master a language in order to write. I didn't master French, and I didn't know English. At that point in time, I had already lost my Vietnamese. So how can you write when you don't have the language—a language, any language—to express your feelings, to describe images? You cannot even think because you don't have the words

for what you're feeling, and what you're feeling is frustration, or maybe it's irritation, maybe it's melancholia, maybe it's nostalgia—but you cannot name it because you don't have the words. So, you become basically blank. It's very funny to say it that way, but you cannot feel until you have the language to identify exactly how you're feeling. So, I didn't think I could write at all. I never knew that I would own enough words and enough vocabulary to write.

All of that came accidentally when I was thirty-eight. I had a restaurant, and I was very tired. So I fell asleep a lot at red lights, and one of the ways that helped me to stay awake was to make notes and to-do lists. What do I buy tomorrow? After a while, you run out of things to buy, so I started writing lists of things I knew. So, verbs, spices, flowers, all kinds of lists of things that I knew. I ran out of ideas, and that's when I started writing.

EK: When you would take notes at the red lights, what language would you use?

KT: French. I don't have enough words in any of the other languages. Also, French is my language of love. When we first arrived here, all these people were welcoming us in their arms. We were so dirty with all kinds of infections, and they didn't care. They just took us into their arms. I remember these parents: when I went to one of the kid's homes for lunch because we were invited, they said, "Oh, you have such great hair! Your hair's so beautiful." I didn't understand much, but *that* I understood because there was this affection. Now it's my love language. When I write, I share the things that I find beautiful. It has to be with the love language, so it cannot be anything other than French.

EK: Importantly, your writing is translingual. You write in French, but you don't only write in French. The multilingual or translingual is woven into the idea of the text as well; it has many meanings. Can you tell us a little bit more about the presence of Vietnamese in your texts?

KT: A friend of mine who first read *Ru*, he knew that I was writing in French, but the sensation he got was that he had just read a Vietnamese book. We started analyzing, and I think that the rhythm and the musicality of the Vietnamese language were never far behind the words that I would choose or how I combined the words together and the images also. One very simple example: red for the Western world means love, passion; it can even be aggressive, but in Vietnamese not at all; it's fortune, chance, or love. When I describe someone wearing a red dress, for example, in my mind it is positive. The way I choose the words, you would have something positive, and you wonder why. It's because of the Vietnamese tradition behind it. The way that I describe

a tree is probably very different, because in my mind the wind I hear, or the meaning of the tree, is completely different from the Western world. We can sit down and analyze every sentence; I'm sure that you will find that underlying Vietnamese culture. In French or in English we say, "He's in love with her," but in Vietnamese, there are expressions like "He adores her like a tree." He's become so still, stunned, he cannot talk about it anymore. When I choose the word or I try to describe the kind of adoration, I have the Vietnamese words in the back of my mind.

If we take every sentence, we can analyze and find the musicality of the word. Sometimes it's just the musicality of the word; sometimes it's the combination of the images; sometimes it's the culture behind it. For example, [in English] you would never pay attention to describing someone calling someone over, but in Vietnamese it's so important for me to describe that. The person had her hand down to wave to or call upon someone. Because if you do it the other way, it's very disrespectful. You can do that only to someone who is younger or to a dog, but not a person. Someone who's not Vietnamese would never even pay attention to the angle of the hand, whereas for me, it's important. The way that I would describe the position of that body or in my mind, it's very clear where the hand is.

EK: As you said, you mothered in a situation of transnationalism, and you had to navigate different cultural norms of mothering. How much of this is part of your creative concern? And how much of this is part of your work?

KT: It's all my work [laughing]. It's all about moving together all these sometimes contradictory concepts, ideologies, and methodologies. How do you make them all dance together? It's like a cocktail, a mojito. You have the sour from lime; you have the tinge of the mint; you have the sugar; you have the bitterness of the alcohol. How do you balance all these ingredients so that together you have a great drink—a drink that is better than just a lime, or just sugar, or just alcohol, or just mint? My work is to show that it's so much more beautiful when you can mix. Once you find the right proportion, it's just perfect. It's the same thing in writing. How can you write in French and still give a taste of the Vietnamese culture or the Vietnamese language without making the French too heavy or that you don't interrupt the flow too much? How much of the Vietnamese culture can you give so that people don't get lost and lose interest in what they're reading? How do you give just enough so that you have that exotic taste, so that the reader feels like, "I'm in new territory; I'm learning, I'm traveling, but I'm not lost"? That's what I try to do.

EK: I wonder as well how much that applies to different styles of mothering that people have to navigate as well—people who are mothering on the move, in different places, and in between places.

KT: I'll give you one example that really broke my heart. In my last book, I talked about these mixed-race children who got adopted elsewhere.[2] Then this girl found her mother, so she went back. The interpreter didn't know the American culture; the interpreter could speak English but did not transpose one culture to the next. The interpreter only interpreted the words, and there was a huge misunderstanding between the two. In Vietnam, we say we owe everything to our parents, because the saying is that you are only the result of who your ancestors have been. If they were good people, you have a good life; if they were bad people, you have a bad life. You're always grateful to your ancestors; your whole life is about paying back that gratefulness, taking care of the elders, because you owe them your life. This interpreter said to the American girl, "Now that you've found your brothers and sisters, you can pay your debt to your mother." This girl, she's American; she couldn't understand what this was. She said: "Oh my God! These people only want my money! I only want love!" She never talked to them again—and that's only because of the interpretation. That's transposing from one culture to the next. How do you explain so that everybody will understand the *intention*? Not the words, but the intention?

So, that's what I try to do with my books. To explain that if a Vietnamese [person] doesn't have a physical reaction, it's because of our culture. The culture is that if the person in front of you knows that what she's saying is making you happy, the person could take it away. If you know that what you're saying is hurting me, you can use it as a weapon. So, as much as possible, you don't have any expression or reaction—and that's strength. Someone like my mom does not cry at the movie; that's strength. It's someone who can hold back the emotion. In the Western world, someone can speak and have an opinion. Both of them are good; both of them talk about power; it's just different ways of expressing power. It's so beautiful when you expose it that way. So, to your question: How do we see the transmission or the trans-culture? It's that. It's not changing one culture or the other; it's communicating the different cultures. It's having one culture communicating with the other.

We say red is the color of love, so that's why we wear red at a wedding. In Vietnam, if you wear white, it's for death, for funerals. You cannot wear a white Vietnamese dress for your wedding—and I forgot about that. So, I made my wedding dress Vietnamese style in white. The shape is Vietnamese, the style is Vietnamese, but the color is Western. It's the interpretation.

2 Thúy's 2020 novel *Em* is inspired by the evacuation of approximately three thousand Vietnamese and biracial children from Saigon in April 1975, a plan known as Operation Babylift. These children were subsequently adopted by families overseas, including in the US.

EK: It has been an honor and a privilege to talk to you. Thank you so much for being so generous with your time.

KT: Thank you, because I feel like I have never really thought about these issues before talking to you. I can now understand better what I do! [laughing].

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