

The Vietnamese Concept of a Feminine Ideal and the Images of Australian Women in Olga Masters' Stories

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Abstract:

Doing research on Olga Masters' life and writing helps me to understand the claim that Masters' writing often deals with many of the Australian women's matters such as taking care of the family, bringing up the children, building up their agency. Together with my own experience as a Vietnamese woman and helpful discussion with the experts in the field of Masters' writing, I put forwards a hypothesis that there are any similarities in Masters' portrayals of Australian women and the Vietnamese concept of a feminine ideal despite of cultural and geographical differences. The current paper investigates how women are portrayed in Olga Masters' writing from the point of view of Vietnamese traditional perceptions of an ideal woman who holds four essential characteristics: Industriousness, Appropriate Self-presentation, Communication Skills, and Virtue. I will explore the similarities in the reflection of that conception from the two different cultures of Vietnam and Australia. The paper will develop a textual discourse of Olga Masters' writing and attempt to show how, in spite of oceans apart, women both in Australia and Vietnam struggle to pursue the so-called feminine ideal.

1 In this paper I compare Olga Masters' portrayals of women with the ideals which are currently expected to be followed by Vietnamese women. The paper will investigate to what extend Olga Masters' work corresponds to the Vietnamese traditional expectation of feminine ideals which are based on four essential attributes: industriousness, appropriate self-presentation, good communication skills, and virtue.

2 Olga Masters is known for her writing career not simply as a female writer contributing to the canon of Australian literature or as someone who finished her first book at the age of 63, but also as a public intellectual offering critiques of Australian femininity. Masters was born Olga Lawler in 1919 and grew up in Pambula, a small country town in New South Wales, Australia.¹ Although she came to journalism early at the age of 15, Masters turned to writing fiction only in her fifties. Describing Masters' happy and satisfying feelings when she was accepted by the *Cobargo Chronicle*, Lewis writes: "From the moment she set foot in that newspaper office, Olga was bewitched. The smell of printer's ink, the clatter of the presses, the rush to get the paper ready for printing - it was something she knew was in her blood and she was happier than she had been for a long, long time" (27). Since then Masters' ambition for writing never stopped. It seems that working as a journalist (casual, part time, or full time) brought Masters lots of practical experience for writing fiction, and that her love of humanity and her careful observations of life never put her at a

¹ The information on Olga Masters is taken from Deirdre Coleman's *Olga Masters: Reporting Home - Her Writings as A Journalist* and Julie Lewis' *Olga Masters - A Lot of Living*.

loss of materials for stories. When asked in an interview with Jennifer Ellison about whether journalism helped or hindered her fiction writing, Masters stressed that journalism was “a great help, not a hindrance at all.” She further added that with fiction writing she didn’t find she had to change her style very much (218). Masters had several collection of stories and novels published between 1982 and 1988, namely *The Home Girls* (1982), *Loving Daughters* (1984), *A Long Time Dying* (1985), *Amy’s Children* (1987), *The Rose Fancier* (1988), all of which were very well received.

3 Her works of fiction made her a widely-admired participant at writers’ festivals and other literary occasions. In complimenting and recognizing Masters’ creative ability, Craig Munro, one of the judges of the SPACALS² award, described her as “one of the most talented writers [he’s] come across in the ten years or so [he’s] been reading fiction manuscripts” (qtd. in Lewis 127). Then in his covering letter to the University of Queensland Press, he added “Masters possesses not only the sure ability to tell a good story simply or effectively, but she has that rare quality, a genuinely original voice” (128). One of the critical works on Olga Masters is *Olga Masters: An Autumn Crocus* edited by McGaw and Sharrad in which most of the scholars who contribute essays argue that for Masters the ‘ordinary’ is a source of amazement. They try to answer the questions how this seemingly ordinary woman came to produce such extraordinary work. Deidre Coleman in *Olga Masters: Reporting Home* introduces her as a typical journalist who tries her best to reflect her own busy life as well as to record the rhythms and daily events of ordinary life in rural Australia with her rich imagination (xiii-xxxii).

