



SOME CULTURAL SYMBOLS IN MEKONG DELTA, VIETNAM - SHORT STORIES FROM ECO-CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract:

Using the theory of ecological criticism, this study shows the expression of environmental consciousness of writers through cultural symbols in short stories in the Mekong Delta, in which the two central symbolic systems are deeply analyzed: rivers and fields. They have both ecological properties and show the way of life, behavior and attitude of people in the process of survival. Thereby affirming that writers have both traditional and creative expressions of artistic symbols in order to send meaningful messages to readers about the close relationship between humans and nature, at the same time, arouse awareness of environmental protection.

Keywords: eco-criticism, short stories, artistic icons, culture

1. Introduction

In the essay *Poetry as the aesthetics of another*, when discussing modern Ontology, Do Lai Thuy reiterated Husserl's concept: *"The world is only the world when there is a consciousness towards it, and consciousness is only consciousness when there is a world to it towards"* [Do Lai Thuy, 2012, p. 13]. This idea has shown the close relationship between people and the natural world. In literature, people's consciousness and thoughts are expressed through a system of images or artistic symbols.

Symbols are images that people keep from the process of observing objective reality. It shows the relationship between thinking and language, reflecting people's perception of themselves and the things and phenomena in their relationships. Conceivably, each symbol contains a puzzle, a "code". Decoding them has important implications for discovering people's thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. In the journey of existence and development, people have perceived reality, "crystallized", "condensed" them in certain patterns. Therefore, when decoding symbols, the original pattern (the first images and ideas) always has a certain influence. Symbols often have multiple meanings

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and are highly metaphorical, so no definitive explanations can be given, but reasonable judgment must be accepted.

When studying the short stories of the Mekong Delta from the perspective of Eco-criticism, besides discovering reflections on environmental or nature problems, and human consciousness and behavior in the face of environmental changes, the authors have created a system of artistic symbols to increase the effectiveness and attractiveness of the messages. The artistic symbols are identified through the author's experience of natural and cultural objects and human notions about the typical space of the delta.

2. Ecological consciousness in short stories of the Mekong Delta through some cultural symbols

Up to now, in the concept of Eastern people in general and Vietnamese in particular, the relationship between man and the universe is governed by the theory of "TAM TÀI" (it consists of 3 elements: heaven, earth, and human). This theory is also a premise to form human behavior with nature. In addition, the Vietnamese worship nature, believing that everything and phenomenon has a spirit, a soul (theory of everything animism). For that reason, natural objects in the human mind are often associated with a certain mindset. In literary works, objects in nature are not only objects for description, background, scenes but always contain an earnest heart for the scene of the writers. The authors of short stories in the Mekong Delta use symbols of rivers, water, animals, and plants typical of the Southwest region to express their anxiety about ecological risks. In addition, the symbols in the material and spiritual culture of people such as houses, boats, landmarks, etc. also become a motif to reflect the rifts in terms of spiritual ecology.

2.1. Eco-consciousness through the river symbol

In the work of *Pragmatics*, George Yule said: "Reference can be seen as an action in which the speaker (writer) uses linguistic forms to make it possible for the listener (reader) to identify what they are referring to" [2003; p. 43]. Reference is often used to refer to the ability of language to represent things. Here, this concept is used to refer to the correlation, the cohesion of objects in the linked chain of symbols.

In each different culture, the river carries a different symbolic meaning. Indians, with their belief and reverence for the Ganges River, consider the river as a symbol of cleansing and liberation. Seeing the mystery and strangeness of the water pouring down from above, radiating and disappearing, Jewish legends believe that it is a gift from heaven, bringing life and strength to people. In Greece, China, and some Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam, worshiping beliefs and rituals performed on the river are associated with the belief in peace and dispelling suffering... Capital as a natural object, when entering Vietnamese literature, the river becomes a symbol with many meanings. Because, the river culture formed a long time ago and has become the source, the cultural quintessence and is also an indispensable part of life.

