

LANGUAGE

THE POETICS OF MOURNFUL LANGUAGE IN “*AI TU VÃN*”

BY PRINCESS NGỌC HÂN

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Abstract

This article examines *Ai tu vãn* by Princess Ngọc Hân through the lens of poetics, focusing on how its mournful language constructs a distinctive artistic voice in medieval Vietnamese literature. The study highlights three dimensions: symbolic vocabulary, artistic epithets, and the technique of defamiliarization. These linguistic strategies articulate solitude, longing, and irreparable loss, while also reflecting the impermanence of fate. Natural imagery such as the moon, wind, and flowers - traditionally symbols of harmony - is transformed into metaphors of estrangement and grief. Exclamatory particles, inverted syntax, and symbolic neologisms intensify the lament, mapping a psychological landscape of anguish. Situated within the *ngâm khúc* tradition, *Ai tu vãn* inherits the elegiac resonance of the *song thất lục bát* form but differs from *Chinh phụ ngâm* and *Cung oán ngâm khúc* through its direct, personal articulation of female grief. Unlike the ventriloquized female voices created by male authors, Ngọc Hân’s poem represents the authentic cry of a young widow who simultaneously voices private sorrow and civic responsibility. By integrating historical context with comparative poetics, the article situates *Ai tu vãn* alongside *Chinh phụ ngâm* to re-evaluate its literary value. The findings affirm its significance as a linguistic and artistic phenomenon, transforming individual mourning into a symbolic discourse of collective resonance.

Keywords: poetics, *Ai tu vãn*, mournful language, symbolic vocabulary, artistic epithets, defamiliarization technique

1. Introduction

Lê Ngọc Hân (1770–1799), also known as Princess Ngọc Hân (the 21st daughter of Emperor Lê Hiến Tông), later titled Empress of the Northern Palace, was the wife of Emperor Quang Trung. In the year Bình Ngô (1786), at the age of sixteen, she married Nguyễn Huệ when he led an army to the North to eliminate the Trịnh Lords (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, 1993, p. 508). According to *Đại Nam liệt truyện* (The Veritable Records of Đại Nam), after vanquishing the Trịnh, Nguyễn Huệ entered the royal court to present records and military power to Emperor Lê Hiến Tông. Deeply moved by this gesture and to further solidify ties, the Emperor arranged the marriage between his last daughter, Princess Ngọc Hân, and Nguyễn Huệ. She then followed him to Phú Xuân (modern-day Huế) (ibid.).

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In the year Kỷ Dậu (1789), following Nguyễn Huệ's great victory over the 290,000-strong Qing army and during a period of governmental reformation in accordance with monarchic principles, Princess Ngọc Hân was officially conferred the title Empress of the Northern Palace (ibid., p.526).

Even as the Tây Sơn dynasty flourished and the life of Emperor Quang Trung with his consort seemed replete with happiness, a sudden tragedy shattered their world: in 1792, the emperor fell gravely ill and passed away. His untimely death left many ambitions unfulfilled, causing profound national grief - especially for his young wife, only twenty-two at the time, and their two small children. *Ai tư vãn*, written by Princess Ngọc Hân in vernacular chữ Nôm using the song thất lục bát (double seven six-eight) form, expresses the sorrow of that moment. It conveys boundless mourning over the loss of a king who was passionate about nation-building, who was also a beloved husband. The poem is considered a long-form elegy of significant value in Vietnamese literature (Văn Tân et al. 1959, p.133). It is not only a lamentation for a emperor commemorating the immense merit of Emperor Quang Trung, but also the heartbroken cry of a widow - a highly artistic and valuable textual document. Particularly noteworthy is its poetics of language: the meticulous arrangement of words to convey profound grief.

Scholarly literature situates *Ai tư vãn* in continuity with the artistic lineage of *Chinh phụ ngâm* and *Cung oán ngâm khúc* while highlighting its distinctiveness. Unlike its predecessors, which revolve around generalized archetypes, *Ai tư vãn* addresses a concrete, lived event, producing vivid and realistic detail. Its plain and accessible diction, largely free of Sino-Vietnamese compounds, further broadens its resonance among readers (Nguyễn Lộc, 2004; Võ Thanh Hương, 2015). Đào Thị Thu Thủy (2010) emphasizes that while the poem may inherit motifs such as the “looking in all directions” scene from *Chinh phụ ngâm*, it transforms them into more immediate and realistic expressions. Moreover, unlike earlier laments, its conclusion does not gesture toward past ideals but compels the lyrical persona to accept present reality, entrusting her grief to heaven and earth. Particularly striking is the greater use of interrogatives and exclamations, underscoring the intensity of emotion and heightening its plaintive tone. In this sense, *Ai tư vãn* both continues the eighteenth-century lament tradition and asserts a distinctive creative voice, emerging as the authentic expression of a female author in medieval Vietnamese literature.

