

LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL

EXAMINING THE CULTURAL IMPRINTS OF SOUTH-WESTERN REGIONAL RIVERS IN NGUYEN VIET HA'S SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT: Culture and literature jointly embody a dialectical relationship. Culture dominates all aspects of literary life while literature contributes to the creation of spiritual and cultural values. Along with other regional cultures, the culture of the new land of the Southwest region with its specific characteristics also plays a crucial role in arousing the artistic inspiration of numerous generations of writers with countless valuable works. Entering the 21st century, literature in the Mekong Delta has been marking its prosperity with the emerging of abundant new faces, typically Nguyen Thi Viet Ha, whose short stories results the cultural imprints of the western rivers in remaining in readers' mind.

KEY WORDS: short stories; river culture; conscious mind; spiritual culture.

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1. Introduction

Blending into the flow of contemporary literature, the Mekong Delta's literature has achieved respectable achievements so far thanks to the appearance of new figures with high writing performance such as Nguyen Ngoc Tu, Le Minh Nhut, Truc Linh Lan, Song Hao, Le Quang Trang, Vu Thien Kieu, Bich Ngan, Le Thanh My, Ho Tinh Tam, Tran Bao Dinh, Kim Quyen, Tram Huong, Vo Dieu Thanh, Nguyen Thi Viet Ha.

Starting from a passion for artistic creation, combined with geocultural factors and a strong love for the land of "Nine Dragons", they have contributed to creating special pieces, creating a new stream of life for contemporary Vietnamese literature. New writers in the new southern land are always aware of their mission, always diligently distilling each word in the process of artistic creation to gradually shape their stylistic imprint and affirm their position in the literature of the country. No matter what genre, topic, or inspiration they are writing in, on each page of their writing, they are also full of love for the land and people, imbued with cultural imprints of the Southwest region. Nguyen Ngoc Tu gives readers rustic, life-style pages, and Tran Bao Dinh sketches a picture of his homeland with what is closest and most familiar. Le Minh Nhut tries to find out the cultural identity of the countryside, and Truc Linh Lan cools people's hearts with feminine poems. However, Nguyen Thi Viet Ha chooses to affirm her stylistic imprint of being calm, profound and rich in cultural aspects through a series of short stories about people's life and fate on the background of the Mekong River. Each river and canal mentioned in her works contains elements of river culture in the land at the end of the country.

Recently, Nguyen Thi Viet Ha's short stories have been approached from many angles such as characteristics, contents and forms of expression, etc. However, another interesting aspect in her short stories, cultural imprint of rivers, has not been well explored by researchers yet. Putting Nguyen Thi Viet Ha's short stories in the relationship between literature and culture, which means using elements of the historical and geographical environment where the stories are created to study and evaluate them, we clearly see the characteristics of the human community's consciousness in the western region. Learning about this particular cultural aspect through her short stories is a way to

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acknowledge the artistic efforts of a talented and enthusiastic young writer.

2. Content

2.1. *The relationship between culture and literature*

Culture is a combination of social relationships. Literature is one of the components that make up those relationships. Therefore, culture and literature have a close relationship. Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the pioneers in viewing literature from cultural perspectives, commented on the inseparable relationship between culture and literature: "The science of literary research must be closely linked to cultural history. Literature is an integral part of culture." ⁽¹⁾.

There is always a close, dialectical relationship between culture and literature. Culture expresses people's conceptions and behaviors in life while literature is the most effective and flexible way to preserve those conceptions and behaviors. To achieve those great achievements, a nation's culture must go through a process of searching, filtering, struggling and creating to form values in society. Literature has to show that searching process and reserve established values. Both literature and culture are interrelated. Literature is a part of culture, expressing cultural values, and it is governed by culture. Therefore, it can be said that literature is the culture that speaks in artistic language through the creative process of the writer.

To create that dialectical relationship, the writers are required to be aware of their role and mission as a "culture expert" ⁽²⁾. It can be seen that writers play an essential role in determining the cultural content in literary works. In doing so, the requirement for the writers is that they should have experience and a deep understanding of regional culture, national culture, ethnic culture, and even culture of the area.

