

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN DUONG THU HUONG'S "THE STORY OF AN ACTRESS" IN THE CURRENT CIRCUMSTANCES OF VIETNAMESE SOCIETY

NHỮNG GÓC NHÌN NỮ QUYỀN TRONG TÁC PHẨM CHUYỆN MỘT NỮ DIỄN VIÊN CỦA DƯƠNG THU HƯƠNG
TRONG BỐI CẢNH XÃ HỘI VIỆT NAM HIỆN NAY

Phan Thị Minh Uyên

Tra Vinh University, Vietnam

Tay Do University, Vietnam

Received: 4/03/2026; Accepted: 27/03/2026; Published: 06/04/2026

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này phân tích truyện ngắn *Chuyện một nữ diễn viên* của Dương Thu Hương dưới góc nhìn Lý thuyết Phê bình Nữ quyền. Bài viết so sánh phê bình nữ quyền với Lý thuyết Tiếp nhận (Reader Response Theory) và lập luận rằng phê bình nữ quyền cung cấp một khung lý thuyết mạnh mẽ hơn cho văn học Việt Nam. Trong khi Lý thuyết Tiếp nhận nhấn mạnh sự diễn giải chủ quan, việc dựa vào phản ứng biểu cảm lại ít phù hợp với độc giả Việt Nam vốn thường hướng nội và kín đáo. Ngược lại, Lý thuyết Phê bình Nữ quyền làm sáng tỏ vai trò, vị trí và trải nghiệm sống của phụ nữ, đồng thời phơi bày cách hệ tư tưởng phụ quyền định hình sự tái hiện trong văn học. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy phê bình nữ quyền không chỉ đào sâu phân tích nhân vật Việt Nam mà còn nâng cao phương pháp giảng dạy bằng cách khuyến khích sinh viên tham gia phê phán các vấn đề về giới và xã hội.

Từ khóa: lý thuyết Phê bình Nữ quyền, lý thuyết Tiếp nhận, Văn học Việt Nam, giới và xã hội

Abstract: This study examines Duong Thu Huong's "The Story of an Actress" through Feminist Literary Theory. It compares feminist criticism with Reader Response Theory and argues that feminist theory offers a stronger framework for Vietnamese literature. While Reader Response Theory emphasizes subjective interpretation, its reliance on expressive reactions is less suited to Vietnamese readers, who are often introverted and discreet. Feminist Literary Theory, by contrast, reveals women's roles, positions, and lived experiences, exposing how patriarchal ideologies shape literary representation. The findings show that feminist criticism not only deepens the analysis of Vietnamese characters but also enhances teaching methods by encouraging students to critically engage with issues of gender and society.

Keywords: Feminist Literary theory, reader Response Theory, Vietnamese Literature, gender and society

1. Introduction

Life is sustained not only by material needs but also by spiritual values, and literature serves as the voice of the spirit, reflecting and shaping human experience. As Mart (2019) and Yang (2002) explain, Reader Response Theory emphasizes the reader's role in co-creating meaning through personal interpretation and emotional engagement. However, this reliance on immediate reactions is less effective in the Vietnamese context, where readers are often introverted and discreet.

By contrast, Feminist Literary Theory provides a structured lens to examine women's roles, positions, and lived experiences, exposing how patriarchal ideologies influence literature (Castle, 2007). The researcher applies this framework to Duong Thu Huong's *The Story of an Actress*, a narrative that portrays two young women, Thom and Be, whose divergent choices reveal the complexities of female destiny in Vietnamese society. Feminist criticism not only deepens literary interpretation but also enhances teaching methods, encouraging students to critically

engage with issues of gender and culture.

2. Literature review

2.1. Feminist literary theory

Feminist literary theory emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s alongside the women's movement, challenging patriarchal structures and cultural norms that reinforced inequality. Literature became a key site for shaping female representation, and critics uncovered hidden meanings in texts, confronting sexism and male dominance. Early feminist criticism focused on women's authorship and depictions, rediscovering neglected voices and reexamining canonical works to expose gender stereotypes. Drawing on psychoanalysis, Marxism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction, feminist theory interrogated the role of gender in literary creation and interpretation (Castle, 2007).

