

Vietnamese Religious Culture in Contemporary Prose after the Doi Moi Period

Vu Thi My Hanh

MA., Institute of Social Sciences Information, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences

Email: hanhvtm76@gmail.com

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Abstract: *Literature has proved its true value as a mirror that reflects all cultural and social matters as well as destiny and perspectives of the nation, the spirit of the times. Many generations of Vietnamese writers and poets all through history have constantly exploited the national cultural values in their works. While prose in the Doi Moi period is likely influenced by the era of information technology, it has, nevertheless, been imbued with the beliefs, customs, Mother Goddess worship among many national cultural values as found in the works of writers, even the young generation. The paper discusses religious belief in Vietnam reflected in works of contemporary prose in post-Doi Moi.*

Keywords: Literary Research, Cultural Research, Contemporary Prose, Religious Belief, Folk Culture, Doi Moi

1. A brief overview of beliefs in Vietnam

Vietnam is a home to several religions and beliefs, in which the majority of people have a long tradition of religious practices. All ethnic groups in Vietnam have their own unique forms of belief associated with their economic and spiritual life. Since the *Doi Moi*, the Party and State have highly appreciated the role of beliefs and religions in social life, as confirmed in the Resolution of 5th Plenum of the Party Central Committee (8th tenure): “Respect the people’s right to freedom of belief and non-belief, ensure that religions operate on a normal basis, respect the law, and strictly prohibit undue encroachment on freedom of belief and non-belief. Implement consistently the

policy of great national unity” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1998).

There are many viewpoints on beliefs. According to Doan Van Chuc (1997), belief presents symbolic indications of formation and typical forms of expression that are now referred to as cultural forms or means. Tran Ngoc Them (1997) defines belief as people’s religious conviction in certain things, events, and figures, which cannot be explained by common logical reasoning because it is opposed to scientific thinking. Such research scholars as Phan Ke Binh, Nhat Thanh, Toan Anh, Tan Viet, etc. study beliefs from the perspective of folk culture, thereby examining folk beliefs expressed through the rituals in Vietnamese festivals

and traditional customs. Dang Nghiem Van (1998) indicates that belief is the main component part of religion, defining its strength in the community. Meanwhile, from a cultural perspective Nguyen Chi Ben (2000) identifies that belief is an integral part of culture expressed through worship rituals, a respectful admiration for the powerful forces in relation with people. Regardless of different viewpoints, each form of belief is a reflection of inherent relations in a society, conditions for the existence of different ethnic groups, classes, and cultures. The forms of beliefs are unique to each different cultural space, subject and time, but still express the man's belief in the sacred, his admiration and devotion. Therefore, belief is an historical cultural phenomenon, a category of history. Religious cultures will be approached from tangible and intangible cultural values through worship facilities, rituals of worship, folk anecdotes, relics and festivals related to various forms of Vietnamese beliefs (See: Nguyen Van Bon, 2010).

Vietnamese literature in the *Doi Moi* period strongly reflected the forms of folk beliefs presenting the national cultural identity. The literary works of this period, especially prose, utilized aspects of Vietnamese culture as a strength to ensure success in the author's writing career. Vietnamese people's soul, personality, history and culture are clearly revealed through literature. Several works of contemporary prose are imbued with Vietnamese cultural identity related to religious beliefs.

2. Polytheistic beliefs and Vietnamese cultural space

The primitive belief of Vietnamese people, like many ethnic groups in the world, is the belief in many gods (polytheism).

All natural phenomena are presided over by a god, "everything has its soul, land is governed by a territorial spirit, and rivers are governed by a water deity" (See: Ma Giang Lan, 1998). That belief is located in a typical cultural space of Vietnam, including villages, banyan trees, river wharfs, rivers, and rice fields, etc.

Image of Vietnamese villages can be captured in contemporary prose works such as Giếng Chùa village (*Mảnh đất lắm người nhiều ma*, literally *The Crowded Land of Many Ghosts* by Nguyen Khac Truong), Cổ Đình village (*Mẫu thượng ngàn*, literally *Mother Goddess of Forests* by Nguyen Xuan Khanh), Đông village (*Bến không chồng*, literally *Wharf of Widows* by Duong Huong), Nhài village (*Những bài học nông thôn*, literally *Lessons from the Countryside* by Nguyen Huy Thiep), Hua Tát village (*Những ngọn gió Hua Tát*, literally *The Winds of Hua Tát* by Nguyen Huy Thiep), small villages (*Hiu hiu gió bắc*, literally *Breeze of Northern Winds* by Nguyen Ngoc Tu), Lạc Quần village (*Tôi và gã*, literally *That Gal and I* by Y Ban), etc. Villages are the place of long-standing traditional cultural activities. Whether in the delta (Đông and Giếng Chùa villages), in the midland (Cổ Đình village) or in mountainous area (Hua Tát village), each village has a village communal house that is located at the center of the village, which functions as a working place for village officials and a place for community cultural activities. It also assumes the functions of village meeting place, a traditional cultural institution of the Vietnamese people through the forms of beliefs, festivals presenting deep humanity, thereby maintaining the national fine customs and practices.