In short, literature and culture have a close interrelated relationship and cannot be separated. The development of culture creates conditions for literature to develop. At the same time, literature is an important element of culture and is influenced by culture. Besides, it contributes to preserving and affecting the development of national culture. This special relationship can be seen clearly in several short stories by Nguyen Thi Viet Ha.

2.2. *Nguyen Thi Viet Ha, a young writer full of energy*

Nguyen Thi Viet Ha was born on April 29, 1978 in Bac Giang. However, she has spent her whole life living closely in Ca Mau. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Literature from Hanoi National University of Education. She has experienced many jobs, from teaching literature, being a journalist to writing with many works of academic values. With her hard work in artistic creation, she has been awarded many prizes in literary competitions from local to national levels. Some of her achievements are the first prize of Youth Literature Contest with the poem *Bang khuang thang Chin* (September's sorrow), the second prize of Youth Literature Contest with the short story *Nhung dua con cua bien* (Children of the sea) (1995), the third prize with the short story *Cau chuyen tang chong toi* (Story for my husband) in a contest organized by VTV Journal and Vietnam Television (2007), the first prize *Netbuttrian* for *Ba hat dau xanh cua me* (Mother's three green peas) (2010), the second prize of Mekong delta's short stories IV for *O lai cung song* (Staying with rivers) (2011), the first prize of *Stories recently told* by Lao Dong Newspaper for *Nhung cay xuong rong cua me* (Mother's cactus) (2012), the first prize in a contest organized by the Journalists' Association of Ca Mau (2012), the second prize for poems supporting Truong Sa organized by Tuoi Tre Newspaper for *To quoc ro hinh tu phia dao Truong Sa* (Viewing the nation clearly from Truong Sa) (2012), etc. Reviewing some of the above awards partly shows her talent and enthusiasm for the literary career that not all young writers can have.

Although she has written in many different genres such as poetry, novels, and prose, the most successful in her career must be the short story. This genre has helped her unleash emotions on each word because it "takes over life in all its fullness and integrity." "Short stories often aim to portray an image, discover an essential in human relations or in the life of the human soul" ⁽³⁾. With a gentle,

calm, profound, evocative and colorful writing style of river culture, Nguyen Thi Viet Ha has made fine impression among readers through several collections of short stories such as *Con do va thieu phu* (The boat and the lady) (2013), *Troi van con mua ngoai hien* (It's still raining outside) (2014) and *Buc thu tinh thu 901* (The 901st love letter) (2014).

Nguyen Thi Viet Ha is deeply attached to the land of Ca Mau, so the human soul and the alluvial aftertaste of rivers have penetrated deeply into her mosaic and words in her works. These gradually create a unique style, contributing to the richness, diversity and excitement of literary activities in the Mekong Delta after 1975 in particular, and contemporary Vietnamese literature in general.

2.3. The imprints of river culture in the land of "Nine Dragons" through Nguyen Thi Viet Ha's short stories

The Southwest is the region of rivers. In addition to the two main rivers, Tien and Hau rivers, there are many interlaced tributaries forming distinct administrative landmarks. These landmarks are often formed along rivers, imbued with cultural imprints of the river region rich in daily life activities of people in the new land of the South.

In Nguyen Thi Viet Ha's short stories, many names of rivers and canals appear, creating a sign of Southern culture. On each page of writing, the rivers, canals, and wharves of the West seem to become familiar, deeply ingrained in the author's memory, but quite strange to many people, especially those in other regions. This stimulates curiosity and discovery in readers. Through these names, the writer seems to try hard to introduce the places associated with the daily life of people in the Southwest region. For example, when approaching the short story "*O lai cung song*" (Staying with rivers) by Nguyen Thi Viet Ha, we encounter three rivers, namely Cai Doi River, Ganh Hao River, and Ong Doc River. When reading the short story "*Mo nui*" (Graves in the mountain), the author brings readers to Lo Hai and Cai Doi canals and places close to daily life in a relatively narrow residential area. In the short story "*Tieng sao tren dong Lung Cung*" (The flute on Lung Cung river), she introduces Lung Cung river with its distinctive features. Stretching on the writing page of Nguyen Thi Viet Ha, each river, canal, and wharf is always associated with a story of everyday life, a separate family situation, and a fate of people who roam around to earn a living. From this point, the writer creates a vivid and true picture of the southwestern region with its distinctive cultural imprint.