4 It is notable that despite Masters’ own writing career, her writing features women in traditionally gendered roles, submitting to their family desires and acting as consummate homemakers. In one article, Katharine England claims that “Many of Olga Masters’ stories are about homes – homes and the families in them, and particularly about the women and girls of those families” (29). Most women are sketched in Masters’ stories as characteristically feminine, spending their time on housework, attending to the children, and preparing delicious meals for the whole family. Their place is in the home, the ‘good’ environment in which a woman undertakes responsibility for the spiritual and physical development of her children. One typical example is Mrs Jussep who “made scones every day before the afternoon milking” for the whole family (Masters “Scones Every Day” 3). The traits of traditional femininity can also be seen in Mrs Schaefer who “was a very particular

² The South Pacific Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies.

housekeeper, sweeping and scrubbing and shining her house, washing curtains when they showed the slightest sign of soiling, and she was fanatical about cleaning windows” (Masters “The Little Chest” 29). It is also demonstrated in Joan’s sacrifice in “The Children are Coming” when she refuses to go out to a Sunday movie or sit by the harbour with her husband because their adult children are coming to visit. Joan insists that “[*she*] should be out there in the kitchen doing things” (155). The image of traditional femininity can be exemplified in Carrie who sacrifices her own happiness to stay at home and attend to her blind father and household in “That Carrie One”. It can also be the young Enid in *Loving Daughters* who becomes fond of a newly arrived and handsome minister, but dares not express her love to him. These are just a few examples in Masters’ depiction of Australian women showing the traditional female virtues. It seems to me that some of Masters’ female characters really try their best to fulfil their domestic duties by being good wives, caring mothers, and industrious housekeepers. Her women are often community- and family-oriented.

5 From the last two years reading and studying Olga Masters’ work, together with my own experience as a Vietnamese woman and helpful discussion with the experts in Olga Masters studies, I put forward a hypothesis that there are similarities in Masters’ portrayals of traditional Australian women and the Vietnamese concept of a feminine ideal despite cultural and geographical differences. The idea for this paper is also inspired by a statement made by Olga Masters during a 1985 interview in which she claimed every story in her first book *The Home Girls* in some way “involves a home girl and because we are all home girls at heart.” The reference seems very relevant in the Vietnamese concept of ideal femininity when it mainly emphasises the feminine and familial roles women. I will now give a general overview of the Vietnamese concept of a feminine ideal before looking more closely at Masters’ writing, focusing on two central questions: first, how is the ideology of being feminine represented in Masters’ work? And second, to what extent does Masters’ work correspond to the Vietnamese concepts of feminine ideals?

6 Consistent with a common Vietnamese saying that ‘women hold up half the sky’, Vietnamese women have always been expected to be feminine, self-controlled, and virtuous, working and sacrificing themselves for the betterment of others. Femininity is defined in terms of softness, chastity, determination, and hard work, which are perceived as inner characteristics contributing to collective morality (see Furman; Wolf; Glover and Kaplan). Looking back into the cultural and social development of Vietnam, it is believed that the cultural heritage and traditional values of Vietnam have partly been derived from

Confucianism-the foundation of East Asian culture (see Keyes 185-88). One consequence of Confucianism in Vietnam was its impact on the status of women upon whom it imposed rigorous standards of feminine modesty and chastity. Confucian political culture emphasised the importance of family life for personal development and strengthened the Vietnamese family system with several cultural imperatives such as ancestor worship, filial piety, and a patriarchal family structure. Like many other countries in Eastern Asia, the Vietnamese ideal woman's characteristics are defined with the four essential characteristics of 'Industriousness, Appropriate Self-presentation, Communication skills, and Virtue' (see Binh, Van, and Khieu; Anh and Hung). The effects of modern development in Vietnam have caused many ideals to be changed. Nevertheless, these four attributes have maintained their cultural relevance and are still understood as the standard ideal of femininity in Vietnam. These values demonstrate that it is not just women's external appearance, but also the harmony between beauty of form and beauty of spirit which constitute perfect femininity (Anh; Nam). I will now comment on each idealised component of Vietnamese femininity and relate it to Masters' literary works.