From another perspective, Võ Thanh Hương (2015) explores how gender roles shaped Lê Ngọc Hân's linguistic choices. The poem reflects a distinctly feminine voice- humble, tender, and deeply emotional - through phrases such as “vâng mệnh phụ hoàng” (obeying the father's command) and “nguyện trăm năm” (a vow for a hundred years), which highlight traditional virtues of obedience, fidelity, and self-sacrifice. Delicate imagery such as “hoa bay thấp thoáng” (flowers faintly drifting) or “huong trời băng lảng” (a lingering heavenly scent) further underscores her refined femininity and graceful endurance of loss. At the same time, *Ai tư vãn* transcends purely domestic roles. Speaking not only as a grieving widow but also as an Empress and mother of the people, Ngọc Hân expands her voice to national concerns “in all four directions.” This duality is evident in the contrast between her soft, submissive self-representation and her solemn exaltation of the emperor, as in descriptions such as “công đức dày, ngự vận càng lâu” (great virtues, long reign) or “công dường ấy, mà nhân dường ấy” (such merit, such humanity).

Taken together, existing scholarship affirms the literary and cultural significance of *Ai tu vãn* but leaves open important space for deeper examination of its poetics of mournful language. Much of the research has emphasized historical context, gendered voice, or thematic comparison with earlier laments, while the artistic mechanics of its language- its symbolic vocabulary, epithets, and rhetorical techniques - remain underexplored. This study addresses that gap by systematically analyzing *Ai tu vãn* from a poetics-based perspective, demonstrating how Ngọc Hân's artistry transforms personal grief into a powerful cultural text. For this purpose, the *chữ Nôm* version of *Ai tu vãn* translated and annotated by Lương Văn Đàng and colleagues (1994) was selected as the primary source due to its systematic presentation, brief commentary and clear, concise annotations for analysis.

2. Theoretical frameworks

The present study is grounded in the theoretical foundations of poetics, understood as the internal principles that govern artistic creation rather than external rules or arbitrary conventions. Poetics is the study of the structures, genres, and artistic functions of literary works. Since Aristotle's *Poetics* (1965/335 BCE), it has provided a foundation for understanding poetry as a form of art with its own rules of construction and aesthetic purposes. Later developments, such as Jakobson's (1960) linguistic poetics, emphasized that the poetic function of language lies in its selection and combination of elements to produce artistic effects.

Following Trần Đình Sử's influential works on the poetics of medieval Vietnamese literature (2003, 2005, 2023), this research treats poetics as a systematic mode of inquiry into how meaning is generated through language, form, and genre conventions. Trần argues that medieval Vietnamese texts must be analyzed at multiple levels: the artistic whole, the level of imagery and symbols, and the level of linguistic expression. This framework provides a comprehensive model for approaching *Ai tu vãn* not only as a historical document of grief but as a carefully structured artistic work.

In Vietnamese literature, the *song thất lục bát* (double seven–six-eight) verse form has been considered “a unique discovery of Vietnamese poetry” (Vũ Thanh, 2004, p. 1550). While the *lục bát* (six-eight) form is strong in its narrative potential, the *song thất lục bát* - with its alternating couplets of seven-syllable lines and six-eight lines - leans toward expressing inner states, particularly tragic and lyrical sentiments. It embodies refined expressive qualities, especially in terms of rhythm and tonality, often creating a melancholic, solemn, and elegant resonance. Although originating in oral folk traditions, the form only truly developed and reached maturity in written literature between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries, as seen in works such as *Cung oán ngâm khúc* (Nguyễn Gia Thiều), the vernacular translation of *Chinh phụ ngâm*, and Nguyễn Du's *Vãn tế thập loại chúng sinh* (Vũ Thanh, 2004).

