

Narrative Identity and Subjectivity in Francophone Vietnamese Life Stories

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Francophone Vietnamese life stories construct narrative identity through memory, testimony, and historical experience, including exile. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, it argues that identity is not fixed and essential but a dynamic process of self-interpretation shaped by narration. Looking beyond the literary genre of autobiography, the study employs the broader category of life stories, encompassing autobiographical narratives, memoirs, testimonial writing, and autobiographical fiction. Through the analysis of works by Nguyen Ky Nguyen, Kim Thúy, Pham Van Ky, Linda Lê, Nguyen Tien Lang, Lý Thu Hồ, Lucien Trống, and Nguyễn Văn Thanh, it identifies two major forms of subjectivity: exilic and witness-based. The analysis demonstrates how these narratives transform lived experience into a space of self-reconstruction, where individual memory intersects with collective history. Ultimately, it finds narration in Francophone Vietnamese life stories to be a practice of identity negotiation, memory transmission, and resistance to forgetting.

Key words: Narrative Identity, Francophone Vietnamese Life Stories, Exile, Testimony, Subjectivity

INTRODUCTION

Life stories constitute a space in which questions of subjectivity, memory, and identity intersect. For Francophone Vietnamese writers in particular, narrating one's life is not merely an act of recollection but a way to reconstruct oneself in response to exile, war, political upheaval, and cultural rupture. In the face of fragmented memories shaped by displacement, imprisonment, migration, or loss, the narrative becomes a means of making sense of a fractured existence by creating connections between past and present, self and other, and individual experience and collective history.

Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity offers a valuable theoretical framework within which to explore these processes. According to Ricoeur, identity is not an immutable essence but a dynamic configuration that emerges through narration. By recounting and interpreting their lived experiences, human beings become intelligible to themselves through the stories they tell about their lives. From this perspective, life narratives are not simply records of events but interpretive acts through which subjectivity takes shape in dialogue with memory, temporality, and historical experience. Narrative thus functions as a mode of self-understanding, allowing individuals to negotiate tensions between their personal trajectories and broader historical forces.

Building on this understanding, this article examines how Francophone Vietnamese life stories published from the colonial period to the contemporary era construct and reconfigure narrative identity. Rather than limiting its focus to autobiography in the strictest sense, it adopts a broader understanding of life stories that incorporates autobiographical narratives, autobiographical novels, memoirs, and testimonial writing. Such an approach reflects the diversity of Francophone Vietnamese self-narratives, in which genre boundaries are often fluid, and writers' primary concerns lie less in formal classification than in the narrative reconstruction of lived experience.

The corpus under study includes works by Pham Van Ky, Nguyen Tien Lang, Lý Thu Hồ, Lucien Trống, Nguyen Ky Nguyen, Kim Thúy, and Linda Lê. Although these authors belong to different generations and literary traditions, their works share a common element in that their narratives emerge from situations of displacement, exile, cultural dislocation, imprisonment, war, or historical rupture. What unites these texts is, therefore, not homogeneity of genre but a shared effort to transform such lived experience into narrative, make sense of individual and collective trauma, and reconstruct the self through storytelling. The corpus is thus constituted according to the works' shared problematic of subjectivity rather than literary genre alone.

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From a sociological and anthropological perspective, life stories can be understood as evolving spaces in which multiple figures of each subject emerge: the individual shaped by familial and social context, the subject confronted with contradiction and loss, and the narrator negotiating between memory, testimony, and literary representation. In this way, as Roger Orofiamma suggests, life narratives reveal the plurality of the subject and the continual, multiplicitous reinterpretation of personal experience through narration¹. Their significance thus lies not only in what they recount but also in how they organize lived experience into meaningful configurations. Through this process, narrators reconstruct the significance, in turn, of their own lives and seek to inscribe themselves within history, whether by acknowledging its constraints or by asserting personal agency in the face of them.

Methodologically, this study adopts a comparative and thematic approach grounded in Ricœur's hermeneutics of narrative identity. Eschewing the analytical lens of literary genre, it focuses on recurring figures of subjectivity that emerge across various forms of life writing. Particular attention is paid to narratives of exile, displacement, testimony, and memory, as described above in relation to the corpus, as well as to the literary strategies through which they present the relevant experiences. Specifically, metaphor, fragmentation, temporal discontinuity, testimonial discourse, and the interplay between factual recollection and literary invention are examined as narrative devices that reveal the ongoing construction and reconfiguration of identity.

