

## Southern People and Culture in Nguyen Ngoc Tu's Short Story

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### ABSTRACT

Oriental literature in general, Vietnamese literature in particular, has many types of values, perspectives, new identities and unique similarities. With the desire to contribute to understanding and introducing more literary quintessence and for meeting the increasing demand for human culture in the integration period, we would like to introduce the research 'Southern people and culture in Nguyen Ngoc Tu's short story' based on a famous female writer of modern Vietnamese literature who has many books published and reprinted in her name.

In order to conduct the research in a scientific manner, we combined the use of primary research methodologies such as classification statistics, meta-analysis and interdisciplinary studies (literature, culture, anthropology and history). 'Southern people and culture in Nguyen Ngoc Tu's short story' was drafted after proper research and survey of the writer's published collections of short stories published from 2000 to 2020 focusing on the personality of people from the South and their relationship with culture.

**Keywords:** Southern people and culture, short story Nguyen Ngoc Tu, Vietnamese literature

## 1. Research Issues

Nguyen Ngoc Tu holds a meaningful and significant place in the literary lineage of the South, serving as a bridge between the previous and the current generations following the 'Đổi mới' (renovation) period in 1986. From the pioneers who launched the literary line of 'văn dĩ tải đạo' (literature must educate people the proper behaviour towards integrity, compassion and excellence), such as Nguyen Dinh Chieu, to subsequent writers, such as Ho Bieu Chanh, Son Nam, Binh Nguyen Loc and Trang The Hy, a face of Southern literature abundant in patriotism and morality has been created. Nguyen Ngoc Tu's inheritance and innovation in the Southern literary flow, particularly her short stories, have reflected more richly and multi-dimensionally the Southern literary circuit, from one period to another, to new people and new cultures in a flexible and ceaseless manner.

In order to conduct the research in a scientific manner, we combined the use of primary research methodologies such as classification statistics, meta-analysis and interdisciplinary studies (literature, culture, anthropology and history). Within the scope of the article, 'Nguyen Ngoc Tu's published short stories' were researched and analysed between 2000 and 2020, focusing on the following fundamental issues: the personality of the people from the South and their relationship with cultural values.

## 2. Southerners in the Perspective of Nguyen Ngoc Tu

### 2.1 Southerners' Personality in the Short Stories of Nguyen Ngoc Tu

The South is one of the three territories of Vietnam (including the North, the Central and the South). In the

living conditions of the environment with many rivers and canals, the personality of the people of the South is also different from other regions in Vietnam. From there, formed Southern lifestyles, manners, and living features. Southern personality is an entirely different behavioural culture that bears a clear mark on human cultural life. In Nguyen Ngoc Tu's short stories, the relationship amongst the people and between people and nature is very strong, creating unique characteristics and leaving its mark in the works of the people of South. Her work is multi-dimensional and multi-faceted. It shows multiple personalities of a human: one that can be a liberal and filial person, a peaceful and good-willed person, a person rich in gratitude and open-minded.

In the short story of Nguyen Ngoc Tu, the human personality of the South is expressed through the relationship amongst the people and between the people and nature. With realistic details, Nguyen Ngoc Tu makes the reader visualise the Southern people clearly on each page:

Talking about human relations with people, with the homeland and the filiation, in 'The Gourd' in front of the alley, the father character said: 'As a human, don't think narrowly, don't think where you were born, where there are graves. Forefathers are the homeland, everywhere in this country is home' (Tu, 2015, p. 35).

The harmony between people and nature in a simple and open way is also a type of personality that makes it very easy to fall in love with people. That's when the sky is gorgeous:

Sometimes, when I look at Phien sleeping, the chicks also circle on his stomach, I wonder what is more beautiful than that. There is nothing as beautiful as a child, a chick, like a sprout just sprouting, the grass has just crossed the ground. (Tu, 2010, p. 159)

Southern people love and care for others as they do for themselves, and so, looking at other people, the people of this land are sad in spite of having a generous and benevolent look: 'It's not fun at all. It's not fun to see people being poor' (Tu, 2008, p. 90). Tran Thi Anh Nguyet in the article 'Nature in Nguyen Ngoc Tu's Short Stories from the Standpoint of Ecological Criticism' has pitted humans against animals, making Nguyen Ngoc Tu's works 'touch the deep pain of modern humanity when men leave nature, it means that men have abandoned their good primordial nature' (Nguyet, 2014, p. 46).