In *Ai Tu Vãn*, the deployment of *song thất lục bát* plays a central role: the alternation between seven-syllable couplets and the *lục bát* cycle, combined with rhyme schemes and tonal contrasts, produces a distinctive elegiac rhythm that enhances the expression of grief and desolation.

Expressive language is one of the fundamental functions of communication, focused on the speaker and the revelation of inner feelings (Jakobson, 1960). In poetry, this function is amplified through metaphor, repetition, rhythm, and emotionally charged diction.

In *Ai tư vãn*, expressive words such as “desolate,” “lonely,” and “solitary shadow,” along with exclamations of grief like “Alas” or “Oh sorrow,” function as linguistic markers of emotional pain. These devices transform Princess Ngọc Hân’s personal loss into a communal lament, thereby transmitting a sense of collective mourning to her readers.

In the Western tradition, elegy is defined as a mournful poem reflecting on loss. In East Asian and Vietnamese traditions, the equivalent genre is the *ngâm khúc* (lament or chant poem), typically composed in song *thất lục bát* form and designed to be recited in a drawn-out, chant-like voice to convey sorrow.

In the *Hán Việt từ điển* [Sino-Vietnamese dictionary], Nguyễn Văn Khôn (1959) provided the following definitions: “ngâm: a sigh, a moan” (p. 624); and khúc: “a musical piece, a melody” (p. 506). Lê Bá Hán, Trần Đình Sử, and Nguyễn Khắc Phi (1997) argue that *ngâm khúc* is a long lyrical poetic form, usually composed in the *song thất lục bát* form, recited in a chant-like manner to express persistent states of sorrow and grief. For this reason, *ngâm khúc* is also referred to as *khúc* (chant), *vãn* (lament), or *thán* (complaint). In Vietnamese literature, the *ngâm khúc* genre occupies an important position, particularly flourishing from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Many literary scholars, such as Dương Quảng Hàm (1968) and Phạm Thế Ngũ (1997), have likewise emphasized the genre’s strong capacity to convey prolonged melancholy, sorrow, and lamentation, especially through the *song thất lục bát* form.

In sum, the theoretical framework of this study is rooted in poetics as the internal principle of literary construction, developed from *The Poetics of Aristotle* (1965/335 BCE) to Jakobson (1960)’s linguistic theory of the poetic function. Building on Trần Đình Sử’s systematic approach to medieval Vietnamese literature, the analysis situates *Ai tư vãn* within a multilayered poetics such as symbolic vocabulary, artistic epithets, defamiliarized language. Central to this framework is the *song thất lục bát* form, celebrated for its capacity to convey lyrical and tragic sentiments and closely associated with the tradition of *ngâm khúc*. As a genre, *ngâm khúc* - defined as a chant-like, elegiac form - flourished in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Vietnam and became a primary vehicle for expressing prolonged sorrow. By employing this form together with emotionally charged diction and symbolic vocabulary, *Ai tư vãn* is positioned both within and beyond its literary tradition, transforming personal grief into a communal and enduring poetic statement.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis grounded in the principles of poetics and stylistics. The central objective is to explore how *Ai tư vãn* by Princess Lê Ngọc Hân constructs and conveys grief through its symbolic vocabulary, artistic epithets, and defamiliarized language.

The analysis is based on the version of *Ai tư vãn* in the modern Vietnamese transcription and commentary prepared by Lương Văn Đăng and colleagues (1994). These editions provide a

reliable textual foundation, preserving both the linguistic subtleties of the original and accessible annotations for interpretation.

The research employs close reading to trace the system of key vocabulary related to sorrow, loneliness, separation, and fate. Each word group is examined in terms of its frequency, connotations, and role in constructing the psychological progression of the lyrical persona. Special attention is given to: symbolic vocabulary - lexical fields expressing solitude, longing, memory, and loss; artistic epithets - modifiers and descriptive phrases that reconstruct emotional imagery and intensify grief; defamiliarization techniques - syntactic inversions, neologisms, and unusual semantic combinations that disrupt conventional expression and heighten affective force.

In addition, to contextualize *Ai tư vãn*, the study applies a comparative poetics approach. The poem's language and stylistic devices are placed alongside *Chinh phụ ngâm* and *Cung oán ngâm khúc*, two canonical works of the *ngâm khúc* tradition. This comparison highlights both shared conventions - such as reliance on the song *thất lục bát* form - and the distinctive innovations of Princess Ngọc Hân, particularly the direct articulation of female grief and explicit self-naming.

