

Ý THỨC NỮ QUYỀN TRONG TRUYỆN NGẮN “CÁI VÚ THỪA” CỦA NGUYỄN THỊ TƯ QUA MỘT SỐ LÝ THUYẾT HIỆN ĐẠI

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TÓM TẮT

Truyện ngắn “Cái vú thừa” của Nguyễn Thị Tư được tiếp cận thông qua hệ thống các kỹ thuật sáng tác gắn với những lý thuyết văn học hiện đại. Cách tiếp cận này là điều kiện cho việc vận dụng lý thuyết diễn ngôn vào nghiên cứu trường hợp văn học hải ngoại. Trên cơ sở đó, bài viết triển khai phân tích tác phẩm dưới góc nhìn lý thuyết diễn ngôn kết hợp các hướng tiếp cận tích hợp để tìm hiểu ý thức nữ quyền. Các phương pháp miêu tả, so sánh và phân tích dữ liệu đóng vai trò quan trọng trong nghiên cứu này. Kết quả nghiên cứu có ý nghĩa cả về phương diện lý luận và thực tiễn. Về lý luận, bài viết góp phần vào việc nghiên cứu tác phẩm hải ngoại trên nền tảng lý thuyết diễn ngôn và vận dụng lý thuyết diễn ngôn với các đường hướng tiếp cận tích hợp. Bên cạnh đó, bài viết còn góp phần vào việc nhận diện và lý giải ý thức nữ quyền trong các sáng tác hải ngoại. Về thực tiễn, kết quả nghiên cứu có thể được sử dụng làm tài liệu tham khảo phục vụ công tác nghiên cứu và giảng dạy các học phần Văn học, Ngôn ngữ học.

Từ khóa: *Cái vú thừa, diễn ngôn, cách tiếp cận kết hợp, Nguyễn Thị Tư, ý thức nữ quyền.*

FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE SHORT STORY “THE USELESS BOOB” BY NGUYEN THI TU THROUGH SOME MODERN THEORIES

ABSTRACT

The short story “*The Useless Boob*” by Nguyen Thi Tu can be examined through narrative techniques informed by modern literary theories. This approach provides a basis for applying discourse theory to the study of overseas literature. Accordingly, this article analyzes the work from the perspective of discourse theory combined with integrated approaches in order to explore feminist consciousness. Descriptive, comparative, and data analysis methods play a central role in this study. The research findings are significant in both theoretical and practical terms. Theoretically, the article contributes to the study of overseas literary works on the foundation of discourse theory and demonstrates the application of discourse theory through integrated approaches. In addition, the study helps to identify and interpret feminist consciousness in overseas literary creations. Practically, the research results can serve as reference materials for research and teaching in Literature and Linguistics courses.

Keywords: *discourse, feminist consciousness, integrated approach, Nguyen Thi Tu, The Useless Boob.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Overseas literature, a term introduced by Nguyen Hue Chi (1994), constitutes an integral component of Vietnamese literature. Works of overseas literature often reflect the sense of fate of individuals and their era. However, the study of overseas literature is still limited in Vietnam. Recognizing the significance of this field, this study seeks to contribute to its further exploration.

The short story *The Useless Boob* by Nguyen Thi Tu demonstrates a number of creative techniques belonging to the system of modern literary theory. Through these techniques, the narrative articulates perspectives on the fate of women living away from their homeland while simultaneously addressing issues of gender and religion. Thus, the creative sensibility, scope of reflection, and writing techniques in the short story are distinctive. This research contributes to the broader study of overseas short stories written by women.

In the 20th century, the emergence of modern theories such as ritual-myth criticism (in the 1950s), intertextuality (1967), absurd literature (from the 1950s to the 1960s), cognitive linguistics (1980), and others directly shaped the diversity and complexity of both scholarly approaches and literary creation. In 1952, Harris introduced the term “discourse” in *Discourse Analysis*, which refers to the study of language at a level larger than the sentence. By the 21st century, discourse theory was explored by researchers from various fields such as sociology, literary theory, and linguistics. This theory enables us to study the literary body as a complex, structurally creative whole.

Ideas and thoughts always exist in an inseparable relationship through their expressions. Different forms of expression reflect different ideas, and creative techniques help convey these ideas. Accordingly, this study examines the discourse forms constructed through modern literary techniques in order to identify and interpret the feminist consciousness embedded in the work.

2. METHODS

This study primarily uses qualitative data analysis to survey the textual material, select

relevant evidence, and analyze discourse elements within the defined scope of research. This method is aligned with the following approaches:

The descriptive method is employed to present the concept of discourse and the research results. We describe several techniques from modern theories identified in the text “*The Useless Boob*”. In this case, discourse theory plays a foundational role in the execution of these techniques to highlight feminist consciousness.