Based on this exploration, the study argues that Francophone Vietnamese life stories transcend individual self-expression to constitute a form of identity work through which their writers negotiate their places within history. Whether they recount experiences of exile, imprisonment, migration, or cultural displacement, these narratives reveal subjectivities under constant transformation, with the act of narrative becoming both a survival strategy and a means of inhabiting an uncertain world. By transforming lived experience into literary forms, these life stories resist historical erasure, preserve memory, and enable the continual reimagining of the self. Through them, narrative identity is revealed, once again, not as a stable essence but as an ongoing process of becoming.

THE RICŒURIAN FRAMEWORK OF NARRATIVE IDENTITY AND LIFE STORIES

As established above, the concept of narrative identity developed by Paul Ricœur provides a key frame-

work within which to understand contemporary subjectivity [2, p. 320]. As Ricœur states, "In my view, the true nature of narrative identity is only revealed in the dialectic between selfhood (*ipséité*) and sameness (*mêmeté*). In this sense, the latter represents the major contribution of narrative theory to the constitution of the self" [3, p. 167]. In contrast to the modern conception of the subject as a stable and autonomous entity, Ricœur argues that identity is itself constituted through narration, being shaped by memory, temporality, and interpretation. Narrative thus becomes the medium through which individuals make sense of their lives and maintain a sense of continuity despite change, rupture, and transformation.

The present study explores how narrative identity functions as a form of subjectivity through two interconnected dimensions: identity and time, which concerns the way in which narration organizes lived experience into a meaningful temporal sequence; and identity and otherness, which concerns the ways in which the narrative self is constituted through its relationship to others. These two dimensions are particularly relevant for examining Francophone Vietnamese life stories, whose narratives are frequently marked by experiences of exile, displacement, cultural rupture, imprisonment, and historical upheaval. To deepen the analysis, the study also incorporates Hannah Arendt's reflections on narrative as a political and existential act and Roland Barthes' conception of identity as textual fiction. Together, these perspectives allow us to consider life stories as spaces in which subjectivity is narrated, negotiated, and continuously reconfigured.

The inseparability of identity from time is one of the central tenets of Ricœur's theory. In *Temps et récit*⁴, Ricœur argues that individuals do not simply experience time passively but actively organize and interpret their lives through narrative. Such narrative provides a means of reconfiguring discontinuous experiences into a meaningful whole. Consequently, identity is not permanently determined but continually reconstructed through acts of narration. According to Ricœur, it must be understood through its triangular relationship with narration and time. He writes:

First, narrative identity is not a stable and flawless identity; just as it is possible to weave multiple plots around the same incidents [...], it is always possible to weave different, even opposing, plots about one's own life. In this regard, one could say that, in the exchange of roles between history and fiction, the historical component of the narrative about oneself pulls it toward a chronicle subject to the same documentary verifications as any other historical narrative,

while the fictional component pulls it toward imaginary variations that destabilize narrative identity. In this sense, narrative identity is constantly being made and unmade [...] A systematic study of autobiography and self-portrait would undoubtedly confirm this principled instability of narrative identity [4, p. 446–447].

Ricœur's conception of narrative identity thus moves beyond a static understanding of the self. For him, identity emerges through the interpretive work of narration, through which subjects connect their past experiences, present situations, and future possibilities to form a meaningful story. This process is articulated through the dialectic between sameness (the *idem*) and selfhood (the *ipse*): The former refers to continuity over time, the sets of characteristics that allow individuals to remain recognizable despite change, while the latter refers to the transformative dimension of identity and the capacity of subjects to reinterpret themselves through experience, memory, and interaction with others.

For sameness-identity (*identité-mêmeté*), Ricœur identifies four distinct meanings [5, p. 196–197]: (1) identity as uniqueness or numerical identity, as opposed to plurality; (2) identity as similarity, as opposed to difference; (3) identity as continuity, as opposed to discontinuity; and (4) identity as permanence, as opposed to diversity. It is precisely through the tension between these opposing dimensions that narrative identity emerges.

As Ricœur further observes:

As for the notion of the narrative unity of life, it should also be seen as an unstable mix between fabulation and lived experience. It is precisely because of the elusive nature of real life that we need the aid of fiction to retrospectively organize it after the fact, even if this means considering any form of emplotment borrowed from fiction or history as provisional and subject to revision [3, p. 191–192].

This insight is particularly relevant to life stories. Rather than a strictly defined literary genre, this category encompasses a broad range of narrative forms, including autobiographical narratives, memoirs, testimonial writing, autobiographical novels, and autofictional texts, through which individuals recount and interpret their lived experiences. What unites these forms is not a homogeneity of genre but the common effort to transform life into narrative and reconfigure experience to form meaningful patterns.