Besides the introduction of rivers and canals, Nguyen Thi Viet Ha's short stories are deeply integrated into the minds of people in the new land of the South. Anyone who has once set foot in the land at the end of the nation, surely cannot forget the interlaced river system. On all rivers and canals, there are always the image of large and small boats moving up and down the river serving different purposes. No matter how busy their lives are, the people here with a free soul can't be without singing, a means to express their feelings and emotions. In particular, on moonlit nights, the chants, songs, and harps reverberate through the riverside and the countryside, conveying the emotions of the people of the Mekong Delta. This feature of life activities has been deeply ingrained in the subconscious, creating the typical river culture of the people here. That cultural imprint is reproduced by Nguyen Thi Viet Ha quite vividly and truthfully in the short story "*O lai cung song*" (Staying with rivers). Letting go of the soul to the lullaby of the character Lan, readers will sympathize with the unspeakable pain when her beloved child is "dead in the river" and the unfaithful husband leaves her for another woman, letting her live lonely on the cold river: "When you go far away, give the shirt back to me to cover myself whenever there is cold win. If you feel cold, use the mosquito net to cover yourself. Give the shirt back to me so that I wear it to go to school far away. The school is so far. I am afraid the letter sent will be missed and the words sent will be forgotten" ⁽⁴⁾. The lullaby of a woman whose pain is gnawing at, contains many hard-to-speak emotions, so the words spoken in the quiet night sound earnestly lamented. That lullaby is very familiar to the poor villagers (small merchants on the river). Therefore, every night when they do not hear the lullaby

they feel insecure, afraid that something bad will happen to that woman. Perhaps, that lullaby also represents the fate of unfortunate people who are faced with a very unsatisfactory, contrarian everyday life. Therefore, the writer must absorb the love of the land and the people of the river and the country so that she can write such touching words about the human fate.

In the short story "*Chuyen o que*" (Story in the countryside) by Nguyen Thi Viet Ha, several elements of the river culture are presented clearly through the specific details. It is the scene of daily life, both simple and typical of Southern rural families with only the elderly and young children because the youths have left the countryside to study downtown and find a livelihood: "The father goes to get the two-chord fiddle while the mother spreads a mat and sits next to him. Uncle Chin and aunt Chin bring some dried fish and a cup of tamarind fish sauce, joining in the sitting mat"⁽⁵⁾. Anyone who was born in this river area will surely experience such singing repeated many times a day. Those lullabies and singing mixed with the sound of the fiddle also help listeners understand the mood of the mans who sing and play the fiddle. For example, the sound of the father's fiddle is so tormenting whereas the singing of uncle Chin is so soft and beautiful: "We have reunited for many times, so do not forget the beautiful sound of the fiddle"⁽⁶⁾. Sometimes, the singing makes listeners understand the desire of the mother in the countryside wanting to enjoy the reunion atmosphere when her children return home from downtown: "The river is larger, and the night is longer. I do not know when people downtown will come back"⁽⁷⁾.

In the short story "*Mua roi dau non*" (Rain falls on the mountain), the fiddle's sound of Ba Sau Dau, a widower in Cay Say village, who often goes fishing for crabs passing the reed field, where the mother and her four daughters live, also contains many emotions. The sound of the fiddle, along with the impromptu singing of the character Ba, who wants to "flirt" with the woman of four children, also clearly expresses his sincere feelings: "It is twilight. Who still remembers you? Go and ask the person sitting at the mangrove apple tree. The water flow brings along the love quickly. Your hair is so long, so should you put it up?"⁽⁸⁾ When he is aware he will never receive the woman's love, Ba Sau Dau uses the resounding voice of the river to express his own sadness hidden in his heart: "Ba Sau Dau is singing sadly in the house. His fishing rods look lonely and sad at the corridor"⁽⁹⁾. Thus, the river culture of the Southwest region is always associated with the sound of the fiddle and the singing. It is the most useful means for Southern people to fully express their emotions and feelings.