Unlike the tough reality of life seen these days, praying for people and being responsible towards relatives and

family are of utmost importance for the Southern people who are loving, hardworking and full of filial piety:

Brother Hai said to my mother, I go to earn money to redeem the fields and gardens, so that when my mother is ready to close her eyes, she can lie on her land, so that my brother can have money to ask Nhien to marry him and help him raise Duong. (Tu, 2004, p. 15).

Even in the story 'Endless Field', when the father's pain had not yet subsided, the son voluntarily shared his physical pain, hoping that the father would calm down: 'Let his father beat him so that he will feel less pain'—an act of kindness that is hard to believe in today's life. And even so, Cai Oi, the Southern character, is still very tolerant and generous: 'I heard, that day, many people shed tears, so the buffalo theft was not on TV, living in the middle of a cheap life. this benevolent land is sometimes a bit annoying' (Tu, 2005b, pp. 16, 183).

But after all the pain as if, the father's heart is always towards his children, about the good things and the admonition that 'people with bad mouths should try to live by their children' (Tu, 2005a, p. 123).

In the vast sea of people, each person in the South has his/her own desire. That is the dream of singing and being free: 'Now I can't give it up, because I can live freely and comfortably, I can sing to comfort my heart, not necessarily because of a couple of thirty thousand per night' (Tu, 2005a, p. 147). An extroverted personality that a few people in the North, Central Vietnam dare to think and do.

Family morals and traditions such as "the lamps that don't go out" are what Tuoi feels it is her duty and that she 'remember[s] what her grandfather said' (Tu, 2000, p. 8). Is this also the root from the land, the moral that reminds people who go against the husband-and-wife morals, the man's responsibility for the family:

Husband is passionate about women. In the morning, [he will] comb his hair with coconut oil sleekly, wear white silk clothes, hug a chicken, and wander at the market. Sometimes go[es] and don't come back, when he comes back, see if the rice bowl is full, calculate the way to sell them to continue playing. (Tu, 2016, p. 144)

In the midst of the chaos of life, nature and the people of the South are always closely and mutually interdependent. It is a profound dialectical relationship in the cultural space of the South, a very separate and very different cultural space. Those are river bathing sessions:

In the afternoons when I go to the fields to run around and fly kites, it's hot and sweaty. I carry a bucket outside and bath at the bridge and pond, but I don't feel cool at all. I then jump into the river, striding with arms and legs to make people happy. (Tu, 2015, p. 3)

This is when in the 'Anxious look', the thoughts of animals have the same love as children.

Coc didn't answer, he raised his head, what he meant was that duck was cold, why didn't he ask, honestly. Coc calmly returned to the batch of rice; he ate slowly. What do you mean, I feel sorry for you two? People are too much, being a human is so miserable, being a duck is even better. (Tu, 2003, p. 31)

Difficult life makes people sometimes forget the stops so that when nature gets angry, exhausted and screams, newly awakened people fixed clouds, realizing that the destruction of nature leads to serious consequences for their own lives: 'From the mudflats, sand avalanches, clams disappear, tourists no longer exist. appeared at the marina, violent waves lapped the steep east coast. The coastal people left one by one. As a way of survival' (Tu, 2018, p. 57).

People suddenly realize, when living in the middle of an 'island', that nature has healed the wounds of the heart and nurtured the lives of the wrong people.

The constancy of the sea is an illusion that quickly cools the wound [and] [i]t is said on the Silver Crane Island. There is a wanted thief base, everyone knows they are there, but they don't want to catch them. Between the sky and the water, listening to the waves lapping is also worn. Seeing the scene where they dig for fresh water, reclaim and plant fruit trees, and raise chickens and chickens, the authorities also let it pass. (Tu, 2014, pp. 34, 37)

Because nature also has its rights: 'The beauty of the forest canopy is always ready to break out from the machine, demanding life, demanding breath, demanding fresh air...' (Tu, 2010, p. 148). It is also a warning to the trade-offs of nature and people in the short story 'Sorrow on Puvan Peak': 'Some people are a little sad but wish for a long sun, no matter where the goats die in the burning grasslands' (Tu, 2008, p. 53).