The comparative method is used to trace the similarities and differences between the Book of Genesis and the details of the story. Through this, the spirit of mythological counter-discourse is recognized and argued. Additionally, a diachronic cultural comparison is conducted to better understand the feminist ideas of the author.

3. THEORETICAL BASIS

3.1. An overview of discourse theory

The term “discourse” first appeared in *Gorgias* (a work attributed to the sophist Gorgias, a member of the group that included Callicles, Socrates, Chaerephon, and Polus) around 483 – 375 BCE. Discourse is closely tied to rhetoric, the art of persuasion practiced by sophists. According to *Gorgias*, rhetoric is the art of handling discourse, and all forms of art refer to discourse in some way. In *Symposium and Phaedrus* (385 – 370 BCE), Plato used the term “discourse” to refer to the argumentative speeches of sophists.

In the 20th century, discourse was foundational to the emergence of a new theoretical approach, primarily through Ferdinand de Saussure. In his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), Saussure proposed the distinction between language and speech, laying the groundwork for the reemergence of discourse theory. In the 1940s, the development of textual linguistics, which focuses on the study of language beyond the sentence level, contributed to the birth of discourse analysis as a formal field. In 1952, the term “discourse” was further developed in Zellig S. Harris's work *Discourse Analysis*. We recognize Zellig S. Harris as the founder of the discourse analysis movement in the 20th century (Nguyen Hoa, 2003).

Different from the philosophical and linguistic perspectives, from the sociological perspective, in 1961, Foucault published *Madness and Civilisation*, marking the connection between discourse and power. In 1970, in an inaugural lecture at an educational institution in France, Foucault talked about *The Order of Discourse*, laying the foundation for the study of power and knowledge through discourse analysis. According to Macdonnell (1986), “Foucault’s study begins the immense task of dismantling the theme that knowledge is an expression of men’s [sic] ideas”.

From the perspective of literary theory, in *Discourse in the Novel*, Bakhtin (1981) perceives genre. According to him, any specific discourse finds its target. The unfamiliar words used express thoughts, opinions, value judgments and general tone. They enter a space of tension and agitation in a dialogical manner. This has an important shaping role for the discourse, especially in terms of semantics and has an impact on style (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276). For him, “language for individual consciousness, located on the boundary between oneself and the other. The words in language are half of the other” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293).

In general, the term “discourse” has been redefined by scholars from various fields such as linguistics, sociology, and literary theory. As Fowler (1996) noted, “Today it seems like anything can be considered discourse.” In contrast, Halliday (1994) argued that discourse analysis should be based on theories of practical language use. Discourse analyses that do not follow this principle are merely “continuous commentaries on the text” (Halliday, 1994).

In this study, discourse is understood as a form of written and spoken communication that integrates linguistic units beyond the sentence level with non-linguistic factors to achieve cohesion and coherence in meaning-making.

3.2. An overview of feminist theory

Historically, there have been three periods of feminist theory. The first stage began in 1792 with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The work was considered a feminist declaration of independence. Then, in 1865, women’s suffrage was expressed by Mill in his election platform.

In the second stage, feminist theory developed strongly in many fields. Originating from the 60s of the 20th century, a wave of political and cultural struggles to eliminate gender stereotypes and promote the role of women took place throughout Western Europe and North America. In particular, in the 70s, feminist film theory was born. This theory aims to understand cinema as a cultural activity that represents and reproduces myths about women and femininity (Smelik, 2016).

In the third stage, in the 90s, feminist movements such as separatist feminism, gender-affirming feminism, anarchist feminism, etc. emerged. During this period, gender consciousness continued to develop and became one of the ideological phenomena of the era, studied by many different disciplines. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler introduced the concept of the heterosexual matrix, criticizing the issue of heterosexuality.

In this article, feminist criticism is understood as an ideological framework rooted in women’s social roles and positions. Feminist consciousness is part of gender consciousness, associated with women’s rights.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The short story “*The Useless Boob*” by the author Nguyen Thi Tu demonstrates several modern literary techniques from various theoretical perspectives, such as intertextuality, ritual-myth criticism, absurd literature, cognitive linguistics, feminist criticism, and discourse analysis.