Life stories naturally reconstruct the past, as memory itself is not a passive repository of facts but an interpretive activity through which individuals give meaning to their experiences. Ricœur distinguishes between historical memory, which seeks to reconstruct

the past from an objective standpoint, and personal memory, which is selective, interpretive, and shaped by present concerns. Narrative identity, as a product of personal memory, is never a simple reflection of the past but a continual reconfiguration of lived experience through storytelling. Hannah Arendt develops a complementary perspective in *The Human Condition* ([1958] 1998)⁶: For Arendt, storytelling is essential because it allows human beings to inscribe their experiences within a shared historical and social world, with narrative granting form and meaning to events that might otherwise appear chaotic or unintelligible. Thus, by telling their stories, individuals situate themselves within history and render their existence intelligible to both themselves and others. Narrative, therefore, possesses not only a personal but also a political dimension. In this sense, life stories function as acts of self-legitimation, and writing becomes a means of negotiating identity through time and relations with others.

For Ricœur, too, identity is constituted not only through temporality but also through alterity. The self never exists in isolation but emerges through its relations with others. This relational dimension is particularly visible in life narratives, where the subject constantly negotiates their stance between multiple positions: the “I” who narrates, the “I” who is narrated, and the “I” perceived by others.

Identity, therefore, is always mediated, being constructed through a complex interplay of memory, narration, and social recognition. Roland Barthes radicalizes this perspective by emphasizing the fictional dimension: In *Le Plaisir du texte* (1973), he writes, “Perhaps the subject returns, not as an illusion, but as a fiction. A certain pleasure is derived from imagining oneself as an individual, from inventing one last fiction: the fiction of identity” [7, p. 98]. For Barthes, then, self-narration is not the discovery of an authentic essence but the invention of a textual self, and identity is a narrative construction, continually revised and rewritten. This perspective is particularly illuminating in relation to narratives shaped by exile, migration, and cultural hybridity, in which the self is already marked by fragmentation and discontinuity. From the combined perspectives of Ricœur, Arendt, and Barthes, contemporary subjectivity emerges as a narrative construction. Identity is shaped through the interpretation of memory, encounters with alterity, and the stories individuals tell about themselves. In this respect, in a world increasingly characterized by migration, displacement, and cultural hybridity, the concept of narrative identity offers us a means of understanding how subjects create meaning and continuity amid uncertainty.

The question of subjectivity acquires particular relevance in the context of Francophone Vietnamese life stories. Marked by the presence within them of exile, war, cultural rupture, imprisonment, and historical violence, these narratives reveal subjects continually engaged in processes of self-reconfiguration. Yet, as theorists such as Judith Butler⁸ and Trinh Minh-Hà⁹ have argued, identity creation cannot be reduced to a coherent process of narrative synthesis. Diasporic and postcolonial experiences often expose the limits of narrative coherence, and the subject, in such contexts, often appears not simply fragmented but fundamentally unstable, constituted through their very absence, their displacement, and the impossibility of complete self-representation.

From this perspective, life stories cease to function as projects of reconciliation and become, instead, spaces of tension, exposure, and negotiation, in which writing the self is less an attempt to recover an original identity than an ethical and existential practice of survival, memory, and testimony. Francophone Vietnamese life stories thus challenge essentialist notions of identity and reveal subjectivity as an ongoing process of becoming.

Within these narratives, two major categories of subjectivity emerge: (1) placeless subjectivity, characterized by displacement, exile, and the continual search for belonging; and (2) witness subjectivity, characterized by the ethical imperative to testify to personal and collective experiences of historical upheaval.

The analysis that follows employs these two categories as a guide, examining how different forms of life stories within the corpus articulate the relevant configurations of subjectivity and participate in the ongoing construction of narrative identity. Since the second half of the twentieth century, life writing and self-narrative forms have attracted growing attention across literature, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and philosophy¹⁰. This renewed interest reflects a broader return to narrative and the question of the subject. As Álvares notes:

Thus, the literary production of the 1980s reclaims “outdated notions” such as character and story. The return to narrative has led to other returns: that of transitivity (the representation of what is external to the work) and also the return of the subject. The subject is grasped not only in the rehabilitation of the character but especially in autofiction, which emerges in the literary scene as a hybrid form that, by taking the autobiographical through the lens of the novelistic, assumes that the truth of the subject has the structure of fiction. By narrating their life, the one who

writes autofiction revisits the question of the relationship between life and writing – life and work – and, thereby, a whole set of issues revolving around the question of the author [¹¹, p. 95].

From this perspective, life stories occupy a privileged position at the intersection of memory, testimony, fiction, and history. They thus provide particularly fertile terrain for the examination of how narrative identity is constructed, contested, and transformed in Francophone Vietnamese literature.