To explain how the Southerners in Nguyen Ngoc Tu's short stories inherited and instilled the national tradition in their personalities, Duong Hoang Loc in the article 'Some Thoughts on Tolerance in Southern Culture' looks

at Southern people in terms of the tolerant character of the Vietnamese people. That is 'the attitude of mutual cooperation, love, and compassion, filled with 4000 years of national culture's extreme human tolerance' (Loc, 2005, p. 69).

Thus, we can see, in Nguyen Ngoc Tu's short story, that the human personality of the South is formed from the relationship amongst people and between people and nature, which is very multidimensional and dialectical. Those are Southern people who are rich in filial piety, generosity and tolerant, and love nature. Besides, there are people with extroverted and free-thinking, people of the reality of fierce and resigned living.

In the article 'Prose in the Mekong Delta: An Area of Prose with Many Characteristics', Chiem Thanh also mentioned: 'The human personality of the South in modern times is multi-faceted and very complex, not simple; it is liberal, chivalrous, rich in gratitude, like some people's unchanging vision' (Thanh, 2004, p. 53).

These are key aesthetic value systems in Southern people's thinking and interactions, creating cultural values from generation to generation. Nguyen Ngoc Tu's artistic conception of a man is a lengthy journey of contemplation, philosophy, living capital and accompaniment of the written words. Occasionally, when she is weary of life, she also has certain reservations because 'being overly cordial will elicit inquisitive inquiries'. For her, 'the gap between fantasy and reality has never been easy to grasp', because of the freedom of thought by the individual with multiple personalities 'who does not nurture in themselves a few other strangers'. However, we cannot avoid the 'default' when 'we think we are powerful enough to control life at will, but we are merely animals grazed by fate alone. Existence, reproduction, rest, and weeping are all determined by fate'. She does not forget to affirm that 'regret is certainly one of the important human rights'. And what binds the relationships of the people of the South are their cultural values of life and people.

## **2.2 The Relationship of Southerners with Cultural Values**

Nguyen Ngoc Tu is a cross-cultural writer of two generations and new ones. Therefore, she has different points of view, compared to her predecessors such as Son Nam, Binh Nguyen Loc and Trang The Hy. Thai Phan Vang Anh in the article 'Narrative Language in Contemporary Vietnamese Short Stories' commented on

the local accent and the formation of a line of regional literature: 'can only be an array of Southern short stories, in which, Nguyen Ngoc Tu is regarded as a typical author with several excellent works', for example: *The Endless Field, Memory Lane, A Vast Sea of Men, Grievance when Crossing Bridge, Breezy North Wind...* Through Nguyen Ngoc Tu's short story, the land of the South emerges from the edges of the water hyacinth, the brocade brood, the pomelo, the fruit of the water lily, the means to call the character's name (*anh Hai Nhớ, dì út Thu Lý, dì Tư, út Thà, Sáu Tâm...*) or everyday talk (trời đất, đúng chóc hà, nói gì lãng xệt vậy ta, nói chơi hoài, như vậy, chút đỉnh...) evokes the shape of nature and people of the South (Anh, 2008).

Those are the cultural features of life taking place in Grandpa's house, which Nguyen Ngoc Tu carved into her writing page: 'Dung addicted to the dark incense he lit on the grandmother's altar'. But the civilized features of modern life are always new to him when:

The two of them rolled in eggs and kneaded dough. His hand was gentle, stroking eighteen rose buds on the cake, which Dung craved for forever. The birthday party was very lively, Dung and they danced together, and grandfather also danced, he wore a beautiful blue shirt with a flower bow. When he held her hand, the Tango prelude 'Far Away' and Grandma wanted 'every year to celebrate New Year's Eve with you and listen to you sing. (Tu, 2015, pp. 29,30, 31,33).