Over time, feminist literary theory expanded into fields such as film, geography, and economics, reflecting its interdisciplinary reach. Aliaga-Lavrijsen and Martín (2026) analyze reproduction and gender politics in speculative fiction, Villanueva-

Nieves (2026) applies feminist geocriticism to racialized identity, Gallon (2026) highlights migrant women's narratives in North America, and Neogi, Bhattacharjee, and Biswas (2026) extend feminist perspectives into economic empowerment in Dhaka. These examples show the adaptability of feminist theory and its relevance in examining identity, power, and cultural norms.

In sum, feminist literary theory offers powerful tools for understanding literature through gender, while its interdisciplinary expansion ensures continued relevance in contemporary studies.

2.2. Reader response theory

Reader Response Theory emphasizes the reciprocal interaction between reader and text, arguing that meaning is not fixed but emerges through engagement. Mart (2019) describes reading as a conversation shaped by cultural and personal contexts, while Yang (2002) notes that texts often present social dilemmas requiring individual responses. In this way, reading becomes a dynamic process influenced by emotions, experiences, and background.

When engaging with different genres, readers assume multiple roles that deepen understanding. Forming responses encourages active reading, enhancing both emotional and intellectual engagement. Classroom discussions are especially valuable, allowing students to articulate feelings, share viewpoints, and refine analytical skills. Readers often find empathy and solace in texts, immersing themselves in narratives that resonate with their own lives.

Recent scholarship affirms the theory's relevance. Dubey (2026) shows how queer and intersectional narratives invite diverse interpretations, while Surujal (2026) demonstrates how internet use and study habits shape student engagement. These studies highlight the adaptability of Reader Response Theory in both literary and pedagogical contexts.

In summary, the researcher views Reader Response Theory as a valuable framework for understanding literature as a dynamic interaction between text and reader. Despite its subjectivity, its focus on reader agency and cultural context ensures continued relevance in criticism and teaching.

2.3. Feminist literary theory as the superior framework for Vietnamese literature

Although both feminist literary theory and reader response theory provide valuable perspectives for literary analysis, feminist literary theory emerges as the more effective and contextually relevant framework for examining Vietnamese literature.

Reader Response Theory emphasizes the subjective interaction between reader and text, suggesting that meaning is co-created through personal experiences, emotions, and cultural background (Mart, 2019; Yang, 2002). This approach has proven useful in classrooms, where discussion fosters diverse interpretations and critical engagement (Dubey, 2026; Surujal, 2026). However, its reliance on immediate and expressive reader reactions makes it less applicable in the Vietnamese context, where readers are often introverted, discreet, and less inclined to articulate personal responses openly.

By contrast, feminist literary theory directly addresses systemic structures of gender and patriarchy, offering clear insights into women's roles, positions, and lived experiences. It situates literature within broader socio-political realities, uncovering how texts reflect or challenge patriarchal ideologies (Castle, 2007). Recent scholarship demonstrates its interdisciplinary strength: Villanueva-Nieves (2026) applies feminist geocriticism to racialized identity, Gallon (2026) explores migrant women's narratives, and Aliaga-Lavrijsen and Martín (2026) analyze reproduction and gender politics in speculative fiction. These studies illustrate how feminist theory not only amplifies women's voices but also interrogates cultural norms and inequalities, making it particularly relevant for Vietnamese literature, where patriarchal structures continue to shape women's lives and literary representation.

The researcher prefers feminist literary theory because it provides deeper analytical power and cultural resonance. Unlike reader response theory, which depends heavily on subjective reactions, feminist criticism offers a structured lens to examine how gender roles and patriarchal ideologies influence Vietnamese texts. This makes it especially suitable for analyzing Duong Thu Huong's *The Story of an Actress*, a narrative that reflects the struggles and consciousness of Vietnamese women. By applying feminist theory, the researcher can highlight issues of gender inequality and cultural expectations while also developing teaching methods that encourage students to critically engage with questions of gender and society.