FROM EXILE TO NARRATIVE IDENTITY

Exile occupies a central place in Francophone Vietnamese life stories. More than simply a geographical displacement, exile constitutes a profound rupture, affecting memory, belonging, and the continuity of the self. It disrupts the relationship between past and present, homeland and host country, and individual experience and collective history. In Ricœurian terms, it threatens the continuity of narrative identity by fragmenting the temporal coherence through which individuals understand themselves. In the face of such significant disruption, narration becomes a privileged way of reconstructing meaning: Through storytelling, the subject seeks to reconnect dispersed experiences, reinterpret the past, and reconfigure a self destabilized by historical upheaval. In Francophone Vietnamese literature, this narrative reconstruction takes a range of forms. Some writers seek continuity through testimony and memory, while others embrace fragmentation, wandering, or cultural in-betweenness as constitutive dimensions of identity. Despite these differences, however, their life stories share a common function: transforming the experience of exile into a narrative process through which subjectivity becomes intelligible.

Nguyen Ky Nguyen and Kim Thúy illustrate two complementary approaches to reconstructing identity through memory. In *Saigon après 75. Une histoire oubliée* (2013)¹², Nguyen Ky Nguyen intertwines personal experience with collective history, structuring his narrative according to the trauma of loss and displacement but also the necessity of preserving a memory threatened by oblivion. Writing thus becomes an act of testimony through which the narrator reclaims both his individual life and a forgotten historical experience. He writes:

A man's life at its beginning is like a raindrop – some fall on a rose, while others are lost in a drain. I have felt, in the deepest part of myself, the meaning of the word abandonment. I have accepted death and even

the idea of no longer being able to determine my own fate. Today, my youth in Vietnam remains a buried parenthesis in my memory. I close behind me a story that ended in March '77 [...] I would like to keep writing [12, p. 190–191].

Nguyen Ky Nguyen constructs his narrative identity through a discourse marked simultaneously by contingency, dispossession, and narrative reappropriation. The opening metaphor, “A man’s life at its beginning is like a raindrop – some fall on a rose, while others are lost in a drain,” immediately situates human existence in a world of uncertainty, in which individual destiny is not the unfolding of a coherent project but something exposed to chance, historical upheaval, and forces beyond the individual’s control. The subject thus emerges not as the sovereign author of their life but as a being at the mercy of events. This experience of dispossession becomes still more explicit in the recurring motifs of abandonment, death, and loss of agency: “I have felt, in the deepest part of myself, the meaning of the word abandonment. I have accepted death and even the idea of no longer being able to determine my own fate.” The self appears, here, at the very moment at which the continuity of existence is broken, when historical violence and exile interrupt the possibility of a linear life story, producing a subject confronted with the collapse of familiar points of reference. The narrative voice speaks from a position of rupture, where identity can no longer be grounded in social status, homeland, or biographical continuity. Yet this rupture does not lead to the disappearance of the self; on the contrary, it gives rise to a work of narrative reconfiguration. The description of the narrator’s youth in Vietnam as a “buried parenthesis” reveals a complex relationship between memory and identity, in which the past is neither fully present nor entirely absent: Instead, buried within the narrator’s memory, it remains suspended, awaiting reinterpretation. The metaphor suggests that the subject’s lost homeland continues to inhabit their present existence, not as a recoverable reality but as a narrative horizon through which they continue to understand themselves. The final affirmation, “I would like to keep writing,” thus acquires decisive significance. Writing no longer functions merely as testimony but as a mode of existence. Faced with the experiences of exile and historical discontinuity, the subject maintains a sense of continuity not through territorial belonging but through narration itself, with the act of writing reconnecting dispersed fragments of experience and transforming them into a meaningful life story. In this sense, identity does not precede narration but

emerges through it. The self survives because it continues to narrate itself. Nguyen Ky Nguyen’s discourse thus embodies Ricœur’s conception of narrative identity as a dynamic process through which the subject negotiates between rupture and continuity, loss and reappropriation, and memory and reinterpretation. The narrative does not restore an original unity of the self; rather, it allows the subject to inhabit the fractures of history by integrating them into a continually evolving story. In this context, exile ceases to be simply a historical event and becomes the very condition through which identity is narrated, interpreted, and reconstructed.