For the people of the Southwest region, the river is not only the origin for singing, but also a "route", a place to live, a place to exchange goods on a daily basis. In short stories of Nguyen Thi Viet Ha, people often attach their lives to the river and become addicted to the river. The mother of the character Hai in Xeo Sau village is always "addicted to the river wharf", making it impossible for Hai to understand what makes her so addicted to this river wharf. Even on rainy and windy days, the mother keeps going along the river wharf. Is it possible that all the activities of the people here are closely linked to the river and the river wharf, so they consider it as a friend to confiding in? Although not "addicted to the river" like the mother, Hai is also linked to that river wharf because it is a place to wash away many sorrows. When Hai is sad, Hai look at the river as if Hai was looking for a soulmate: "Looking at the river wharf to ask the floating water hyacinth to remove the sadness in the heart"⁽¹⁰⁾. In the short story "*O lai cung song*" (Staying with rivers), the image of the girl who commits suicide at the Ganh Hao wharf but is rescued by the aunt Tu Rum, is also "always obsessed" about the river: "There are river near wharfs, and there are also far wharfs. There are wharfs with sadness and happiness. The life of every woman is the same, just like this Ganh Hao river wharf which is probably for those who are betrayed like my mother and me. The water keeps flowing endlessly throughout the rivers, canals, and fields. Everywhere is an alluvial color. Whenever I look at the water flowing in, I cry"⁽¹¹⁾. To her, it seems that Ganh Hao wharf is a witness to the sorrow and pain of betrayed women, including her mother. Therefore, in her mind, each river wharf has the

shape and face of her mother. The river is cloudy and alluvial with sadness and pain in the hearts of people.

The image of the river in the countryside is always in the mind of every person. In the short story “*Bien biet song*” (The far away river), even though the husband does not live on the river any more, going ashore to live with his wife and children, as the years pass, the nostalgia for the river always stands by his heart: “For decades along the river, when I am happy, I anchor. When I am sad, I go down the river. I eat and sleep with the waves, but now I have been at the shore for almost five years, and I only miss the river a little”⁽¹²⁾. That “little bit” nostalgia for the river is enough for the readers to see his deep attachment and love to his hometown river. And there are times, “I miss the river. That nostalgia must have been somewhere for a long time, so today I lie in bed and feel pain in my back”⁽¹³⁾. The nostalgia for the river in him is too strong. Gradually, it becomes an obsession in the mind of the wife, causing her to panic and insecurity when someone invites him to cooperate in building a boat. She is afraid that when the nostalgia for the river arises, he cannot help and leaves her again to return to the river, back to the familiar space in him: “I am afraid the river will make him leave me”⁽¹⁴⁾. Missing means love. There must be strong love for the river to make people so sad and missing.

Rivers and water are associated with people's livelihoods in the land at the end of the country. Their daily activities also contribute to the distinctive cultural imprint of this land. The boat, with its oars, is an asset, a means of living and a gathering space for the family. In the short story “*O lai cung song*” (Staying with rivers), through the character Aunt Tu Rum, the readers also somewhat understand this particular culture: “We live by the water. wherever we go, we put poles there and then trade and sell goods. Then, we go down the river to find another place to put poles, so people call us traders in rivers”⁽¹⁵⁾. We also see the image of a woman fishing in the river to make a living: “She casts her fishing net well like her parents living with rivers, and her two children are like otters”⁽¹⁶⁾. Another image is when Uncle Tu uses his old boat to carry passengers, sell fresh and dried goods and collecting scraps on the river. Those who have a chance to visit Cai Rang floating market in Can Tho or Nga Bay floating market in Hau Giang will see this particular imprint of river culture.