In sum, while reader response theory emphasizes variability of interpretation, feminist literary theory offers sharper insights into systemic issues of gender and patriarchy. Its ability to connect literature with lived realities of women and cultural dynamics ensures its superiority as a critical framework for Vietnamese literary studies and explains why the researcher chooses it as the primary lens for analysis.

3. Methodology

This study employs feminist literary theory as the primary lens for analyzing Duong Thu Huong's *The Story of an Actress*. The methodology combines textual analysis, thematic exploration, and pedagogical application to ensure both scholarly rigor and practical relevance. The participants are English-majored students at a private university, whose engagement with feminist criticism will provide valuable insights into how literary theory can be effectively applied in classroom contexts.

The research process unfolds in three interconnected stages. First, textual analysis focuses on the representation of female characters, narrative voice, and thematic concerns, with particular attention to how patriarchal ideology shapes the protagonist's life and choices. Second, thematic exploration situates these findings within the broader socio-political context of Vietnam, examining issues such as gender inequality, cultural expectations, and the marginalization of women's voices. Third, pedagogical application involves classroom practice with English-majored students, encouraging them to critically engage with gender dynamics, question traditional interpretations, and connect literary analysis to social realities.

This design ensures that the study not only deepens the interpretation of Duong's text but also enhances teaching techniques. By involving English-majored students, the research highlights how feminist literary theory can foster critical thinking, cultural awareness, and sensitivity to issues of gender and society.

4. Results and discussions

Women through the "three submissions" (to parents, husband, and children) and the "four virtues" (diligence, appearance, speech, behavior). This belief in male superiority is reflected in *The Story of an Actress*. Mr. Trang Tuy, for instance, confined Thom to domestic duties, denying her independence. Patriarchy dictated that obedient women were "good," while those who resisted were "bad," reducing women to lives limited to the home and kitchen. Feminist literary theory, like deconstruction and new historicism, challenges such outdated norms, emphasizing that interpretation is always subjective. Duong Thu Huong begins her story with the refrain "In those days, we lived so happily and joyfully... In those days, we really lived," which immediately sparks curiosity. Thom and Be embody contrasting choices like "wrong deeds" and "right deeds", showing how simple dreams can lead to very

different destinies.

The researcher applies feminist literary theory, while also drawing on reader response theory in teaching, to assess students' understanding of gender roles and patriarchy deeply ingrained in Vietnamese culture. Concepts such as *nhất nam viết hữu, thập nữ viết vô* (a boy is worth ten girls) and the "three submissions and four virtues" have shaped women's lives for centuries. To broaden analysis, the researcher compares *The Story of an Actress* with classics like Nguyen Du's *The Tale of Kieu*, Ngo Tat To's *Light-off*, To Hoai's *A Phu Couple*, and Nguyen Hong's *Hue Chi in the Wedding Night*, tracing women's destinies across time.

The following statement can be taken from two poetic lines in *Truyện Kiều* (The Tale of Kieu) by Nguyen Du:

"Trăm năm trong cõi người ta

Chữ tài chữ mệnh khéo là ghét nhau.

Within the span of a hundred years of human existence,

What a bitter struggle is waged between genius and destiny! Misfortune)

Vietnamese people believed that beautiful women often encountered hardships and difficulties in love and life. A person's talent could bring him or her calamity. If someone is rich or lucky in one thing, he or she will be poor or unlucky in others; especially women, the more beautiful they are, the unluckier they become. For their appearance, if they are beautiful, they will be unlucky in their lives. An excellent example is Kieu in "The Story of Kieu," who has endured a very hard life since she was a young, beautiful girl. Poor her! Seldom in my life have I heard that a beautiful woman is always happy. It just happens in foreign fairy tales such as "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," "Sleeping Beauty," or "Beauty and the Beast." In reality, beautiful women also have happiness, but that is rare; as with Princess Diana, she died in her prime. How cruel her fate is for such great virtues!