A different but complementary configuration appears in Kim Thúy’s *Ru*. While Nguyen Ky Nguyen constructs continuity through testimony, Kim Thúy foregrounds fragmentation itself as a mode of self-representation, with her novel composed of brief, discontinuous narrative fragments that lie between poetic prose and flashes of recollection. Such formal discontinuity reflects an identity marked by exile and displacement. The title itself encapsulates the dual aspect of dynamic movement and static memory: In French, *ru* designates a small stream, whereas in Vietnamese, it refers to a lullaby. Movement and rootedness, departure and memory, thus coexist within the same signifier.

The fragmented structure of *Ru* transforms narrative form into a reflection of subjectivity, in which memory emerges through discontinuous impressions rather than chronological reconstruction. As Kim Thúy writes, “My life had the duty to continue my mother’s. But the history of Vietnam, that History with a capital H, thwarted my mother’s plans” [13, p. 11–12]. The intrusion of such History into personal destiny reveals how collective events fracture individual lives, leaving inherited displacement, in turn, to become a defining component of identity. Similarly, when the narrator recalls that her mother “threw the accents of our names into the water when she made us cross the Gulf of Siam thirty years ago” [13, p. 12], the loss of diacritical marks symbolizes a broader process of cultural transformation in which language itself becomes a locus for the experience and negotiation of exile.

The significance of exile in *Ru* is not, however, limited to loss. It also creates possibilities for renewal and reconfiguration: “One horizon always hides another, and so it goes on to infinity, to the unspeakable beauty of renewal, to the intangible rapture [...] A country is no longer a place, but a lullaby” [13, p. 142]. The homeland is no longer a geographical territory but a narrative and affective space reconstructed through

memory. In this respect, *Ru* exemplifies Ricœur's notion of narrative identity, with the lost homeland surviving not through a physical return but through narrative reappropriation.

If Nguyen Ky Nguyen and Kim Thúy foreground memory and testimony, Pham Van Ky and Linda Lê explore a different dimension of exile: the experience of inhabiting an in-between space. Consequently, their works are less concerned with recovering the past than with negotiating the instability produced by cultural displacement. Pham Van Ky embodies a form of intercultural subjectivity situated between East and West: Having adopted French as his principal language of literary expression, he nevertheless remains haunted by Vietnam as a lost point of reference, and his writing is characterized by tensions, contradictions, and oscillations between cultural worlds. As Jean-Jacques Mayoux observes:

But you create within an extraordinary void, in an abyss of absence, your imagination fixed on your lost country, just as James Joyce's was on Dublin. Is this the source of the magic in the world you evoke? Perhaps it is now, in the Orient, at the heart of this play of appearances. And yet, far from the Orient, at the very core of this literary game. Mallarmé created you by helping you to destroy yourself, so that you might become, in his land, the inventor of an essential and nonexistent Vietnam. Far from having lost your language, your land, and your sky only to be condemned to silence or mere verbosity, it seems that your reality as a writer has emerged from these very negations [14, p. 717].

For Pham Van Ky, exile creates a rupture between lived experience and belonging, but this rupture itself becomes the source of narrative identity. The "essential and nonexistent Vietnam" identified by Mayoux in Pham Van Ky's work is not a real homeland recovered through memory but a narrative homeland recreated through writing: Thus, in Ricœurian terms, the self is constituted here not through fidelity to an origin but through the continual reinterpretation of loss. Exile thus functions as a condition of narrative reconfiguration, transforming absence into a mode of self-understanding.

Linda Lê radicalizes this experience of in-betweenness: Unlike Pham Van Ky, who attempts to construct a narrative bridge between cultural worlds, she embraces instability as the very condition of exilic existence. In *Tu écriras sur le bonheur*¹⁵, she presents exile not as temporary but as a permanent state of dispossession:

For the exile, entering literature will therefore be under the sign of loss rather than heritage. By dispossession rather than ownership. He comes from nowhere.

He has abandoned everything. Including the resonant breath of his homeland. All he has left is a single identity: that of the traitor. He is a renegade twice over. A traitor to his country. A traitor to his language [15, p. 334].

This passage reveals a conception of identity founded upon loss rather than continuity. The exile no longer belongs to a stable territory, language, or cultural tradition, instead occupying a condition that recalls the notion of deterritorialization¹⁶ and Edward Said's figure of the displaced individual¹⁷. The subject thus becomes permanently suspended between worlds. For Linda Lê, however, this absence of belonging is not merely deprivation; it is also a condition for literary creation. Writing emerges from dispossession; the exile writes because they have no stable place available to them. In this respect, her reflections resonate with Maurice Blanchot's conception of writing as a space in which the subject undergoes a process of disappearance¹⁸. Here, identity is not recovered through narrative but continually deferred.