First of all, the river is a component of the natural condition of the plains. Each land is often associated with a river - where alluvium is deposited for trees and nurtures the human soul. It seems that each work has a glimpse of a river - a stream of life. Those are the rivers of human mildly sadness floating around; rivers that have witnessed many ups and downs of history, reminding people of the arduous but profound journey of making a living; rivers carry the consciousness, way of life, and culture of human behavior towards nature. There are many typical works, such as *Remembering the river* (Nho song), *The river of memory* (Dong nho), *The anxious look* (Cai nhin khac khoai), *The endless field* (Canh dong bat tan) by Nguyen Ngoc Tu; *Delta alluvial night* (Dem phu sa chau tho), *Country water* (Con nuoc mien que), *Fish roaming the Mekong River* (Con ca rong choi song nuoc Cuu Long), *Ghost rice dam* (Dap lua ma) by Tran Bao Dinh; *The sea towards the river* (Bien ve ben song) of Cao Thanh Mai; *Outside the forests* (Ben ngoai nhung canh rung), *The drift of fate* (Menh lenh denh), *The story goes nowhere* (Chuyen chang di den dau) by Le Minh Nhut; *Haunting by the river* (Am anh dong song), *Woman swim in the River* (Nguoi dan ba boi tren song) of Bich Ngan; *Stay with the river* (O lai cung song) by Nguyen Thi Viet Ha... In the writer's perception: "*The river's flow is like a natural rope that binds the hamlets together because the places chosen to build houses have "a river in front, a field behind"* (*Delta alluvial night* - Tran Bao Dinh). In the short story *A piece of the river* (Mot khuc song), Da Ngan also envisions and compares the lives and fates associated with the river symbol: "*And the river broke into the randomness of the old elephants. Of course, the local people know well that its starting point is a river confluence with wavering waves, the Di Hang fork falls into the Cai Lon stream at the end of the sky, and the other jumps across another land, quietly catching a canal. But they still have the feeling that the river has broken its links, they are completely private from characteristics to identities like human lives*". Or the river-like life, it's full of Phong's memories in Le Minh Nhut's work (*The story goes nowhere*). That river witnessed his childhood with fun during two rainy and sunny seasons. After the hustle and bustle, the nostalgia for the old water made his soul is at peace again.

Besides, the ecological risks have lost the divinity of the river, and people in the compositions began to realize the changes and the anomalies. The river becomes a symbol of the transformation of nature and the cognitive journey in human behavior. "*Five years in a row, the water has turned the bay into a curved arc, has swept away many imprints and memories of each shore. His father carried the land, he carried the land, but it seemed that it did not work, only nature was omnipotent and invincible. Yeah, why not someone else but just my family members who seem to be born to serve, carry, and preserve a riverbank?*" (*A piece of the river* - Da Ngan). The land is known for fresh water and healthy trees, and rivers with rich alluvium have begun to change their character. Climate change and environmental risks are shown by the authors through images of rivers drying up at the bottom of the dry season and high floods sweeping away the achievements and efforts of many people. The rivers are not romantic and peaceful places, but also contain the anger of nature. Although not very bold, the authors began to be more aware of the mission of literature - the mission of man.

Thirdly, in the short story of the Mekong Delta, the combination with the river symbol is the water symbol. According to the concept of the authors of the *Dictionary of World Cultural Symbols*, the meaning of the water symbol is expressed in three contents: “the source of life, the means of purification, the center of rebirth” [1997; p. 709]. Here, writers do not use the water symbol in general but concretize it into a flow - a symbol associated with the culture of the Southern people. The symbol of the flow as human life in the livelihood “like great water, low water” of merchants, traders and living on boats, wandering around (*Country water* - Tran Bao Dinh), *Remembering the river*, *The river of memory*, *Water like tears* (Nuoc nhu nuoc mat), *Gorgeous smoke from the sky* (Khoi troi long lay) - Nguyen Ngoc Tu, *The drift of fate* - Le Minh Nhut, *Wind blows to Nga Nam* (Gio ve Nga Nam) - Le Thi Cam Nhung ...). The water is also a symbol for the disposition of nature and the way of life and behavior of people: “The full moon is bright! The immense water flows strongly in the middle of the stream, but the fish and shrimp lose gradually because of the polluted habitat and climate change. Huy sat next to the grave, the damp earth was overgrown with blooming weeds”. That is the heart of the character Huy (*Countryside moon shadow* (Bong trang que) - Tran Bao Dinh) when he returned to the village after many years away. The author used the water symbol to remind us about events in human life and the change of the environment. In many short stories, images of farmers and merchants had to watch the water appear quite common. In Tran Bao Dinh's short story *Country water*, the characters together explain the miraculous impact of water on human life: “Reason is the end, water is life, but water is the way to live in life”. And understanding the water is a success when maintaining the journey of human life: “Looking at the flowing water, looking at the movement in the middle of the river, we can also guess the number of fish and shrimp, listening to the sound of fish hooves water, we can also guess what fish it is” (*The woman who is not petrified* (Nguoi dan ba khong hoa da) – Hoang Khanh Duy). If you watch the right water, you will release the net, cast a fishing line, and put your hooves to hit the fish channel; watching the water to depart, the boat can go quickly and save fuel costs. If you choose a place adjacent to the water to anchor the boat, the trade will be convenient and smooth... If the water is big or net, the field is overflowing or it's dry, people must also depend on it to survive. This is also an expression of the reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural environment.