4. Analysis and findings

With sorrow and pain over separation as its dominant emotional undertone, the poem's language is structured through deliberate selection and application, reflecting a unified artistic principle. This approach highlights the emotional state and inner world of the lyrical persona - a wife in the anguish of separation.

4.1. The System of Symbolic Vocabulary

In the 164-line poem, the author makes frequent use of symbolic vocabulary that simultaneously reflects personal emotions and carries profound connotations regarding human fate and the socio-historical context. Throughout the poem, a melancholic, mournful tone permeates the expressions of a woman who has lost her husband. This tone is vividly conveyed through a cohesive and expansive system of vocabulary. Princess Ngọc Hân consistently employs lexicon related to loneliness and sorrow such as: *bơ vơ* (desolate): “Nỗi con cô cút, nỗi mình bơ vơ”; *quạnh quẽ* (gloomy solitude): “Thương ôi, quạnh quẽ trước lầu nhện chằng”; *chiếc bóng* (a lone shadow), *lẻ đôi* (separated pair): “phòng không chiếc bóng, phượng hoàng lẻ đôi”; *vắng vè* (deserted): “thương ôi, vắng vè giữa trời tuyết sa!”; *biệt ly* (separation): “lòng trời tráo trở, vận người biệt ly”

These words depict emptiness in contrast to a once-companionate past, creating a quiet depth in emotional perception, which in turn enhances the sorrowful effect and evokes a profound void.

Additionally, vocabulary that evokes longing and recollection of the past is employed to recreate the flow of retrospective consciousness and to underscore the contrast with present pain. Words such as: *ngỡ* (mistakenly believed): “ngỡ hương trời bằng lãng còn đâu”; *nhớ* (remember): “Ngỡ tàn vàng nhớ cảnh ngự chơi”; *trông* (look out for): “Càng trông càng một xa vời”; *thương* (love/mourn): “Lòng đùm bọc thương hoa đoái cội / Thương ôi...thương ôi / Còn trúng nước thương vì đôi chút / Cắt chân tay thương khó xiết chi...”; *bồi hồi* (restless): “Tuồng

thôi lại bồi hồi trong dạ”; xót (grieve): “Duyên hảo hợp xót rày nên lẻ”; kinh sợ, lo phiền, trần trọc, mong, bàng hoàng (terror, anxiety, restlessness, yearning, bewilderment). These choices reveal a flood of grief-stricken emotions, illustrating a love that lingers and aches through remembrance.

Princess Ngọc Hân also utilizes vocabulary that expresses the anguish of final separation and loss, such as: đoạn trường (gut-wrenching sorrow): “Nỗi đoạn trường còn sống, còn đau”; cạn, vùi (dry, buried): “Nào hay sông cạn, bể vùi”; chia (split): “Nèo u minh khéo chia đôi ngã”; chưa trọn (unfulfilled): “Kiếp này chưa trọn chữ duyên”; gãy (broken): “Nửa cung gãy phím cầm lành”; cô cút, bơ vơ.

These terms portray a shattered emotional state in the face of irreparable loss. At the same time, the poet conveys a sense of helplessness before fate and reflects on the impermanence and unpredictability of life through lines like: “Công đường ấy mà nhân đường ấy / Cõi thọ sao hẹp bấy hóa công” (“Such great deeds met such a cruel fate - why is life-span so narrow under Heaven’s design?”)

Thus, the system of vocabulary expressing inner torment is densely organized. The entire emotional landscape appears dark and heavy, forming a detailed psychological map. The vocabulary is not used in isolation but arranged into a logical system that represents the lyrical persona’s psychological progression: from loneliness, to longing and remembrance, to acknowledgment of loss, and finally to the acceptance of a hopeless reality.