Taken together, these four writers' works reveal widely divergent configurations of narrative identity under conditions of exile. Nguyen Ky Nguyen reconstructs continuity through testimony; Kim Thúy transforms fragmentation into a mode of self-representation; Pham Van Ky seeks to mediate between cultural worlds; and Linda Lê embraces wandering and indeterminacy. Their personal trajectories differ, yet all four share a common experiential horizon marked by displacement, rupture, and the necessity of self-reconfiguration. From a Ricœurian perspective, what unites these life stories is thus not a common literary genre but a common narrative function. Each writer transforms their exile into an interpretive process through which they, as a narrative subject, seek to understand themselves and their place in history. Narrative identity thus appears not as the recovery of a stable essence but as an ongoing negotiation between memory and loss, continuity and rupture, and belonging and displacement. Through these life stories, exile becomes not merely a historical condition but a privileged narrative site for observing the continual reconstruction of subjectivity.

TESTIMONY AND WITNESS SUBJECTIVITY

Within Francophone Vietnamese life stories, testimony occupies a distinctive role. Unlike narratives of exile, which are primarily concerned with questions of displacement and belonging, testimonial narratives are structured around an ethical imperative to

bear witness to events. What is at stake in this context is not merely the recollection of personal experience but the transformation of that lived experience into a means of mediation between individual memory and collective history. In this sense, testimony constitutes a privileged mode of narrative identity creation, in which the subject narrates not only to remember but also to attest, transmit, and preserve experiences that risk erasure from collective memory. As Ricœur argues:

Bearing witness involves a type of subjectivity affected by an inner and imperative necessity, which is expressed in the statement “I testify that”, meaning “I attest to it”. However, bearing witness also engages the self in its relationship with others, before whom or on whose behalf one testifies — “one testifies for”. For oneself and for others — the communities or traditions that receive and understand it — but which one may also challenge as unjust, the witness makes present that which they attest to. They are, therefore, a form of mediation. In bearing witness, the witness speaks of themselves but also of a form of otherness within them, capable of mobilizing them and to which they bear witness. As an interpreter of the absolute in their testimony, testimony itself is to be interpreted [19, p. 435].

Ricœur’s reflections are particularly relevant to Francophone Vietnamese life stories because those stories reveal how subjectivity is shaped through historical upheaval, political violence, war, imprisonment, and social transformation. In this context, testimony is never limited to the affirmation of factual truth; it also constitutes a process of self-reconstruction through which the witness seeks to make sense of a fractured existence. Narrative identity emerges precisely from this transformative effort.

Nguyen Tien Lang occupies a singular position within this corpus. Unlike Kim Thúy, Linda Lê, or Lucien Truong, whose writings are directly shaped by their experiences of migration, displacement, or long-term exile, Nguyen Tien Lang belongs to an earlier generation. His *Les Chemins de la révolte* was published in France in 1953, shortly after his departure from Vietnam and his settlement in France, thus situating his testimony at the intersection of historical rupture and exile, but the narrative does not primarily recount his experience of geographical displacement. Instead, it revisits a traumatic period of imprisonment and political upheaval as seen from the distance created by exile. In this sense, the work functions simultaneously as a testimonial narrative and as a life story shaped by the writer’s separation from his homeland.

This rupture is expressed through a striking discourse of symbolic death and rebirth:

A new existence had begun for him yesterday. He was both dead and reincarnated. While Mandarin Nguyễn, the scholar Nguyen, was dying, a new Nguyễn was being born, confirmed in a new life. (Ah! Could one even call “this” a life?) Nguyễn, a prisoner. Prisoner of whom? Of what? Nguyễn the scholar was dead. Was he truly dead? Did the dead remember the living? Did the dead regret the life they had lived, their affections, their former loves? [20, p. 42].

As can be seen here, the narrative stages a profound crisis of identity. The former self — the mandarin, the intellectual, the cultivated man — appears symbolically dead, while a new and uncertain self emerges under conditions of imprisonment. The text’s repeated questioning reveals a subject deprived of the social, cultural, and symbolic frameworks that previously structured his existence, but the act of testimony prevents this dissolution from becoming absolute. Through narration, the witness reinterprets the rupture that has transformed his life and gradually configures a new sense of self. In Ricœurian terms, narrative identity thus emerges from the tension between continuity and discontinuity, between the life that has been lost and the life that must still be narrated.