Industriousness

7 To begin with, an ideal Vietnamese woman must be industrious both in her domestic and professional life. Women traditionally have been relegated to certain kinds of work (e.g. child rearing and housework, though certain occupations such as primary school teaching and nursing are also acceptable) (Lich 195-196). Generally, being 'good' at being a woman involves doing 'womanly' things at regular and appointed times. This ritualized behavior often involves to self-beautification, child-rearing, housework and cooking, all of which attests to this symbolic order. Being industrious implies a woman's involvement in female domestic labour. According to the Confucian concept, it is women's particular skill to take good care of family happiness, domestic work and raising children (Bich 212-15). In Vietnamese culture, the woman should undertake every task inside the house regardless of its difficulty, proceed with it in an orderly and efficient manner, and complete it in time. This is also what is meant by diligence in the Vietnamese views of a feminine ideal (Hy 68-69). This is a function of a familial woman and also gives women one advantage over men. Women may not compete with men in terms of physical strength but men may not compete with women for their domestic labour. Therefore, in Vietnamese culture, it is known that a good wife often symbolizes her husband's pride because she can assure a better domestic life for the whole family and provide better upbringing for the children (Bich 141). Industriousness also proves necessary if she wants to succeed in every social field she takes part in. Even

though the housewife is not endowed with any special professional qualifications, she can still achieve things that she desires. It is because she has the willingness and determination, which differentiates her from non-industrious women. There is folklore, though it is not just applied to women, saying that success includes 1% being a genius but 99% being industrious.³ It is accepted that an ideal woman should be hard working at home and at work.

8 Olga Masters' literary texts often suggest that society assumes female characters' place is in the private sphere, in the home, where they are portrayed as being in charge of all that goes on in their kitchens. Generally, female characters are portrayed as people who are expected to uphold the values of stability and morality. They must make their homes a special place, a refuge where their men can escape from the highly competitive, unstable, immoral world. It is undeniable that a woman's place was once in the home. In the past, women were merely required to fulfil the role of mother and housewife. As a mother, a wife, and a woman, and also as a writer during a time with many conflicts and changes in women's roles and opportunities, Olga Masters provides readers with truthful account of what it was like for home-bound women in the past. In her stories, she depicts many Australian women who show caring and nurturing features. There is the image of Mrs Schaefer who spends the majority of her time and energy caring for her family. In displaying her morally good character and her unfailing domesticity, Mrs Schaefer can be taken as representing the ideal compliant and domestic woman that is epitomized and considered a necessity in creating a good family life in the nineteen-thirties, but the story also implies that she often resents the situation she has been forced into. Evidence for this is shown when she bursts into tears when her husband shows no respect to her at the tennis court. She seems to fulfil her duties only as mere performance in order to meet the expectations of society and to compensate for her loneliness. Mrs Schaefer is portrayed as being a conventional homemaker in the sense that she does nearly all cleaning and caring for her husband and children, so fulfilling the household responsibilities expected of her.

9 When talking about women in the family, Masters often identifies them as 'a housekeeper' as in 'Mrs Schaefer was a very particular housekeeper' ("The Little Chest" 29) or 'Carrie was aware that she was trapped forever as her father's housekeeper' ("That Carrie One" 262). What emphasises Mrs Schaefer's industriousness is that she attends to every detail of the house, from the wooden drawer knobs to the curtains and the windows, from the chest in the hall to the glass and china in the kitchen. For every piece of the furniture, she

³ The English version is that success is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.

shows careful consideration and scrupulous care. She also spends the whole week cleaning and washing. She even makes it one of her Saturday tasks 'to polish the little chest'. She only leaves the house when all of her household duties have been fulfilled (e.g. "Providing the glass and china were washed and stacked on clean, fresh paper in cupboards, the house was without dust, and of course the little chest shined,... she would join the crowd of spectators at the tennis court") (Masters "The Little Chest" 31). She is so fanatical about household work, she undertakes a great deal of domestic labour. Obviously, Masters' depiction of Mrs Schaefer reflects the industrious nature of a housekeeper in the family as a typical example of femininity.