Intertextuality was proposed as a critical theory in the mid-20th century, closely linked to Julia Kristeva’s work *Word, Dialogue and Novel* (1966). However, the term was used earlier in antiquity, and in the 20th century, figures like Ferdinand de Saussure, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Roland Barthes also employed this concept. Intertextuality is a phenomenon, sometimes defined as “a set of relationships that a text has with other texts and/or discourses across different cultural domains and contexts” (Zengin, 2016, p.299). In *The Useless Boob*, intertextuality manifests in three different forms: direct quotation, the reworking of fairy tales, and anti-mythology.

At the beginning of the short story, the writer directly quotes Steven Wright: “If a man says something in the forest and no woman is there to hear him, is he still wrong?” (Nguyen Thi Tu, 2019, p.81). The direct quotation of Steven Wright reflects a discourse on gender. The author reinforces her argument on gender through the perspective of an influential male comedian. The quoted text represents a male discourse. This citation adds objectivity to the author’s perspective on gender. Moreover, as a comedian, Steven Wright’s quotation introduces an element of humor. The author uses gender discourse through this direct citation. Elements such as gender, profession, and the ideological stance of the source subject are utilized to develop feminist ideas.

Reworking fairy tales involves rewriting traditional stories while preserving the core plot. This is a common practice in the transmission of fairy tales. The story “*Bỏ cha vào rừng*” (literally: “Leaving Father in the Forest”) teaches the value of filial piety. The Vietnamese cultural mindset of “*respect for elders and honoring parents*” plays a key role in this discourse. The parable functions as a mega metaphor, representing a life philosophy, while the point of view is metaphorical (Tran Dinh Su, 1998, p.149). This viewpoint reflects cultural ideologies and the author’s behavioral stance. In Vietnamese society, there exists a cultural institution around age and social status. The principle of “*sống lâu lên lão làng*” (literally: living long enough to become the village elder) stems from this institution. According to this belief, older individuals possess significant experience and knowledge due to their longer lives, making them fit for positions of social leadership.

Additionally, the parable reflects familial relationships. The figures of “*the blind father*”, “*the man*”, and “*the young son*” represent familial ties. The patriarchal mindset is expressed here. The characters in the story are all male, embodying archetypes of different generations. However, the structural repetition through the cyclical behavior of the son toward the father creates a critical discourse. The son is unfilial toward his father. This notion is buried within the deeper meaning, which is

summarized from the surface, literal meaning. The structural repetition plays a role in triggering a shift in the reader’s thinking from the superficial to the deeper conceptual layers. Moreover, the critical discourse is set within a cultural framework, creating an opposing stance to the prevailing concept of filial piety. Culture plays a crucial role in activating the reflective thought process regarding the discourse on filial piety.

The connection between the fairy tale “*Bỏ cha vào rừng*” and the protagonist’s (referred to as “*I*”) story is made through their similarities. This connection reflects the psychological depth of the character “*I*”. The fairy tale serves as a mechanism to trigger the protagonist’s memory through two discourses: “*My mother said: You’re a man. Don’t cry. You must be strong and talented, a real man*” (Nguyen Thi Tu, 2019, p.78) and “*My father said: It’s not easy to be a man. You have to have your own achievements. You must also be a pillar for your family. Father worked hard outside day after day. Mother all her life worked hard at home. Dad earned money. Mom handled the house. Never enough money, they often quarreled. She cried for her bad luck. For having married a poor man.*” (Nguyen Thi Tu, 2019, p.82). These discourses reflect the role of men in the family.

Historically, the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture and animal husbandry marked the decline of women’s social positions. Matrilineality was replaced by patrilineality. Moreover, throughout history, Vietnam was once under Chinese domination. Thus, Vietnamese culture has inevitably been influenced by Chinese culture. The Confucian ideology of “*patriarchy and male superiority*” has strongly shaped the mindset and actions within Vietnamese family life. Through the discourses of the characters “*my mother*” and “*my father*,” Nguyen Thi Tu critiques the roles and positions of men in the family. The author positions the character of “*the old man*” (the protagonist “*I*”) as the anchor of this reflection, as he recalls his childhood. Through this character, the author indirectly expresses thoughts about gender in family relationships. By using the male point of view to critique the role of men, the argument gains strength.