A similar dynamic can be observed in the works of Lý Thu Hồ and Lucien Truong. Their life stories reveal subjects who have been profoundly affected by historical violence but seek, through their testimony, to restore meaning to the experience. Writing thereby becomes a form of survival, allowing individual suffering to be integrated into a broader historical narrative. In *Printemps inachevé* (1962), Lý Thu Hồ bears witness to the experiences of Vietnamese women caught in the turmoil of war, her narrative moving beyond personal confession to become part of a collective memory in which individual experience reflects a wider community of suffering. The metaphorical language used throughout the text transforms trauma into a narrative form capable of preserving memory: “Yes, Tuoi, Tran’s life was like a rose whose stem broke at the moment of its blooming, like a barely gilded dawn, tarnished by bad weather, like an unfinished spring” [21, p. 205]. The brief image of the “unfinished spring” represents an entire experience of interruption and loss, framing life as an existence deprived of fulfillment, suspended before its realization. Through such imagery, the testimony acquires both a personal and a collective dimension, the narrator speaking not only for herself but also for a generation shaped by war and uncertainty.

This movement from individual memory toward collective remembrance becomes even more explicit when the narrator declares:

— On your grave [...] I make the vow, for the rest of my life and in the hope of better days, to keep my heart intact and pure in reverence of your memory, to never step into another boat, no matter how enchanting it may be, to uphold my promise of loyalty to you, and to never leave this southern land where your ashes now rest, even though this land is shrouded in a veil of suffering and despair [22, p. 309].

The promise made before the dead transforms personal grief into ethical commitment; memory becomes a responsibility, and testimony becomes a means of preserving both individual and collective histories in the face of oblivion. This testimonial dimension is further developed in *Le Mirage de la paix*, in which Lý Thu Hồ explicitly presents herself as a witness to modern Vietnamese history:

I believe it is useful to write my “memoirs”. I am one of the direct witnesses of Vietnam’s contemporary history, from 1954 to 1984. I saw and lived through the events of my country during this troubled period of its history [...] My public life was therefore closely tied to the political events of my country, which allows me to retrace here the long, perilous, and bloody path my country endured during this time, only to finally sink definitively into oblivion [23, p. 14].

This insistence on being a “direct witness” legitimizes the narrative act, the subject claiming authority not through historical expertise but through lived experience. The repeated use of the first person situates the narrator at the intersection of private life and national history. Her personal destiny becomes inseparable from the collective fate of the nation, and her testimony functions as a form of mediation between individual memory and historical consciousness.

Lucien Tr ng’s *Enfer rouge, mon amour* (1980) extends this logic of witness subjectivity into the context of political imprisonment and reeducation camps. Here, testimony becomes a form of struggle against both personal physical destruction and historical silence. The narrative records not only events but also the psychological experience of surviving a system designed to erase its detainees’ individuality:

One night, we were awakened by gunshots, followed by the sound of galloping footsteps and a loud explosion coming from the minefield near the river. Everyone speculated about what had happened. Nam Son advised us to stay quiet, threatening us with the worst. The next day, we learned that the detainees from conex B had attempted to escape [...] Of the four

who survived the shooting, only two managed to flee; the other two stepped on the minefield [24, p. 42].

Beyond its documentary value, Lucien Tr ng’s testimony reveals a particular configuration of narrative identity. The narrator does not present himself as a hero, nor does he attempt to impose retrospective coherence on the chaos of his lived experience; instead, the narrative self emerges through the very act of witnessing. The repeated use of the collective pronoun “we” situates the narrator’s individual experience within a shared condition of suffering, transforming personal memory into collective testimony and constructing subjectivity less through self-assertion than through solidarity with others who endured the same ordeal. At the same time, while highlighting the fragility of human existence under conditions of extreme violence, the narrative symbolically restores the anonymous detainees’ presence within history by recounting their failed escape. Testimony thus becomes an act of ethical reparation, in which the dead and forgotten are reintegrated into collective memory through narrative. In Ric urian terms, the witness assumes the responsibility of speaking for those who no longer can, transforming personal remembrance into an act of transmission. This testimonial subjectivity is inseparable from the experience of survival: The narrator writes not because he has overcome the trauma but because that trauma continues to demand narration. The camp experience remains a constitutive part of the self, one that can only be approached through fragments of memory and scenes of violence. Narrative identity consequently emerges as a fragile reconstruction, situated between remembrance and loss, between the necessity of bearing witness and the impossibility of fully communicating the suffering endured. Writing becomes both an act of recollection and a means of preserving human dignity in the aftermath of historical violence.