10 Enid in *Loving Daughters* is another example of Masters' portrayal of Australian women's industriousness. Enid is a serene and lovely girl, devoted to the care of her widowed father, Jack, and the household. She was described by van Herk in "Missing Men and Unmothered Sisters" as being "...steady, reliable, and proficient,..., replacing her mother in domestic science (cooking, cleaning, and caretaking)" (73). When writing home, Edwards, a new minister in the town, describes her as a hard-working and 'capable homemaker' and a good cook. Edwards keeps thinking of Enid in terms of her smiling competence with stoves and cool safes, with smooth linen and shining crockery, with the fragrant and beautiful harvest of her ordered garden (Masters *Loving Daughters* 120). He even talks to himself that "a man with support from a wife as beautiful and charming as that would do a better job for the church" (Masters *Loving Daughters*).

11 In Masters' stories, we can see a close link between women's virtues and domestic duties. A woman is to care for the inner (private) world, while a man cares for the outer (public) realm. Most of the time, Masters' women stick to the gardens or kitchens. They keep their hands busy all day; sometimes they complain about their hard work, but it does not mean they stop caring and serving the family. This is the image of Tad's mother in "A Dog that Squeaked". Although she shows no interest in the household tasks - "her face was shut like a window and her mouth not a kissing mouth" - she still does them. As women, they try their best and work hard to fulfil their duties. Sometimes, I think women in Masters' stories, frequently older women, are seen as feminine not because of their appearance but for their domestic skills. Apart from that, it also seems that doing housework may help women to hide their feelings and loneliness. Since they cannot control the uncontrollable things in their life, they attempt to control their physical environment. They view their homes as extensions of themselves.

Appropriate Self-representation

12 The second important characteristic of a traditional Vietnamese woman is signified in her appropriate self-presentation. Self-presentation, also known as impression management, is the effect on others from their manner of performance (Leary and Allen 1198-1203). People's outcomes in life, and how they live and interact on a daily basis with others, are greatly affected by the impressions other people form of them. People generally want to be liked and well regarded, because being thought of in a positive manner has better social and material consequences than being thought of in a negative manner (Leary and Allen 1193-94). Therefore, they should recognize how their presentation of themselves can affect that. Appropriate self-presentation does not mean a woman possesses the beauty of a pageant queen or fulfils the commercial concepts of beauty such as being tall, thin, or sexy. To Vietnamese people, beauty is about personality and productivity, not just 'gorgeousness' or 'cuteness' (Van). A woman should be full-figured, without resort to cosmetic surgery. This virtue also emphasizes the fact that under no circumstances should women appear in untidy or sloppy apparel. A good outer impression can bring them many advantages in life. Obviously, a clean, tidy, and careful self- presentation shows both self-respect and respect for others.

13 It is suggested that a woman's self-presentation is reflected by her natural beauty. Metaphorically, a woman's beauty and the natural world are often compared to each other. Women's beauty may evoke the natural environment: their eyes, faces and curves mirror flowers. Olga Masters was enchanted by the beauty of the world around her, so in her writing she would consider nature as an ideal representation of womanhood, as can be seen in the following examples: "Sybil, who was twenty and ripe like a black cherry, her body a piece of fertile ground ready for seed,..." (Masters *Loving Daughters* 147) or "[Una's] hair had been curved over her cheeks, covering her ears like birds' wings" (116).

14 From the other angle of self-presentation, there is a saying that 'no woman looks ugly; there are just women who do not know how to make themselves look beautiful'—she must learn to make the most of herself. Sharing the same view, Birtwistle and Tsim state that the feminine stereotype depicts women as being very concerned about their bodies, their clothing, and their appearance in general (664-65). Their figures and clothing, their attractiveness is the criteria by which they most often are judged. Not surprisingly then, women are conscious of their visibility. This is true in the case of the Herbert girls in Masters' *Loving Daughters* where both pay lots of attention to their appearance and dress to appear attractive. Masters notes that "the reputation of Herbert girls who are well-dressed,

gadding and unencumbered has spread far beyond the borders of Wyndham” (164). A desire to appear attractive is revealed when Enid, the elder Herbert girl hurriedly changed her clothes and “tore off her apron” knowing that Edwards had come to visit her family. She wants to her look best in Edwards’s eyes. Amy in *Amy’s Children* serves as another example. As a way of presenting herself to others during her early arrival in city, Amy promises to herself that “I’ll dress nicely and always clean my shoes” (35). The idea of being beautifully and cleanly dressed not only meets her need to look good but also satisfies her desire for social status. People will treat her differently because of her visually pleasant appearance.