In the series of symbols related to rivers, the fish symbol (especially the Linh fish) becomes a symbol reflecting the natural ecological characteristics and cultural activities of the inhabitants. Southerners in particular and Vietnamese in general believe in the spirituality of objects. No wonder Phat Duong - writer of the 9x generation - has felt that: “It is said that rivers also have souls. In this domain, everything one can see has a soul” (*Crying River* – Song khoc). This has become a way of thinking and dominates many aspects of life. The fish symbol first suggests the wealth and abundance of products that nature has bestowed. The stories of Uncle Ba Phi: *Catching goby fish* (Bat ca keo), *Catching fish in Lung Tram* (Bat ca Lung Tram), *Snakehead fish swallowing dried coconut* (Ca loc nuot trong dua kho); Son Nam's stories: *Fish in the water, birds in the sky* (Ca nuoc chim troi), *The first rainy day of the season* (Ngay mua dau mua) has partly evoked the image of that from the very

beginning. Today, the authors recall this abundance as a memory, a regret of a generation: *"I see that the water is pouring in, I miss the fish, the river so much, how can I forget the old years in this season when the fish from the source fill the river. Which is tench, thac lac fish, red gill, carp, Ho fish... all kinds. Children eat fish instead of rice"* (*The fish misses the river* (Ca nho song) – Nhat Hong). Mr. Hai (in *The fish misses the river*) is sad, quietly weaves Lop (a bamboo fishing tool) even though he knows that the source of fish has dwindled, the people around him are used to going to the market or the supermarket to buy all kinds of fish raised with industrial food, so they think he is free, works in vain. No one understands the excitement in his heart when he looks at the red alluvial water that promises many fish and shrimp, no one understands the desire to restore a precious fish species that was thought to be extinct when picking up the "Thac lac fish", gently dropping it into the water, hoping it will survive, continue to grow and reproduce. It is the deep bond between man and nature. In the short stories of Nhat Hong (*Waiting for fish*, *Loving the season of the Linh fish*, *The fish misses the river*), by Tran Bao Dinh (*Fish roaming the Mekong river*, *Countryside moon shadow*), the fish symbol (Linh fish) represents the lifestyle by nature, and following the rules and cycles: *"The Linh fish loves playing in the field, but it does not get lost or run aground. At the time of October 25 of the lunar calendar, we go down to the river without moving"* (*Waiting for fish* – Nhat Hong). People understand the characteristics of fish species: lay eggs at the beginning of the flood season, grow up with the rotating water and move along the channels of the Mekong River. This is the reason for them to make a living during the flood season. In the minds of the people of the delta, fish (Linh fish) is also a symbol of sacred and mysterious nature. Author Tran Bao Dinh recalled an anecdote based on Vuong Hong Sen's *Dictionary of the Southern Voice*: *"When Nguyen Anh was about to go out to sea from Vam Nao, he discovered a few small fish jumping onto the side of the boat, he felt like something was wrong, he ordered his entourage to postpone the trip. Thanks to that, the whole group escaped from the ambush of Tay Son troops. To show gratitude to a species of fish that saved him, Nguyen Anh immediately named them Linh fish"*. The "epiphany" not only comes from old stories but also comes from the mentality of this fish: *"People see that the Linh fish is delicious, caught a lot, so some people dumped them in the pond to feed but they all died. Someone said: "At night, I see Linh fish in the pond flying in flocks like butterflies to the river"* (*Waiting for fish* - Nhat Hong). Humans are not always able to interfere with nature because it has its process of formation and existence. This is also seen as a challenge for people to gradually understand that they are not subjects with all powers. Understanding and grasping nature is to harmonize and adjust behavior and lifestyle, not to destroy nature.