The psychological mechanism of age and developmental stages underpins this process of recollection. The nostalgia for the past unconsciously exists in the minds of older individuals. In the protagonist's memory, the father is associated with "*A few drops of semen, a wallet, and sometimes a leather belt for discipline. End of list. A true man never shows his emotions. Doesn't have any.*" (Nguyen Thi Tu, 2019, p.83). These childhood experiences form the foundational knowledge of gender, which is subjective. This lived experience allows the protagonist to recognize and reassess the prevailing ideologies. In modern society, the division of labor where "*Father worked hard outside day after day. Mother all her life worked hard at home*" (Nguyen Thi Tu, 2019, p.82) is no longer the only model for family life. Modern society, with its ideals of "*gender equality*", helps relieve the pressure on men and enhances the position of women. The term counter-discourse appears in David Lee's *Introduction to Cognitive Linguistics* (2001). Counter-mythical discourse refers to the rewriting of a myth with an opposing ideology or discourse. In the short story *The Useless Boob*, the author rewrites the Book of Genesis with a counter-mythical discourse: "*I am your God. She started talking. I was terrified. She had a face similar to Jesus who I uns often jealous of. Yes. The Creator is a woman.*" (Nguyen Thi Tu, 2019, p.84), and "*The Old Testament here is mistaken. I didn't make Adam first. I made Eva so she could manage the earth.*" (Nguyen Thi Tu, 2019, p.84). The Old Testament, "*God made all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them; and whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name.*" (Matthews, 2016, p.16). Additionally, the author builds the symbol of Eve with the physical description of "*having three breasts was awkward.*" (Nguyen Thi Tu, 2019, p.84). God compares humans to animals through the discourse: "*I had given four to the lioness, twelve to the sow and ten to the female dog*" (Nguyen Thi Tu, 2019, p.84). This kind of thinking about physical appearance may have been inherited from ancient Greek philosophers. In Symposium and Phaedrus, "*each being had four arms, and the number of legs was equivalent to the number of arms, with two*

faces, and the neck was round." (Platon, 2020, p.77). Eve's attitude toward her appearance reflects the concept of female beauty through the discourse: "*she had two hands, two feet, two eyes, two ears, and she liked that balance.*" (Nguyen Thi Tu, 2019, p.84). Balance or symmetry is considered the standard of female beauty. This thinking, presented in Genesis, leads to a counter-historical view of beauty, as the law of symmetry was first discovered in the Middle Stone Age (Do Van Khang, 2010, p.7).

The poetics of the body, one of the key techniques in feminist theory, originates from the idea of the body. It is the process of cognition through the body (embodiment). Bodily elements are tied to biological mechanisms and serve a gender-specific function. Among these, the breast reflects this function. In Greek mythology, "*the Earth Mother Goddess Gaia has ample breasts full of life-giving force*" (Nguyen Van Khoa, 2018, p.32). The breast symbolizes the source of life. In the Dictionary of World Cultural Symbols, the breast is associated with the female principle. On the female body, the breasts are located on the right and left sides, symbolizing balance or limitation. The right side represents the sun, while the left side represents the moon (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1997, p.664). In contrast to this idea, Eve's use of the "*Useless Boob*," the "*Extra Breast*," to create Adam is a form of satire and feminist awareness. On the other hand, in the Book of Genesis, "*Adam's rib*" is used to create Eve, implying that women are a part of the male body. This part serves the function of bearing and carrying, positioning women as helpers to men. The gendered idea in *The Useless Boob and Genesis* presents a stark contrast: women as a part of the male body versus men as a part of the female body.

The change in gender representation of God and the perception of Eve preceding Adam directly counteracts the discourse of Genesis. Nguyen Thi Tu could be the first writer to recreate the discourse to Genesis through a feminist consciousness. The term absurd dates back to ancient times, and by the 18th century, the modern concept of absurdism emerged. This philosophy became the foundation for the emergence of absurd literature in the 20th

century. Existentialism is considered a milestone in the development of absurd philosophy. From a logical standpoint, the absurd contradicts the rules of logic. From an epistemological perspective, the absurd refers to something that opposes reason and cannot be explained by thought (Nguyen Van Dan, 2002).

The absurd element is evident in the short story *The Useless Boob* through the construction of the character's journey in search of a name. A name is a tool for identification, used in communication to distinguish between individuals. In the course of life, it is common for someone to lose or forget their name. However, the case of "accidentally dropping one's name" has never been encountered. A name belongs to the realm of the spiritual and immaterial, which makes the act of dropping one's name and searching for it an absurdity. The character "I" repeatedly mentions this journey: "I turned back, panic-stricken, to look for it. Unfortunately, I didn't remember exactly where to look. The road twisted and turned. I lost hope. Days and years later I kept wandering this way and that. Asking everywhere. No one had seen it." (Nguyen Thi Tu, 2019, p.81), "Every day I was busy looking for the name I had carelessly dropped." (Nguyen Thi Tu, 2019, p.82), "Every day I still looked for my name that I had lost somewhere. No use" (Nguyen Thi Tu, 2019, p.82). This journey ends when the name is found, and the character uses bodily discourse to counter emotional discourse: "For so long I thought my name was Solitude And Sorrow. No. My real name is Useless Boob." (Nguyen Thi Tu, 2019, p.84). The character "I" is male, and the acknowledgement of the name reinforces the correctness of the counter-mythical discourse: that men are a part of women's bodies.