There will be a shortage to mention the Western river culture without mentioning the eating and drinking culture with dishes of flavors of the delta. It can be a bowl of *canh chua* (i.e., a special soup of Vietnamese people) with tamarind leaves, a dish of minced green mango served with braised fish with a few chili peppers, etc. Another special dish is gobies braised with mangrove apples or *canh chua* with catfish cooked by the mother in Nguyen Thi Viet Ha's short story, “*Chuyen o que*”: “Dad quietly walks in, looking at the delicious food tray. Dad says nothing, picking up a piece of braised goby and eat with rice. The fresh fish braised with ripe mangrove apples is sweet and delicious, but why does it sound like something bitter in the heart”⁽¹⁷⁾. The everyday rustic dishes, rich in the flavor of the Mekong River region, also contribute significantly to creating a unique cultural imprint. From the rustic dishes, Nguyen Thi Viet Ha has partly sketched the beauty of the soul of the people of the Southwest river region, who are simple but full of love.

In general, short stories by Nguyen Thi Viet Ha have helped us initially identify the cultural imprints of river culture in the Southwest region expressed in many aspects. It can be the name of the rivers and the canals, the lyrics, the daily life activities, the desire for love, privacy and thoughts and concerns about life. All of these are derived from the female writer's desire to create art, just as she confided to the public: “Write for your heart, for your passion, for your own aspiration and for those who have loved, trusted, and waited for us. Writing is like breathing.”

3. Conclusion

Nguyen Thi Viet Ha is a new figure of literature in the Mekong Delta in the early twentieth century, a sparkling “alluvial grain”, knowing how to use words, experiences, emotions, talents and aspiration to create many good spiritual values for life. From an overview of some typical short

stories, readers can realize the cultural imprint of the Mekong River culture along with the writer's reflections on life although there are still certain drawbacks in the way of creating characters and the unelaborate writing style. However, each of her short stories brings readers profound human values and remarkable cultural content. In other words, each of her short stories is like a bridge connecting literature and culture. Since then, she has given readers a more comprehensive view of the land and people of the South, arousing love and appreciation for the land of the Nine Dragons.

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*Annotation:

⁽¹⁾ M.Bakhtin (1980), *Important principles for examining literature in the past*, *Literature Journal* (4), p.139

⁽²⁾ Phuong Luu, *Literature principles - volume I*, Ha Noi: University of Education Publishing House, 2020, p.139

⁽³⁾ Le Ba Han, Tran Dinh Su, Nguyen Khac Phi (Editors), *Dictionary of literature terminology*, Ha Noi, National University Publishing House, 2001, p.371

⁽⁴⁾ *Staying with rivers*, p.164

^{(5), (6), (7)} *Story in the countryside*, pp.223, 224.

^{(8), (9)} *Rain falls on the mountain*, pp.74,75

⁽¹⁰⁾ *Wharf of Xeo Sau village*, p.440

⁽¹¹⁾ *Staying with rivers*, pp.159-160

^{(12), (13), (14)} *The far away river*, pp.167,171,172

⁽¹⁵⁾ *Staying with rivers*, p.167

⁽¹⁶⁾ *The far away river*, p.172

⁽¹⁷⁾ *Story in the countryside*, p.122

Dấu ấn văn hóa sông nước miền Tây Nam Bộ qua truyện ngắn Nguyễn Thị Việt Hà

Tóm tắt: Văn hóa và văn học có mối quan hệ biện chứng với nhau. Nếu văn hóa chi phối mọi bình diện của đời sống văn học thì văn học cũng góp phần làm nên các giá trị văn hóa tinh thần. Cùng với các vùng văn hóa khác, văn hóa vùng đất mới Tây Nam Bộ với những nét đặc thù cũng góp phần khơi dậy nguồn cảm hứng sáng tạo của nhiều thế hệ nhà văn với không ít tác phẩm có giá trị. Bước sang thế kỉ XXI, văn học Đồng bằng Sông Cửu Long cũng ghi dấu sự khởi sắc với sự xuất hiện nhiều gương mặt mới, tiêu biểu là Nguyễn Thị Việt Hà. Đọc truyện ngắn của chị, cái đọng lại sau cùng trong tâm trí độc giả chính là dấu ấn văn hóa sông nước miền Tây.

Từ khóa: truyện ngắn; văn hóa sông nước; tâm thức; văn hóa tinh thần.