In addition to vocabulary portraying the character's inner world, the poem incorporates numerous words depicting barren nature - wind, moon, rain, mist, clouds, snow - which traditionally symbolize harmony and love, but here are repurposed to emphasize emotional estrangement. For instance, the moon, typically a symbol of eternity, becomes a “dim moon”: “Buồn trông trăng, trăng mờ thêm tủi” (“Sorrowfully gazing at the moon - its dimness deepens my sorrow”)

Symbols like uyên ương (mandarin ducks) and phượng hoàng (phoenix), conventionally representing conjugal happiness, are juxtaposed with: đoạn trường, chiếc bóng, lẻ đôi (“gut-wrenching grief”, “a lonely shadow”, “separated pair”). These associations heighten the sense of loss and abandonment. Natural oppositions, like “spring passed, flowers remaining” (xuân về, hoa ở) serve to underscore solitude: “Buồn thay nhẽ! xuân về, hoa ở / Mối sầu riêng ai gỡ cho xong!” (“Alas! Spring had passed, but the flowers remain - who can unravel this private sorrow?”).

4.2. Artistic Epithets

In the poem, artistic epithets are employed to reconstruct emotional imagery, playing a vital role in expressing the tumultuous, torn inner world of the lyrical persona. These epithets are often paired with images of desolation, separation, and gloom. For instance: phòng tiêu lạnh lẽo (cold, desolate boudoir): “Gió hiu hắt, phòng tiêu lạnh lẽo” (“With a faint wind blowing, the boudoir is cold and lonely”) hoa héo ron ron (wilted flowers, shriveled and lifeless): “Trước thềm lan hoa héo ron ron!” (“Before the orchid porch, flowers wilt with lifeless sorrow!”) These

descriptions not only depict the setting but also evoke emotional devastation, suggesting an overwhelming sense of emptiness and cold isolation.

The line *xe rồng thăm thăm, bóng loan rầu rầu* (the dragon carriage is distant, the phoenix shadow is mournful) employs *thăm thăm* (vast and deep) and *rầu rầu* (melancholy) not merely to illustrate spatial separation but to metaphorically express the chasm between the realms of the living and the dead. This epithet communicates the notion of absence - death not just as a physical departure, but as an absolute severance from love and affection.

Additionally, the juxtaposition of contrasting epithets serves to heighten emotional intensity. Some epithets are reconstructed from recollections of the past, such as: *rõ ràng vẻ thúy* ("splendid jade-like beauty") "*Sang yêu muôn đội ơn trên / Rõ ràng vẻ thúy, nói chen tiếng cầm*" ("Favored by royalty and praised by all - her jade-like beauty shone among the music and grace")

This vivid memory of imperial court life and romantic fulfillment contrasts starkly with the present sorrow, forming a literary technique of antithesis that enhances the poem's emotional resonance.

Artistic epithets in *Ai tư vãn* also serve metaphorical functions and contribute to reimagining imagery. For example, *mưa thu trái tiết* (autumn rain out of season): "*Từ nắng hạ, mưa thu trái tiết / Xót mình rồng mỗi một chẳng yên!*" ("From summer's heat to untimely autumn rain - grieved for the dragon's weary restlessness")

This unusual seasonal reversal is a metaphor for the disruption of fate and love. Similarly, epithets like *trăng mờ* (dim moon) and *hoa buồn* (sorrowful flowers) suggest that nature itself is no longer immutable but instead reflects the emotional landscape of the human soul. The moon no longer glows with its usual brilliance but appears dim under the weight of the speaker's despair.

To express defiance toward fate and to criticize the workings of the cosmos, the poem utilizes striking epithets such as: *trời tráo trở* (fickle heavens): "*Lòng trời tráo trở, vận người biệt ly*" ("The heart of Heaven is fickle, human fate cast into separation") *máy Tạo bất bằng* (unjust Creation): "*Ngán thay, máy Tạo bất bằng / Bóng mây thoát đã ngát chùng xe loan!*" ("Alas! Creation is unjust - like clouds fading, the phoenix carriage disappears"). These phrases express a clear, emotional protest that elevates the poem's personal tragedy to a cosmic level.

In summary, the poem's artistic epithets, with their unconventional structures and intense imagery, go beyond ordinary descriptive function. They work to construct and reveal the mournful emotional current within the linguistic framework, enhancing the poem's poetics effect and emotional depth.