The communal house is a cultural center, said Tran Ngoc Them (1997). Village festivals and feasts are held there. The communal courtyard in many villages is also the venue for *chèo* (popular opera) and *tuồng* (classical opera) performances. Besides, the communal house is a religious center, thereby its landform and direction of the main door are believed to determine the prospect of the whole village, and a place of worshipping the village's Tutelary God.

When describing the spiritual life and beliefs of the people of Co Dinh village in "Mẫu thượng ngàn (Mother Goddess of Forests)", Nguyen Xuan Khanh (2006) paid great attention to the communal house - the pride of the people there. In 'Bến không chồng (Wharf of Widows)' by Duong Huong (1990), one of the various outstanding features of Đông village is the village communal house with smooth and glossy bluestone steps and massive columns that represent the strength of the village. People from Đông, Cô Đình, Giếng Chùa villages... all are proud of their villages, as shown in the verse: "Regardless of size, it's named Đông village communal house. There is Đá Bạc bridge over Đình river. Remember me, gal? Remember Đá Bạc bridge and Đông village communal house" (Duong Huong, 1990: 120). This way of thinking is said to be popular among Vietnamese villagers, reflecting their belief in the strength of communal unity, and expressing their pride of native place.

Besides, cultural space in modern prose works is often associated with the image of rivers, rice fields, banyan trees, water wharfs, namely, Đình River (in *Bến không chồng (Wharf of Windows)* by Duong

Huong), Son River (in *Mẫu thượng ngàn (Mother Goddess of Forests)* by Nguyen Xuan Khanh), Cầu River (in *Mảnh đất lắm người nhiều ma (The Crowded Land of Many Ghosts)* by Nguyen Khac Trung), Cái River (in *Con gái thủy thần (Daughter of Water Deity)* by Nguyen Huy Thiep) or immense rivers and rice fields (*Cánh đồng bất tận (Immense Rice Fields)* by Nguyen Ngoc Tu), etc. Vietnamese people have always had feelings of love and affection to rivers because it is associated with memories of their homeland and their parents. Modern writers have described rivers as stated by Tran Quoc Vuong (2003): River-related things are a characteristic of Vietnamese culture. Each river section, a mound of land, a rice field, a tree stump in contemporary prose works has its own history and legend, and even imbued with national history and culture in a deeper sense.

The partially depicted image of villages, rivers, etc. in contemporary prose works provide the readers experiences of a diverse spiritual life, beliefs and unique identities of Vietnamese people.

3. Ancestor worship

In Vietnam, ancestor worship is a primary and popular belief that conveys the viewpoints of the existence of the soul and the blood relationship between the dead and the living through the soul. Through this soul, the deceased keeps an eye on and observes the behavior of their descendants and relatives, scolds or blesses them. In this regard, morality is emphasized. Descendants worship their ancestors to express their gratitude to their superiors. The Vietnamese people are always influenced by the viewpoints of "ancestral blessings", therefore "when we are alive we should pay attention to the burial place

of our deceased ancestors and relatives in order to receive their blessings” (See: Ma Giang Lan, 1998).

Eastern people believe that ‘to live is like being a lodger in the world, and to die is like returning home’, therefore they attach more importance to death anniversary than birth anniversary. The ordinary and practicality of Vietnamese ancestor worship facilitate it easily to become a lifestyle and customs deeply rooted in each individual’s subconscious, which are manifested in a variety of modern prose works. For example, there are cases of the prays for protection and support for a peaceful daily life when making an offering in the *The Crowded Land of Many Ghosts*; Mr. Kien’s solemn posture and attitude on the occasion of his wife’s death anniversary: “With all sincerity, please bless us with good health and prosperity”; the way Mr. Vy, Mrs. Nhon’s sister, standing solemnly with his head down as if in a thoughtful posture; the image of Doai with her hands full of unwashed chicken fat, praying frantically: “I bow to my dear mother to bless me to study abroad for a Cub motorbike” (Nguyen Khac Truong, 2008: 128). Besides, well-prepared offerings are also described in *Không có vua (Without a King)*: a boiled cockerel with a rose in its beak, a jam box, three cups of wine, a teapot... (Nguyen Huy Thiep, 2006). The children’s prayers in *Đường về trần (Way back to Earth)* before their mother’s graves says: “Please rest in peace. Please forgive our mistakes...” (Vo Thi Hao, 2005: 184). In *Mẫu thượng ngàn (Mother Goddess of Forests)*, Nguyen Xuan Khanh (2006) notes the sincere prayers of a third wife to the spirit of the first wife. To show respect for the ancestors, the