Back to "The Story of an Actress" by Duong Thu Huong, we also see that Ms. Thom is also in 'the same boat' as a beautiful woman's destiny. She is lucky in her beauty but very unlucky in her life. She is at the bottom of despair. Her wish to be a famous actress is only a fugitive dream; it never comes true. It seems that human beings can never escape their "karma." There is a saying that "*Nobody can run out of her or his fate.*" Since each of us has a burden to carry, let's carry it and not accuse God of what might happen to us, and we should not blame

God for our destiny. Supposing that everyone has his or her own destiny, can human beings alter their destiny? Her future was so gloomy that she could not find her own direction and finally decided to die to ‘escape’ from such a gloomy future. She had no right to do that because we have our lives, we should live, and we must live worthily. However, she deserves to be sympathized with rather than claimed. Women often endure what happens to them and seldom complain to God or anyone else why they have to bear a miserable life. They are ready to accept it, consider that it is my “*karma*,” and never protest such a fate. She has to feel the iceberg’s part under the water like Hemingway instead of merely reading the “floating parts.” It is like a new “wind” to awaken the audience with audacious speech and reckless thoughts. They somehow feel unpleasant with the excessive and sometimes aggressive words in commenting on female writers but cannot deny their positive values.

On the surface, *The Story of an Actress* appears to be a simple tale of two girls choosing different paths in life. Yet, like Ho Xuan Huong, Duong Thu Huong uses language and detail to critique a society that values beauty over intellect and wealth over kindness, exposing how fading youthful optimism can lead to despair. According to Duong, most writers in Vietnam struggle to balance individual concerns with the collective mentality demanded by the party, often succumbing to group-think. She herself has faced severe censorship, with her works excluded from Vietnamese anthologies and accessible only through smuggling, despite gaining recognition abroad. Still, Duong remains hopeful that readers will one day confront the realities of her homeland. A passage especially meaningful to me and my students states: “*Each person has to find his or her own place in life; people need glory but shouldn’t look for it up a dark staircase. Life by nature is fair, so don’t expect to enjoy its fruit if you are not ready to sweat for it.*” This serves as both a moral lesson and a central theme for classroom discussion and examination.

Finally, Buddhist doctrine also influences Vietnamese literature, reinforcing the belief that destiny depends on virtue and that individuals must bear responsibility for their own deeds. This moral framework, combined with feminist critique, provides a rich context for understanding women’s struggles and identities in Vietnamese literary tradition.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Feminist Literary

Theory provides a stronger and more contextually relevant framework than Reader Response Theory for analyzing Duong Thu Huong’s *The Story of an Actress*. By uncovering how patriarchal ideologies shape women’s roles and destinies, feminist criticism deepens literary interpretation and connects literature to broader social realities. The comparison with classical and modern Vietnamese works highlights the persistence of gender inequality across time, while also revealing women’s resilience and agency. Applied in teaching, feminist theory encourages students to critically engage with issues of gender, culture, and identity, fostering both intellectual growth and social awareness. Ultimately, this approach affirms the enduring value of feminist literary criticism in Vietnamese literary studies and pedagogy. In conclusion, feminist literary theory proves superior not only because it illuminates systemic gender and patriarchal structures in Vietnamese texts, but also because it equips students with critical tools to question cultural norms and inequalities. Unlike reader response theory, which relies on subjective reactions that may be limited in the Vietnamese classroom context, feminist criticism offers a structured, socially resonant framework. This makes it especially effective for teaching Vietnamese literature, where women’s voices and experiences remain central to understanding both the texts and the society they reflect.

References

- [1]. Aliaga-Lavrijssen, J., & Martín, S. (2026). Exploring reproduction and gender in contemporary feminist speculative fiction. In *Palgrave Studies in Science and Popular Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [2]. Castle, G. (2007). *The Blackwell guide to literary theory*. Blackwell Publishing.
- [3]. Dubey, K. K. D. (2026). Reimagining gender, sexuality, and identity in contemporary English literature: Queer, non-binary, and intersectional narrative strategies. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)*, 8(2).
- [4]. Gallon, L. (2026). Migrant women writers and the short story in North America. In *Palgrave Studies in Contemporary Women’s Writing*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [5]. Surujal, S. K. (2026). Internet use and study habits among undergraduate students in co-educational colleges of Ullunda Block, Odisha. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)*, 8(2).
- [6]. Villanueva-Nieves, N. (2026). The true colors of feeling are brown. In *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies*. Springer Nature.