15 The notion of self-presentation also indicates the modesty and appropriateness of how women dress and appear to others. One example is Martha in Masters’ “A Spread of Warm Blood”. Before going out to a social gathering, standing in front of the mirror, she “makes sure the neckline was positioned exactly right because she is proud of her neck and shoulders” (142). In many cases, women understand the effect their clothes have and assume a modest pose, imbued with ‘softness’, a quality believed to be perfectly female in many cultures. For example, at the social gathering, Martha creates a good impression on others with

a good view of [her] in the blouse, the lantern above her giving the rust colour a sheen and whitening her arms and darkening her hair, dressed looser so that fine hairs escaped the coils on her ears and were burnished too, like fine grass turned gold by the sun. (150)

Communication skills

16 Communication skill is classified as the third attribute of an ideal woman, who is characterized as speaking well and articulating words with grace and tenderness. Vietnamese society often marks a woman’s femininity by how her voice is pitched, by her excessive politeness and hesitation to speak (Nam). Women should speak words which are gentle, pleasing to the ear, and loveable - words which reach the heart and are courteous, desired by many and agreeable to many. She should speak politely in a light, warm, but not harsh or high-pitched tone. There is a Vietnamese saying that “your speech costs you nothing so speak in a manner that pleases the listeners.” A good woman should know when and what to say and how to broach a problem. She should be gentle and flexible when communicating with parents, her husband and those around her (Bich 74). Her manner of communicating also shows her confidence and knowledge and the listeners can easily judge her according to how she speaks. Thus she must not boast about herself; instead she must be modest, allowing her accomplishments to speak for themselves.

17 As Matthew Budd claims "you are what you say" (1), communication skills can be rated as one of many essential features representing women's femininity. Echoing this point, in his research Braun argues that women tend to use more intensifying adverbs such as "very" or "really" and women's sentence structures involve the more frequent use of tag questions, questions in general, and hedges (qtd in Voegeli 5-6). He also adds that, together with a female style of conversation that is more polite and contains indirect orders rather than imperatives, this could be categorized as an absence of dominant behaviour in conversation. This can be seen in Masters' writing about women's femininity.

18 In *Amy's Children*, when discussing the matter of falling in love with a married man, Kathleen tries to persuade her mother, Amy, to end that love affair, sounding very persuasive and determined. In order to achieve her aim, Kathleen is still using "her amiable, even pleasant tone" though Amy becomes so frustrated (Masters *Amy's Children* 139). Consequently, Amy listens and recognizes that: "Kathleen's voice was a kind she had never heard before. She thought of rain falling on a tree, sending the leaves brushing against each other making a whispery sound, a light and slithery noise, so gentle it was hardly audible. Hardly a noise at all, a precious sound, thin but strong, only ears trained hard would hear the vibrancy" (139). This suggests that communication skill is not only one important feature of femininity but is a tool to broach a problem in a feminine way.

19 In the novel, *Loving Daughters*, the smart and handsome minister Colin Edwards becomes impressed not only by the sweet appearance of Una but also by her 'amiable voice' which makes her more sexually appealing to him. Though after their marriage, Edwards sometimes shows his disappointment in Una's indifference to housework, he cannot help meeting her requests whenever she whispers to him in a soft and naïve voice: "Carry me!" Una said. "Pretend I've hurt my leg". He bowed his head partly to hoist her on his back, partly to shut out the frowning face of the church" (305). Edwards agreed to carry Una as requested and by doing so he also wanted to evade the scrutiny of the Church or the people therein.