Nguyen family in the Đông village in *Bến không chồng (Wharf of Widows)* built an ancestral home for their next generations to worship ancestors. After seven years of failure to track down the person who burn the ancestral home, Mr. Khiem asked to rebuild it on the old ground. He lovingly and sternly taught Nghia, his next eldest son, in the hope of his next successor with “a bright future from the ancestral land” (Duong Huong, 1990). As for the Trinh family in Giếng Chùa village in *Mảnh đất lắm người nhiều ma (The Crowded Land of Many Ghosts)*, there is a picture of Mr. Tiger in a rising position drawn on a hemp yarns-woven cloth behind a bronze jar on their altar. His gums and reaching-out claws looks majestic (Nguyen Khac Truong, 2006).

Delightful details of Vietnamese ancestor worship can be found in almost any literary work. Ancestor worship, which is considered a suitable religion for everyone conveying Vietnamese people’s simple wishes and beliefs, is likely to be permanently spreaded and preserved in their spiritual life.

4. The belief in the Mother Goddesses

Mother Goddess worship/ religion, a relatively typical form of folk belief imbued with the Vietnamese cultural identity, is a unique spiritual cultural phenomenon in the Vietnamese polytheistic beliefs. The adoration of goddesses has long been popular, which is reflected from the legend of the Great Mother Au Co - the earliest Vietnamese fairy goddess - to well-known heroines such as Hai Ba Trung throughout history of building and defending the nation. Besides, the temples, shrines, communal houses, pagodas dedicated to goddesses in relation with the agricultural beliefs and

the principle of yin and yang to advocate the femininity are encountered in all over the country. The goddesses of Moon, Sun, Fire, Rice, or Empress Wa (Nu Wa), etc. are also worshiped, notably Mother Goddess Lieu Hanh, both sacred and dignified but affectionate to the people of Vietnam.

Tran Ngoc Them (1997) emphasizes that living a life of gratitude means the respect for morality, dignity and women. Meanwhile, Tran Quoc Vuong (2003) affirms that the maternity is deeply engraved in human mind and manifested into codes of conduct. According to Ngo Duc Thinh (2001), regardless of the different names, the belief in the Mother Goddesses has originated from the custom of goddess worship, which has now become the religion of the Vietnamese people, presenting Vietnamese identity the most.

Expressions of the principle of maternity in Vietnamese literary tradition are not always the same. Throughout the history of Vietnamese literature, there appeared sister Ly, mother Tom, mother Suot, Vo Thi Sau who were loyal and undaunted during the war. Modern Vietnamese prose depicts an image of a woman with tolerance, kindness and self-sacrifice. They are a heart of families, a bridge of culture among generations.

Women in Vietnamese literature, whether from ancient or modern times, is the embodiment of beauty. Their tolerance, patient altruism and kindness help counter bad and evil, and provide an effective spiritual therapy for each individual. Among the characters of modern writers such as Nguyen Huy Thiep, Nguyen Xuan Khanh, Duong Huong, Nguyen Khac Truong, Y Ban, Nguyen Ngoc Tu, etc., all the female appears to have vivid beauty amidst the

non-stop movement of life. In Nguyen Huy Thiep's works, they are Ms. Bua, Ms. Sinh, Mrs. Tham, the daughter of water deity, Xuan Huong, little Thu, the young married woman rowing boat, etc. who has their own beauty. In *Nàng Bua* (Miss Bua), he affirms that: "Beauty is a noble spiritual dignity of women. It is a heart of tolerance and generosity to all people" (Nguyen Huy Thiep, 2006). They are not only the embodiment of beauty but also a symbol of support, fertility and assistance, for example, little Thu in *Tâm hồn mẹ* (*The Soul of a Mother*), Tham in *Chảy đi sông ơi* (*Flowing dear river*), Sinh in *Không có vua* (*Without a King*) who presents the maternal attributes of love, affection and protection for their own home.