The river is a familiar symbol in Vietnamese culture and literature. The writers of short stories in the Mekong Delta, besides interpreting and expressing symbols with their inherent meanings, also develop aspects associated with specific contexts and enrich the allusion to the system of reference symbols. Water creeps into every corner, operates silently, and moulds all things, so the Taoism concept is used to compare religion to water, soft and strong depending on the circumstances. Thus, in many short stories in the

Mekong Delta, rivers and related symbols occupy an important position in nature and play an important role in the development of mankind.

2.2. Eco-consciousness through the field symbol

In Vietnam, the topography and soil are suitable for residents to live by agricultural labor. The wet rice agricultural civilization was formed about ten thousand years ago, so the image of rice fields has become familiar and indispensable in people's minds. In literature, the field has become a symbol with many meanings about nature and culture. Studying the symbolism in the short story of the Mekong Delta from the perspective of eco-criticism cannot fail to mention the field and its related symbols. It creates a field of view on the relationship between nature and nature, nature with humans and between people in the process of survival and development.

Within the scope of surveyed authors and works, it can be seen that fields appear quite often. This symbol is expressed in many forms and has meanings both in terms of physical ecology and spiritual ecology. If water/river bears the mark of the beginning, displacement and eternity of nature, the field is represented by the obsession of the soul associated with the human survival process. That is the image of fields full of wind and water in the short story of Nguyen Kim Chau, the field is desolate and far away in many of Nguyen Ngoc Tu's works, the field with the evidence of an arduous period of resistance in Da Ngan's short stories. Hoang Khanh Duy is impressed by the fields of vague sadness in the nostalgia of young souls. The field in Le Minh Nhut's short stories causes obsession in the reader because of the desire to find the source of man...

Since ancient times, Vietnamese have been familiar with the image: *"In the shallow fields, in the deep fields/ Husband plows, wife transplants, buffalo go harrowing"* (Folk verses). It can be said that this is a simple, warm and happy scene. Labor in the field becomes close and the field symbolizes the attachment between people and nature due to the specificity of the process of working and making a living. After the loss and injury, Ut Vu (*The endless field* - Nguyen Ngoc Tu) took his two children to leave the house, follow the profession of duck-herding, and run from one field to another and the fields seemed like strangers have become pieces in his daughter's memory: *"The field has no name. But for me and Dien, there is no place anonymous, we remind, we name by the memories we have in each field"*. It is the fields that have attached, shared joys and sorrows, and nurtured their souls, soothing their wounds so that they become more and more mature through each journey. In Vo Dac Danh's short story, the Cho Ngap field appears again and again as a memory of poverty and hardship but is also warm and dear: *"I lived in this field from the age of three until the end of the war, so everything that begins for human perception from intuition to thinking is also this field. A field of war and poverty"; "A field with sweat, tears and blood of my father, a field of my whole childhood with many rainy and sunny seasons"* (*Remember the field* - Nho dong). People often have aspirations towards good things, but they still cherish the basic values in mind. Modern life with full facilities can help people satisfy their material needs, but the past with limbs covered in mud in the fields nourishes and nurtures the soul.

The field is like an organism, sometimes full of life, sometimes writhing due to drought and flood. Through the works, in addition to showing the relationship between humans and nature, the field clearly shows the changes in the environment and ecology: *"The vast fields of rush and sedge have just been burned fiercely in the dry season like in an instant the field was filled with water; the roads and embankments connecting this house to the other house, if not disappeared in the water, are also submerged in the mud"* (*Sadness in a small shop* (Tinh buon noi quan coc) - Le Minh Nhut). It is also a space for people to affirm their abilities and volition. In *The endless field*, Nguyen Ngoc Tu describes: *"The fierce drought seems to gather all the sun and pour it down on this place. The rice plants died young in the field, their bodies were dried and bent like freckles that had not fallen, and they were crushed when held in the hand"*. But Ut Vu's family and many people who live by herding ducks in the fields have overcome, firmly coped to find the "ideal land". Plainland is not always fertile with alluvial soil, but there are also patches of wasteland, arid due to drought. This is nature's test of human ability and will in the process of survival. The couple Sinh and Dao (*Silent field at noon* – Dong trua vang lang) chose a barren field to "build a foundation, build a house". They were not afraid of difficulties and hardships, but their life was still precarious: *"The land is dry, Dao has to go to the river to carry water to irrigate the soil to soften and then sow seeds. In a few seasons, the rice plants died, and when one crop was successful, two or three crops failed"*. Nature does not favor people, but they still have faith in their industrious hands, believing that the land will not help people because they have relied on, entrusting their whole future to this strange field. In the work *The Untiring Stork* (Canh co khong moi), Nhat Hong praises the capacity of people through the description of the fields and rice fields of Hai Thua: *"In addition to the constantly changing vegetable of beans, eggplant, and corn, he also makes use of the planting paths which are mint, basil, cilantro, amaranth, spinach, nothing is lacking, and in the ditch to raise fish, all kinds of fish live peacefully in the pond"*. His field banks are not wild with weeds, but with bright yellow chrysanthemums. Taking care of flowers is no longer an elegant hobby but becomes a way to minimize pollution to the natural environment because this is a way to attract natural enemies without using chemicals.