20 Masters' women also show feminine characteristics in the way they suggest or ask someone to do things. They tend use modals, tag questions; hedge words such as 'I think', 'kind of', and 'sort of' because modals and these words can be used to express hesitancy. For example, when Una wants to go for a walk, she does not put a direct request to Edwards but only suggestion "We will go for a little walk and post it, shall we?" (Masters *Loving Daughters* 249). With that soft command, she makes it impossible for Edwards to say no

even if he would rather do something else. Obviously, good communication skills are not only a secret ‘weapon’ of women but also symbolize a feminine ideal.

Virtue

21 Finally, virtue is another important indicator of an ideal woman in the Vietnamese concepts. People always want to know whether a woman has been well brought up. According to how she behaves to others, people can show the appreciation or disregard. Therefore, women must be careful and sensitive in everything they do if they want to retain a good image in others’ minds. A woman occupies many positions in life and is expected to fulfil all of them. She must show her responsibility as a dutiful daughter, a devoted wife and caring mother, as well as a conscientious worker (Bich 108-10; Jamieson 134). In terms of marital virtue, an ideal woman is expected to be both faithful and honest. She treats her husband well and always tries to support her marriage because it is a long-term commitment in her life. A good woman should place a high value on the relationship and marriage. When married, it is totally unacceptable for Vietnamese women to engage in affairs or flirt with the opposite sex (O’Harrow 174-76) (in theory, men are not supported in doing this either, but they are not condemned the same way if they do). Women are expected to be strong, upright, loyal, and able to keep their dignity in any circumstances. Traditionally, women, viewed primarily in the relationships to husbands and families, have been expected to make sacrifices (Bich 37-42). According to tradition, it would be better for a widow to live single and support her children than to lose her virtue by remarrying (Van). This concept puts more pressures on widows, even very young ones, to stay with their husband’s family and not remarry.

22 According to Rosalind Hursthouse, a virtue “is the concept of something that makes its possessor good: a virtuous person is a morally good, excellent or admirable person who acts and feels well, rightly, as she should” (8). Hursthouse presents an attractive picture of virtue, for the virtuous person knows how to act in a morally appropriate way and can be relied on to do so.

23 In Masters’ writing, most of the female characters are teenagers or mature women. They show their great concern for being considered ‘a virtuous lady’ as illustrated in the character of Amy, a mother of three daughters, whose husband goes away to earn a living. Having the appearance of an 18-year-old-girl, Amy still looks attractive and always dreams of a romantic life so she develops a secret affair with her boss Lance Yates. However, she understands that this is a taboo. It is an immoral act for a married woman to have a love affair. She tries her best to forget Yates by changing her job and controlling her emotion.

When they see each other again after a short separation, Amy is still attracted to his manly appearance. However, as a married woman Amy has to “curb an impulse to reach out and take hold of Lance’s wrist, a nice strong one attached to a yellowish hand.” Her face reddens and she has to hide her passion by looking at the sea (Masters *Amy's Children* 157).

24 In *Loving Daughters*, the two Herbert girls are obsessed by the arrival of a gentlemanly minister but dare not disclose their feelings. They try to out-keen each other to impress him, deepening the rivalry that already exists between them. Even when Edwards and Una are married, Enid never stops loving him. However, as a girl, she only secretly dreams of one day being his wife or tries to capture an intimate image of him by “[smelling] his body on the sheet she held as close to her face as she dared” (Masters 267).

25 It is suggested that in whatever situation of life female characters are portrayed, from the cradle to the grave, a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper, and humility of mind is required of them. Vietnamese ideas of female virtue are not only concerned with chastity but also with obedience, because in Vietnamese culture, fidelity and wifely obedience is presented as a model of feminine virtue, a virtue synonymous with a feminine submission that grounds the patriarchal order of the country (Binh, Van, and Khieu; Anh and Hung; Nam). Similarly, many female characters in Masters’ stories are portrayed as examples of the virtue that a woman should be obedient to her parents (when young), and her husband (when married). It is the image of Carrie Grant who is the eldest of the three daughters of her blind father in “That Carrie One”:

It was a natural progress that Carrie stay on in the house and care for him after her mother died. Carrie was twenty-five and not likely to marry.... Carrie was aware that she was trapped as her father’s housekeeper. The grief was already running from her face, taking the softness of it. The pupils of her tearless eyes had sharpened to arrow points. (Masters 261)