4.3. Defamiliarized Language

To heighten the tragic emotional current, the language of *Ai tư vãn* is further shaped through the technique of defamiliarization - achieved by creating unexpected, unusual linguistic combinations. A prime example is the poet's insertion of concrete realities into juxtaposition with allusions drawn from classical Chinese references: *Hằng Nga* (the Moon Goddess): "*Giương Hằng Nga đã bụi màu trong*" ("The Moon Goddess's mirror is now dust-covered and dim"), *điện*

quế (cassia palace), nguồn hoa (the source of blossoms): “Theo phen điện quế, theo lần nguồn hoa” (“Once graced the cassia palace, once entered the source of blossoms”) gương Hán cung (mirror of the Han palace): “Này gương là của Hán Cung” (“This mirror belonged to the Han Palace”). These images imbue the poem with a sense of sacred destiny and simultaneously reflect a heartbreaking reality of shattered fates and estranged love.

The poet also subverts conventional syntactic structures by crafting verses that lack explicit subjects, contributing to a sense of ambiguity and emotional disorientation. Though the speaker is clearly the one experiencing loss, many verses feature a “distancing of the self.” For instance: “Giờ sao bỗng thờ ơ lặng lẽ” (“Why now this sudden apathy and silence?”)

Here, it is unclear who is being “apathetic” or “silent” - is it Heaven, the world, or a person? The ambiguity transforms the line into a cry of anguish, devoid of direction - a lament cast into the void.

Moreover, defamiliarization appears in combinations of words that typically do not coexist, forming syntactic anomalies that express ineffable grief: “Nặng lòng vàng đá, cạn lời tóc tơ” (“Heavy-hearted with steadfast love, yet speechless on threads of fate”)

The structure “nặng lòng vàng đá” (heavy-hearted with gold and stone) appears syntactically unusual - possibly a case of inversion, but the mixture of one verb (nặng lòng) with three abstract nouns (vàng, đá, tóc tơ) defies straightforward parsing. Such combinations resist conventional grammatical restoration and instead must be interpreted emotionally. Behind this “linguistic disorder” lies a deeply troubled psyche, weighed down by grief.

Inverted syntax, or đảo trang, is deployed extensively to amplify emotional impact. This includes fronting interjections and rearranging the subject - predicate order to produce explosive, mournful expressions: “Đau đớn thay, ấy cảnh chiêm bao” (“Oh, how painful - such is this dream-like vision”); “Thương ôi, quạnh quẽ trước lầu nhện chăng!” (“Alas! Such desolation before the tower, where only spiderwebs remain.”); “Buồn thay nhẽ, Sương rơi, gió lọt” (“Alas! Mist falls, winds seep through”); “Ngán thay máy Tạo bất bằng” (“Alas! How unjust are the workings of Creation”). These lines create emotional ruptures - verbal outbursts akin to sobs caught in the throat, heightening the poem’s affective force.

In addition, the poem employs symbolic neologisms that reflect the speaker’s subjective worldview. Instead of conventional expressions like nguồn nước (“water source”) or nỗi buồn (“sorrow”), the poet coins: nguồn tình (“source of affection”); nỗi lai lịch, nỗi sinh cơ (“the sorrow of origin”, “the sorrow of vitality”); cõi thọ (“realm of lifespan”) instead of cõi trời (“heavenly realm”); mạch sầu (“vein of sorrow”) instead of mạch nguồn (“spring vein”); tắc lòng (“a span of heart”) instead of tắc ruột (“a span of gut”) or tắc đất (“a span of land”)

These unconventional constructions open up a surreal dimension of meaning, evoking irrational anxieties and fractured emotions. They reflect the disrupted, heavy inner state of the speaker and deepen the reader’s immersion into her psychological and emotional world.