In *Bến không chồng* (*Wharf of Widows*)¹ by Duong Huong (1990), such legendary fabulous women as Ngan - the most beautiful girl in Đông village, Ms. Nhan, Tham, Thuy, Han, etc. whose beauty in daily life and their stories revealed in their self-sacrificing and mercy makes the readers filled with sympathy and admiration. The maternal attribute in the work is light and hope for all.

To Nguyen Khac Truong (2006), the femininity in *Mảnh đất lắm người nhiều ma* (*The Crowded Land of Many Ghosts*) is indicated in a beautiful and radiant glowing face, smooth and bright skin, wasp waist, dark phoenix eyes, etc. of Mrs. Son, Ms. Dao. In an "ugly" community of Gieng Chua hamlet with characters Phuc, Ham, Thu, Uong, Ngac, Cao..., Mrs. Son appears as a typical wife, mother, Vietnamese woman who has a heart of tolerance and

¹ The work won the Vietnam Writers' Association Award 1991.

kindness. She brings a strong vitality and a new light source to the work.

Women are portrayed and praised the most in *Mẫu Thượng ngàn (Mother Goddess of Rivers)*¹ by Nguyen Xuan Khanh. Cultural thought imbued with the work is Mother Goddess religion. Accordingly, all the women therein are gorgeous and energetic, full of love, tolerance, kindness, from the mysterious Tô Cô, the amative Ba Váy to Ms. Đồng Mùi, the miserable Mỗ Hoa, the virgin Nhụ, etc. Even Mrs. Đà of the legendary Đùng is also full of vitality, good fertility, humanity, and femininity... Nguyen Xuan Khanh uses the art of words to clearly depict the Vietnamese culture in this work.

Female writers of modern Vietnamese prose have demonstrated the principle of maternity in Vietnamese culture in their own way. The maternal attributes related to giving birth, child nourishment, intimacy and happiness are conveyed in a voice of heart, because “a woman speaks from her heart”. When writing about women, writer Y Ban is like “drawing a portrait of people of the same sex with her”. She is merged with them, showing their souls and faces with the most realistic angle. A short story *I am a Woman* giving Y Ban both praise and criticism, is controversial among researchers. It is a story of a poor woman with a bunch of kids who does not lose her tolerance, kindness, and selflessness. When she saw a newborn baby abandoned in the forest, she first felt scared, then hurt, stemming from the instinct of a mother (Y Ban, 2006:5). The maternity, which is never exhausted to this illiterate woman who

has never come out of that village, covers her children, the abandoned boy, and the disabled man she takes care of. She cried and felt intense sadness and hurt when she was accused of “sexual harassment”. The excuse “I am a woman” should probably be sympathized and forgiven.

With regard to characters in Vo Thi Hao’s works, readers encounter women who are willing to be generous and benevolent in *Đường về trần (Way back to Earth)*, *Chuông vọng cuối chiều (Late Afternoon Bell Ringing)*. In 2006, Vietnamese literary forum was headed up by the distinct work of *Cánh đồng bất tận (Immense Rice Fields)*² by young writer Nguyen Ngoc Tu from the South, which has been considered a phenomenon of young literature in Vietnam. The stories are written with lots of feelings from the Southern woman, the people from the countryside who work hard, love passionately, and make great sacrifices. It is the silent sacrifice, the passionate love of the woman in *Dòng nhớ (A Line of Memories)*, *Nhà cổ (Ancient House)*; benevolent compassion and sacrifice in *Duyên phận số le (Different Fates)* telling that Xuyen sacrificed her happiness and life for her children to live in peace. “Feeling the sorrows one after another is painfully hidden in my heart...” (Nguyen Ngoc Tu, 2005: 34).

It can be said that the portray of women in post-Doi Moi Vietnamese prose is depicted from multi-dimensional perspective of life. They are beautiful women, imbued with Vietnamese soul, personality, and principle of maternity.

¹ The novel won the Vietnam Writers’ Association Award 2006.

² The collection of short stories won the Vietnam Writers’ Association Award 2006 for outstanding works.

Conclusion

Such insertion of folk cultural attributes into modern prose works has brought a new perspective and development path for Vietnamese literature. More importantly, those literary works are the place to embrace and preserve the diversity and richness of Vietnamese culture.

Those works of modern prose have explored and applied the national cultural values as a strength to create their depth and enduring vitality. Traditional cultural identities such as festivals, beliefs, customs... are saved and spreaded in several different forms, including literature □

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