26 The description suggests that Carrie completes her exhausting duties with endurance and without any complaints. She may continue to behave with submissive devotion to her father for the whole life though sometimes she still dreams of having a job in a post-office or a shop—it suggests that Carrie may resent the situation she has been forced into. Mentioned in Masters’ *The Home Girls* are other traditional women like the mother in “The Snake and Bad Tom” who dares not show her protection for her son who is, in the father’s eyes, ‘bad’ Tom. In that story, the power of the father is so strong that the mother usually asks the kids to “behave when Father comes” otherwise it would turn into a bad day (170). The examples of Carrie and the mother illustrate that obedience or devotion to the family becomes their nature. This point also implies the fact that on one hand, Masters represents fulfilling household

tasks as one of popular indicators of traditional femininity; on the other hand she may show some disapproval in that kind of commitment.

27 As mentioned earlier, the important roles for Vietnamese women are still current in the conception of womanhood. It is believed that all the characteristics of 'Industriousness, Appropriate Self-presentation, Communication Skills, and Virtue' are indispensable in a woman (Binh, Van, and Khieu; Anh and Hung). The combination of modernization and industrialization and the persistence of traditional attitudes serve to create a unique set of tensions and strains on Vietnamese women. Women in contemporary Vietnamese society are still expected to be 'good daughters, wives, and mothers' even though the importance of their daughter/wife/mother role has been significantly reduced by demographic and technological changes. Meanwhile, qualities such as domesticity, nurturance, and softness that are believed to be uniquely female remain central to the way men view women.

Conclusion

28 However, her emphasis on traditional female roles, Masters can also be seen as a feminist writer. She is quite aware that motherhood and women's roles are not invariable and that they alter with community requirements, economy, and the women's own desires and needs. Therefore, she builds up the character Amy in *Amy's Children* as a young woman who is determined to break the traditional country-town concepts of being a wife and raising her family during the years of the Depression. Amy tries her best to get out of the circle of fatalism, deciding to leave her children with her parents to seek a better life in the city. Another example of Masters' feminism is Mrs Carroll in "The Teacher's Wife". Being known as a small, dark woman with six children, she never bothers with the garden or household chores but 'got out of the house as often as she could ... [to] play tennis ... in a dress shorter than those the other women wore' with the determined thought of 'being the first' on the Cobargo Agricultural and Horticultural Committee (Masters 76). These actions and attitudes often symbolise not only that these women have broken out of the narrow boundaries that society has sought to impose, but also their freedom of spirit and disregard of social conventions.

29 It seems to me that Masters' female characters really want to stand in between the two poles of traditional femininity and the modern version. Masters is thus looking for two kinds of 'heroines' in her writing. She wants inspiring professional 'role-models' of femininity but she also wants rebellious female images, a womanhood of shared passion and suffering, a woman who sobs and struggles and rebels. On the one hand, they try their best to fulfil their

domestic duties, being a good wife, a caring mother, and an industrious housekeeper. On the other hand, they still want to prove themselves, fighting for their freedom, escaping from the burden of housekeeping and domestic responsibility. Masters' celebration of strong, subversive female characters is contrasted with images of traditional femininity and by doing so, she reinforces their personalities rather than criticizing them.

30 It is notable that most of Olga Masters' women characters are living country areas in the period between 1920s and 1930s, the period just after the Second World War as indicated by Geordie Williamson: "[Masters' fiction] take as their background the Great War's aftermath, the biting Depression years, the vast disruptions of World War Two and the creeping modernity that followed" (127) – she was writing about a period that is earlier than the time she herself started writing. She was writing about it, looking back from the perspectives of 1970s or 1980s and although it does not mean that her concepts about how women should behave have changed totally, they have changed quite a lot. Women are not supposed to strictly abide by the aforementioned attributes: they become more economically independent, intellectual, politically conscious, and even sexually emancipated in some extents. However, the standards as industriousness, appropriate self-presentation, good communication skills, and virtue still keep their importance and practicality in society.

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