4.4. The Artistic Language of Ai tư vân in Comparison with “Chinh phụ ngâm” and “Cung oán ngâm khúc”

In *Chinh phụ ngâm khúc giảng luận* (published by Á Châu), the author Thuận Phong (1953) discusses the influence of *Chinh phụ ngâm* on subsequent literary works, including *Ai tư vãn*, asserting that the latter bears influence from Đoàn Thị Điểm's vernacular (Nôm) translation. This article seeks to reassess that claim through the lens of textual history and poetics-language perspective. From a historical perspective, existing research suggests that the Nôm translation of *Chinh phụ ngâm* (attributed either to Đoàn Thị Điểm or Phan Huy Ích) consists of 412 verses in song thất lục bát form. The earliest recorded publication is from 1902, with some evidence pointing to an earlier version dated around 1815. In any case, these dates do not align with the period in which *Ai tư vãn* was composed - between 1792 (the year of Emperor Quang Trung's death) and 1799 (the year of Princess Ngọc Hân's passing). Therefore, it is highly unlikely that the author of *Ai tư vãn* had access to any vernacular *Chinh phụ ngâm* translation. However, in the field of translation studies, we must acknowledge that the survival of textual materials does not always reflect their original circulation. Thus, dating alone is insufficient to prove influence; instead, it is essential to examine the textual nature and later reception of *Ai tư vãn*. This section will explore *Ai tư vãn*'s distinctive literary value by comparing its poetics language with that of *Chinh phụ ngâm khúc* and *Cung oán ngâm khúc* - two of the most famous ballads in the tradition of vernacular Vietnamese poetry.

From a poetics-linguistic standpoint, although all three poems share emotional themes and reflect a common historical context - specifically, the flourishing of vernacular poetry in 18th-century Vietnam - they differ significantly in how they construct the lyrical subject's inner voice. *Ai tư vãn* frequently employs intense, direct expressions of grief. Its language is urgent, overflowing with mournful emotion, especially through exclamatory particles and visceral vocabulary. The speaker appears in sharp relief: a fractured, sorrow-stricken, grieving self. By contrast, *Chinh phụ ngâm*, in its vernacular translations, often evokes a quieter melancholy. The language is softer, more allusive, and leans heavily on conventional poetics symbols and landscapes to mirror inner emotion. Rather than cry out in anguish, the voice of the *chinh phụ* (soldier's wife) broods, immersed in wistful longing. The lines tend toward subtle emotional diffusion, making sorrow feel persistent, muted, and eternal. Consider, for instance:

“Chón Hàm Dương chín khúc cung đào

Nỗi oán này kim cổ biết là bao!”

(*Chinh phụ ngâm khúc*, câu 67 - 68)

The poet references Hàm Dương, cung đào, and kim cổ - allusions steeped in literary tradition. These classical references demand prior cultural knowledge to be interpreted, and they elevate the poem's tone to one of meditative, symbolic resonance. This stands in stark contrast to *Ai tư vãn*'s direct emotional articulation, as seen in a line like:

“Đau đớn thay, ấy cảnh chiêm bao...”

("Oh how painful - such is this dream-like scene...")

Additionally, *Ai tư vãn* employs poetics of self-naming, affirming that the speaker is none other than Ngọc Hân herself. This is in contrast to *Chinh phụ ngâm*, where the speaker's identity is veiled - expressing pain not as an individual but as a generalized figure. While *Ai tư vãn*

evokes deep empathy through its vivid portrayal of personal suffering, *Chinh phụ ngâm* elicits contemplation of a sorrow that is generalized, enduring, and cyclic - almost like a metaphysical fate.

Turning to *Cung oán ngâm khúc*, its language is intricately crafted and polished, replete with Sino-Vietnamese allusions. The poet deliberately refines diction to evoke an elegant yet mournful tone - appropriate for portraying a palace lady burdened by timeless sorrow. Phrases such as *vách quế* (cassia wall), *vũ y* (feathered robe), *má đào* (rosy cheeks), *cửu trùng* (imperial throne), and *bóng câu* (passing shadow of a horse) are all metaphors laden with symbolic weight. The author employs an erudite, scholarly style, drawing on ethical and moral vocabularies that are encoded into imagery and require interpretive effort to understand. In contrast, *Ai tư vãn* favors a more emotionally immediate register. While symbolic language is still present, it is integrated systematically, allowing for clearer interpretation. The poem's frequent use of exclamations and affective vocabulary enhances its accessibility and directness.

From these preliminary comparisons, it becomes evident that *Ai tư vãn*, though thematically aligned with the melancholic spirit of female-authored poetry in medieval Vietnam, asserts its own unique voice. Its poetics language sets it apart through its distinctive tone, personalized expression, and psychological depth. Rather than viewing *Ai tư vãn* as a derivative work influenced by earlier ballads this study proposes recognizing it as a singular linguistic phenomenon - an expression of the author's literary talent and emotional sensitivity. In this light, the work earns a legitimate place within the canon of Vietnamese literature.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study affirm that *Ai tư vãn* exemplifies the expressive and symbolic potential of the song *thất lục bát* form within the *ngâm khúc* tradition, while simultaneously advancing new dimensions of poetic language. Through its system of symbolic vocabulary, artistic epithets, and defamiliarized structures, the poem not only conveys Princess Ngọc Hân's individual grief but also resonates as a communal and cultural lament.