The truss in front of the alley is always the village culture and origin; it is the homeland and the heart of people, because everyone who comes to the house compliments, you have a really beautiful gourd... Foreign guests also put their left cheek on the fluffy green gourd to take pictures. Students riding bicycles across the street stopped to look at each other in pain and then shouted, 'I miss home, guys!' ...My father said: 'You can rip people out of their homeland, but they cannot separate their homeland from their hearts'. (Tu, 2015, pp. 27, 29)

It's not only Southern culture but also Vietnamese culture in Tet for her, because 'normally, I miss my hometown a lot, let alone Tet, the time my grandmother used to say: it's family reunion time, having fun together after a year of hard work, away from home' (Tu, 2015, p. 57). On the moment of New Year's Eve:

Mr Nine burned six incense sticks, divided half of it between Dat, and said, 'I'll give you a New Year's Eve offering. Praying for good health, happiness, and wealth next year. '...'At the market, people who wanted to go home before New Year's Eve sold out quickly to return,

the rest of them also tried to clean up how to be present on the first day of the new year at home and make teapot to worship the ancestors. (Tu, 2003, p. 97)

Southern people in Nguyen Ngoc Tu's short story preserve cultural traditions like One Love: 'I don't know if my father and son can still keep the elaborately carved statues, the paintings of the countryside and the sky, earth, cattle, peaceful and idyllic children, wallpaper on the walls depicting the stories of Betel and Areca, Tam Cam, and the bed, the room, the threshold. (Tu, 2003, p. 164)

Because Trinh Dang Nguyen Huong in the *Journal of Literature*, October 2015 issue, with the article 'Nguyen Ngoc Tu, Author of Damaged Souls' deeply analysed and explained the artistic intentions: 'the name of the land as well as human life are closely linked, the land of sorrow can only produce sad stories' (Huong, 2015).

Spirituality and culture have always been closely related in human life. Tomb of the wind is a tomb set up to commemorate the missing person who has not been found. However, the strong faith from the waiting hearts always urges people to stay, even though: 'Until my mother believed in the picture of me when I was 10 years old, I put it on the altar, standing with some old and worn-out grandparents' (Tu, 2010, p. 68).

People always look to their roots, and national culture has always been a part of the flesh and blood of the people of Vietnam in general and the South in particular, from the flag-coloured bird tracks: 'Every National Day, every festival, he voluntarily raised the flag, what movement did the ward launch, my family always led by example' (Tu, 2008, p. 15).

Preserving culture and collecting culture is a work that requires perseverance and courage, because the things belonging to the lost day are not easy to find again: 'You follow me to do more folk music collection and research projects in a year'; 'walk a few times through the dying fields to reach a small hamlet in the middle of the open sea, where some old woman is keeping in memory a song and melody that we do not know, I thought that day would never go away'; because culture is the flow: "The boat took us from one song to another" (Tu, 2008, pp. 93, 96-97, 100).

Especially Ethical Culture, an important foundation to keep like the old houses 'that must be kept, determined to keep the house. Love and pain made the cousins work hard together, but the old house with sweet memories of

their childhood held them back' (Tu, 2010, p. 63). It is a tradition of loving hospitality in Thuong Trau laksa:

The children carried a naked boy, blasphemously saying that Ut Chot's bird was shackled, it was swollen, doctor, Van mam. Laughing so hard, asked why it was so bad, Ut Chot straightened his hands to cover the pain, and said with tears in his eyes, 'Because Tu said everyone has to go to the doctor to see the happy doctor, he didn't leave the city. I'm not sick, I'm going to catch the cuffs and play ... Van can only cry two voices, oh my god. And he understood why the old man cared about him. Every afternoon, he went to Van's place, inviting whispers. He knew that at that time, Midwife Nam, the second employee of the clinic, had come home, maybe Van felt lonely'. (Tu, 2005b, p. 21)

There are strange and beautiful river weddings, the bride of the South in Remembering the River is different from the brides of the North and Central:

when along the riverbanks, on the bunches of frames, the groves... to a tube yellow colour, and then dotted with white baby flowers like grains. A few friends' boats were turned into rafts and parked outside the dam. The women and girls carried the cooking pots on the shore... The next morning, Giang dressed in ao dai from the boat and stepped up, the photographer took a beautiful photo, the most beautiful was around Giang. The falling gold is like a hundred bells. (Tu, 2005a, pp. 133–134).