The absurd element is further exhibited in *The Useless Boob* through the character "I" engaging in a monologue: "One morning I got up, looked into the mirror. A completely strange face looked back at me. How can this be? It had my hair but nothing else. I looked behind me, but I was alone. "F... you, the one with-no-name!" It suddenly threw obscenity into my face." *Dreams. Plans. Hopes. Forget it. Throw them all away. Your life from now on is only about your woman. Try to make the bitch happy if you can.*" (Nguyen Thi

Tu, 2019, p.82). Monologues are not uncommon in character development, but a monologue with the intent to deny one's self-identity is rare in traditional literary works. The character "I" perceives the reflection in the mirror as "a strange face", rejecting the connection with this reflection and affirming the consciousness about love and women. The character experiences absurdity in the process of self-awareness and emotional perception of "the woman" in the character's life. The absurd element also appears in the ending of the short story. The repetition of the phrase: "The boy in the Sunday Bible class story lay still in my head for decades, suddenly popped out." (Nguyen Thi Tu, 2019, p.84), "He was walking towards me, a rope in his hand. I stood still. Dumbfounded. The raisin exploded into a dumb thin old man, grey hair, powerless, useless" (Nguyen Thi Tu, 2019, p.84). The detail about "the story told in Sunday school class" - The Father in the Forest - and the "rope" is reused to create a connection with previous parts of the story. Through the "embodiment of the body" consciousness, the character "I" has three embodiments: the boy in the Sunday school story (the past embodiment), "I stood there" (the present embodiment), and "the old man" (the present embodiment). The detail of the boy in the story resembling the character's own son, and the mother's tears, which were once advised to be stopped, now fall (Nguyen Thi Tu, 2019, p.84), creates doubts about the character's identity. The relational images established between the "father" and "I" through the "rope" detail suggest the possibility of a cyclical narrative about domestic violence across generations. The story's structure, based on modern theoretical techniques, leads to the "blurring" of the plot, and the connections occur according to the traditional centrifugal principle. From this perspective, the feminist consciousness is formed through the experience of domestic violence. It allows the expression of negative reflections about men and positive reflections about women.

In addition to affirming the role, position, and value of women, *The Useless Boob* by Nguyen Thi Tu also shows women's sympathy for men. In modern society, men are under pressure because they are the pillars of the family. They carry loneliness and sadness from childhood to

adulthood. They are husbands and fathers responsible for their wives and children, but their contributions are easily forgotten. The character “I” mentions that “*Father worked hard outside day after day*” (Nguyen Thi Tu, 2019, p.82), and the character herself also carries this burden. Pressure not only motivates men to fulfill their responsibilities to their families, but also the cause of domestic violence. That is the painful consequence of the cycle of making a living. The fact that the character “I” once thought her name was “*Solitude And Sorrow*” before discovering the name “*The Useless Boob*” and the comparison with Jesus shows the inner despair of a subject who is considered to be male. The character “I” is jealous of Jesus because on the way to Golgotha, Jesus received help from Simon and Veronica, while the character “I” was alone, facing the difficulties of life (Nguyen Thi Tu, 2019, p.82–83). In addition, the detail that the character “I” only acknowledges the mother’s merit but seems not to see the father’s merit shows that men are both victims and perpetrators of a rigid system of gender concepts.

5. CONCLUSION

Nguyen Thi Tu’s short stories demonstrate creative techniques from a number of modern theories, such as intertextuality, ritual-myth criticism, absurd literature, cognitive linguistics, feminist criticism, and discourse. This combination creates a distinctive character for the story. Perhaps Nguyen Thi Tu is the first female writer to counter-discourse on Genesis. Through this, the writer expresses the feminist spirit.

Intertextuality exists in three forms: quoting verbatim, re-interpreting fairy tales, and counter-mythic discourse. In which, other issues are simultaneously implemented, such as alienation, absurdization, repetition, etc. In general, feminist thought governs the use of these techniques. This thought is formed based on the process of embodiment. The character “I” had an unhappy childhood and witnessed the pain of her mother. The father was the cause of this, so the perception of the father is negative. Feminist sensibilities, the scope of married life and techniques of modern theories are the elements that distinguish the short story *The Surplus Breast* from short stories by other overseas writers. The cycle of life is recreated through generations. The element of

“blurring” the plot allows the development of the author’s contemplation.

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