As previous scholarship has emphasized (Nguyễn Lộc, 2004; Đào Thị Thu Thủy, 2010), *Ai tư vãn* inherits the thematic framework of *Chinh phụ ngâm* and *Cung oán ngâm khúc*, particularly in its preoccupation with loss, sorrow, and feminine subjectivity. Yet the poem distinguishes itself by anchoring its voice in a concrete historical event - the death of Emperor Quang Trung. This rootedness produces a heightened realism that departs from the generalized female archetypes of earlier laments. The analysis here demonstrates that Ngọc Hân's use of plain diction, stripped of excessive Sino-Vietnamese compounds, intensifies accessibility while reinforcing the immediacy of grief. Thus, the poem maintains continuity with tradition while innovating in form and voice.

Applying Trần Đình Sử's multi-level poetics framework, the study reveals how the text functions at three layers: the artistic whole, the imagery-symbolic layer, and the linguistic-expressive layer. The symbolic vocabulary constructs an emotional map of loneliness, longing, and despair; the artistic epithets intensify imagery of desolation; and the defamiliarized syntax produces ruptures that mirror psychic breakdown. Collectively, these devices create a cohesive emotional architecture where form and content reinforce each other. This illustrates Jakobson's

(1960) insight that the poetic function lies in the deliberate selection and combination of language to produce aesthetic effect.

Võ Thanh Hương's (2015) perspective on gender roles is corroborated by the present analysis: the poem's diction demonstrates both a submissive, tender femininity and a regal authority as Empress. This duality allows Ngọc Hân to transcend the boundaries of domestic lamentation, elevating her voice to encompass national concerns. The contrast between self-effacing vocabulary ("côi cút," "bơ vơ") and elevated praise of the Emperor ("công đức dày, nư vận càng lâu") reflects both personal and political dimensions of her expression. From a poetics standpoint, this interplay positions *Ai tư vãn* as a rare example of female-authored textual agency in medieval Vietnamese literature.

The comparative discussion with *Chinh phụ ngâm* and *Cung oán ngâm khúc* highlights that while *Ai tư vãn* shares motifs and form with its predecessors, its distinctive use of self-naming and direct, visceral expression of grief mark it as an independent literary phenomenon. Historical evidence suggests Ngọc Hân may not have had access to vernacular translations of *Chinh phụ ngâm* during her lifetime, further supporting the view that similarities are structural rather than derivative. Thus, the poem should be re-evaluated not as a secondary imitation but as a creative innovation within the *ngâm khúc* tradition.

Ultimately, the discussion underscores that *Ai tư vãn* transforms a personal tragedy into a cultural text of enduring value. Its poetics of mournful language allows it to function simultaneously as elegy, historical testimony, and artistic artifact. By foregrounding language as the central site of meaning-making, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of medieval Vietnamese poetics and situates Ngọc Hân's work within both national literary heritage and broader comparative elegiac traditions.

6. Conclusion

From the perspective of poetics, *Ai tư vãn* emerges as a literary work characterized by a distinctive linguistic structure, rich in symbolism and bearing significant historical and literary value. Although Princess Ngọc Hân was not a prolific literary figure (as measured by quantity), with this singular work, she succeeded in crafting a meticulously organized poetics language system - featuring prominent lexical layers, vividly constructed artistic epithets, and especially the innovative use of defamiliarized language. These elements collectively highlight the fusion of subjectivity, landscape, and emotion. Positioning *Ai tư vãn* in dialogue with other vernacular Nôm poems - specifically *Chinh phụ ngâm khúc* - is not intended to establish a direct line of influence, but rather to affirm the author's creative independence, artistic agency, and unique literary identity within the stream of female-authored medieval Vietnamese literature. The poem's mournful language reveals that words in *Ai tư vãn* function not merely as a medium to express personal tragedy but also as a mirror reflecting the precarious nature of human existence, caught between fate and historical forces. By examining the work's linguistic features in depth, we are compelled to recognize *Ai tư vãn* as an artistic discourse of exceptional emotive power.

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