When life's roundabouts take place, people face the reality of making a living, but cultural values are always preserved and nurtured, because village culture is not lived by just acting but by tradition.

#### **True tradition:**

The little boy was annoyed, because his father performed the game of taking hooves in the river, because Aunt The sang for the dolls lying in hammocks throughout the afternoon, and it was also a show to make tourists feel moved to come back and play in the old village. It's boring to watch the villagers all day indifferently, let customers pass by in front of their silk shop, if they don't wave their fan; it's like a stone statue. Even those of her age like Huong, tie the fourteen-year-old to the mat weaving looms, making no mistake. (Tu, 2016, p. 83).

The simple dreams of the family life of the people of the South are also the dreams of the Vietnamese people's family culture, about a passing country with a 'future fragrant with the scent of cinnamon leaves in the dew, the smell of pumpkin sap that has just been cut, the melons

that are out of season are melting into the ground' (Tu, 2018, p. 29) and the ashes are brilliant in happiness: 'the house has a voice of people. like a true family: the sound of women babbling, men spitting and children laughing, she tells stories again, hoping to fill the silence' (Tu, 2014, pp. 142-143)

It can be said that the relationship of Southern people in Nguyen Ngoc Tu's short story with cultural values is very diverse and rich in many aspects. It is the relationship of community culture, ethnicity, village culture, family culture, spiritual culture, festival culture... All in all, creating a value system imbued with Southern culture unique set, very personal and unique. Besides, there are many other cultural value systems that in the limited scope of the article have not had the conditions to mention such as: food culture, dress culture.

Talking about the Southern quality in the short story Nguyen Ngoc Tu, writer Nguyen Ngoc has an interesting comment, he compares: 'She is like a natural tree that grows in the middle of the Melaleuca or mangrove forest in the South, fresh and strange. Often, it gives literature a cool, subtle but sincere breeze, especially in the South' (Ngoc, 1991).

### **3. Conclusion**

The messages that Nguyen Ngoc Tu conveys in his short stories such as people and relationships with people, with nature, with cultural values are the concerns of today's young modern generation. Blending into the general flow of Vietnamese literature, writing about the people and culture of the South, Nguyen Ngoc Tu has created a unique mark and unique attraction. The author's perspective has also changed: reality is exploited deeper, is more realistic and more multi-dimensional. According to Professor Tran Dinh Su: 'The cultural value of literature has a relationship between national cultural values and international cultural values... in which value is close to the need to liberate humanity, and human senses and human ideals are more likely to be recognized by the world' (Su, 2017). Therefore, the messages conveyed by Nguyen Ngoc Tu's short stories deal with fundamentally cultural-human issues in human life.

In the process of exchanging and acclimatizing, the currents of thought in literature-culture, the requirements set forth from the expectations of both the author and the reader in the general modern social trend of the region and the world is an inevitable trend.

On *Ton Vinh Van Hoa Doc*, regarding contemporary short stories, in Nguyen Ngoc Tu's short stories, the simple lives or the small joys of the people of the South, those poor, outspoken and hard-working people are hidden inside the 'soul that is both benevolent and delicate in the way people treat people... all expressed in a language that is innocent, crude, and characterized by Southern dialects' (Ton Vinh Van Hoa Doc, n.d.). It is the preservation and continuation of the Southern literary circuit of the predecessor writers such as Binh Nguyen Loc, Son Nam, Trang The Hy, Nguyen Quang Sang... Nguyen Ngoc Tu. As a person with a distinct voice, hard to be confused in the flow of modern and contemporary Vietnamese literature, Nguyen Ngoc Tu has created for herself a world of its own, boldly Southern. It is hoped that, with the appreciation of the literary and cultural quintessence of Vietnam, researchers, readers, organizations, communities, etc. will join hands to contribute to promoting cultural relations. The ideology between Vietnam and other countries in the region is becoming more and more profound.

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