This testimonial dimension extends beyond experiences of war and political imprisonment. In *Saigon-Marseille aller simple* (2012), Nguyễn Văn Thanh gives voice to another often-forgotten chapter of Vietnamese history: that of the *travailleurs indochinois* recruited and transferred to France for work during the colonial period. His life story bears witness not to a single traumatic event but to a prolonged experience of displacement, deprivation, and marginalization. Recalling life in the labor camps after the war, he writes:

The powder factory gradually began to slow down its activities for reasons unknown to us, and eventually shut down completely. Idleness, compounded by

food shortages and restrictions of every kind, soon began to affect people's minds. We relived the same sad process we had experienced aboard the *Yalou* during the crossing. The commanders, overseers, and their accomplices colluded like thieves, diverting our rations of food, tobacco, and soap for their own use or to sell on the black market. From then on, we were constantly hungry. And that hunger encouraged degrading behavior. The community began to fracture. "Pro" and "anti" factions confronted one another. Some sought favor with those in power in order to pick up a few crumbs. Others chose to reject the law of the jungle and to remain dignified [25, p. 117].

What is particularly striking in this testimony is the predominance, once again, of the collective "we": The witness narrates his experience not as an isolated individual but as a member of a community subjected to the same conditions of deprivation and abandonment. Subjectivity is, therefore, constructed collectively, with the narrator becoming the spokesperson for a group whose history has long remained invisible within both French and Vietnamese collective memory. His testimony thus moves beyond personal recollection to become an act of memorial restitution. At the same time, the narrative foregrounds an explicitly ethical thread that runs throughout many Francophone Vietnamese life stories. The experience of hunger is not merely presented as a material condition; it becomes a test of human dignity. Faced with scarcity and injustice, some laborers submit to what the narrator terms "la loi de la jungle," while others make efforts to preserve their moral integrity. Identity is thus defined not by social status or national belonging but by the capacity to remain human under conditions designed to erode solidarity and self-respect. In this sense, Nguyễn Văn Thanh's testimony shares important aspects with the witness narratives of Nguyen Tien Lang, Lý Thu Hồ, and Lucien Trọng. His narrative, however, extends the field of testimony beyond war and imprisonment to encompass a largely forgotten colonial experience. Through the act of narration, therefore, the witness restores visibility to those whose lives have been relegated to the margins of official history. His testimony consequently assumes the role of an act of historical justice, transforming individual memory into a collective claim to recognition.

CONCLUSION

Francophone Vietnamese life stories offer a privileged space in which to explore how subjectivity is constructed, negotiated, and transformed through narrative. Rather than approaching identity as a fixed

essence, these narratives reveal it as an ongoing process of interpretation shaped by memory, historical experience, and relations with others. Drawing on Paul Ricœur's theory of narrative identity, this study has shown how such life stories function as forms of self-(re)configuration through which their writers seek to make sense of rupture, displacement, suffering, and change. What unites the texts of the corpus addressed here is not their belonging to a single literary genre but their shared effort to transform lived experience into narrative, a common feature that holds despite their diversity. Whether such works take the form of autobiographical novels, memoirs, testimonial writing, or other models of self-narration, the act of storytelling within them serves as a means of organizing fragmented memories and reconstructing a meaningful relationship with the past. Narrative identity creation thus emerges not as the recovery of a stable self but as a dynamic process through which the subject continually interprets and reinterprets their own existence.

The analysis has highlighted two major configurations of subjectivity within Francophone Vietnamese life stories. Exilic subjectivity, exemplified by the works of writers such as Nguyen Ky Nguyen, Kim Thúy, Pham Van Ky, and Linda Lê, reveals how exile, displacement, and cultural dislocation generate new forms of self-understanding. Witness subjectivity, meanwhile, embodied in the works of Nguyen Tien Lang, Lý Thu Hồ, Lucien Trọng, and Nguyễn Văn Thanh, demonstrates how testimony transforms personal experience into shared memory and an ethical act of transmission. In both cases, narrative becomes a means of confronting historical rupture and preserving the continuity of the self in the face of loss. At the same time, significantly, these life stories show that narration is never purely a retrospective act. Writing does not simply record the past; it actively reshapes it. Through recollection, imagination, testimony, and interpretation, subjects reconstruct their places within history and redefine their relationships with community, homeland, and belonging. Narrative thereby functions not only as a mode of self-expression but also as a practice of survival, recognition, and resistance to forgetting. Ultimately, Francophone Vietnamese life stories invite us to reconsider identity as a narrative achievement rather than a predetermined condition. Emerging from histories of colonialism, war, exile, imprisonment, and displacement, they reveal how storytelling enables both individuals and communities to preserve memory, transmit experience, and continually reimagine themselves. In this sense, life stories are not only

records of lived experience but also spaces in which history, memory, and subjectivity are brought into dialogue and transformed through the act of narration.

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The author declares that they have no competing interests.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author carried out all stages of the research and was solely responsible for preparing and finalizing the manuscript.

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