In the reference relationship with the symbolism of the field, the author also builds a system of symbols of animals and plants. These symbols are shown quite diversely in short stories with different functions. Animals and plants are considered to be the original models, which are symbols of the "originals" and of the cosmic power that includes both aspects: material and spiritual. People seem to be familiar with comparing human characteristics with the characteristics of things and phenomena in nature. When Hai Thao's wife (*Outside the forests* - Le Minh Nhut) wondered about her son's health, Hai Thao compared it: *"It was stronger than my old man's buffalo back then!"*. Or when describing the singers of the singing groups at the headquarters of the Commune Committee, the author likens: *"The singers are strange and strange, most of them are soft and glint like weasel tails"* and the voice Thieu said when he met Ut Ngao, it was *"sweet like honey in a drought"*. In the story of *The family that eats the ground*, the character claims I feel his father's pain when he held the dead body of his youngest uncle through a rather new simile: *"Father's*

voice is as dull as the breaking sound of plowed earth in the dry season". Symbols such as the yellow cotton melaleuca tree, the red O Moi (a legume), the nipa palm tree, the cork tree, the mangrove tree, the blind tree, etc., or the sound of the chicken at noon, the Tu hu (birds do not incubate eggs and do not raise babies) calling the flock, and the bullfrog, etc. have become familiar and have the typical appearance of the plains. Not only to describe, but the author also uses these symbols to praise and defend nature. In the short story *Ba Thac heartache* (That long Ba Thac), Tran Bao Dinh borrowed an old story to express this attitude. When asked by Nguyen Anh about the cork tree, Le Van Duyet mentioned his mother's lullaby: "Oh Cork! Oh, cork! Green leaves, white flowers, people approaching can't smell the fragrance". But then he argued again: "Although it is not fragrant, it is useful and it is still better than many flowers overflowing with fragrance but the fruit is not good, sometimes, even betraying the fragranciness. The cork forest blocks the waves, keeping the island's soil so thick that it stands in the shade at noon, and the sun can't drop a drop on the ground". In many short stories in the Mekong Delta, readers encounter the symbol of a stork. For a long time, the stork has become a familiar and close symbol in Vietnamese literature. When using the symbol of the stork, the writers of short stories have a connection between the traditional meanings in the human mind and the meanings of the times. In *The Untiring Stork* (Nhat Hong), the image of "white stork silhouettes imprinted on two graves" is recognized in Dung's gentle and distant eyes as an eternal symbol of parents' hardship and sacrifice. At the same time, the stork is an image symbolizing a peaceful space, for the earnest connection between people and nature and fields: "The white stork wings fly towards the eyes of the father and mother, they caress the rice plant to bloom day by day".

The field and the symbols in its frame of reference are presented in many forms in the short story Mekong Delta. It is not only a symbol of the movement, change, or long journeys in endless space but also a desire to express and keep pristine feelings. These symbols are both the appearance and disposition of the natural environment, as well as the conceptions and attitudes of people in the face of volatile modern life.

3. Conclusion

In the work of *Environmentalism and Eco-Criticism*, Richard Kerridge mentioned the concept of Barbara Adam: "Culture, without a multi-dimensional and synthetic view of time and space, cannot find the symbols, visual images, or personal life stories to give them corresponding representations" [2017; p. 117]. Given this opinion, along with the analysis of symbols of nature, the wild world..., R. Kerridge emphasized the impact of space, especially primitive space, on human consciousness and perception. In literature, the system of symbols plays an important role in helping writers reflect reality vividly. In the short story the Mekong Delta, the authors used the symbolic ability of objects to send messages about the relationship between people and the living environment, awakening and motivating people to have a better attitude and action to improve and restore the natural and cultural environment.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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