



## “CORPSE OF DUST” (XÁC BỤI) SHORT STORY OF NGUYEN NGOC TU FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

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### **Abstract:**

With the short story “Corpse of dust” (Xác bụi), Nguyen Ngoc Tu has created a new and impressive view of how to build a plot according to psychological characteristics. The story structure is a series of developments in the psychology of Diu's character revolving around the subtleties and sensitivity to many changing events of life. Using the psychoanalytic structure from the theory of psychoanalysis, the confusion in the protagonist's psychology is explained by the system of the “ID”, the “ego” and the “superego”. The psychological struggle of wrong times and deviations from moral norms is clearly exposed in the sympathetic gaze of readers. The Psychoanalytic Theory has helped those who come into contact with this short story to be touched and sad for the love, meaning and fidelity of the girls in the Southwest of Vietnam when in love.

**Keywords:** short stories, psychological structures, female characters, fidelity, sexuality, psychoanalysis, psychiatry

### **1. Introduction**

Nguyen Ngoc Tu is a writer who has brightened Vietnamese literature since 1986, with works imprinted with the imprint of postmodernism and existentialism. The female writer from Ca Mau has sparked many social issues evoked from her own pages. In addition to the depth of the character's psychology, her short story appears with special twists and turns that are both decisive and unforgettable in life, and it must also be mentioned that she has succeeded in letting readers themselves experience those heartaches. Applying psychoanalysis to literature to obtain profound explanations for the problems of human spiritual life is a scientific operation that has been widely applied in literature. Reading Nguyen Ngoc Tu is not just about reading the Southern Vietnam text, but there we can also read a page of life written with profound and unusual psychological experiences imprinted with the imprint of psychological.

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As part of the short story collection "Island" (Đảo) published by Nguyen Ngoc Tu in 2018, "Corpse of dust" (Xác bụi) appears with a small capacity (only more than 1500 words) but leaves an obsession in the hearts of readers about the unfortunate love story between two characters with a very special psychology in the context of wartime. The plot is simple, but the psychological structure is very unique, making anyone who passes by can't help but worry about the concerns of the characters themselves.

The short story tells about the first love between a nineteen-year-old boy named Nhu and a young woman named Diu. That first love, associated with the times of loving the flesh in the night by the warehouse full of vinegar and soybeans. Then, it was all like a joke of nature, the fiery sex scenes in the twenties stopped before Nhu's death could not be found in wartime. Diu embraced her love and sensual pleasures and followed her husband. And, there, the wife and mother of the two children still cannot forget the sex nights with Nhu in his childhood. During the years that followed until the day Nhu's body was found, Diu lived in half-reality, half-dream, half-awake of bodily jokes.

The story is simple but has evoked a wonder for those who accidentally read "Corpse of dust". The game of the flesh has made a woman like Diu immersed in the years of "eating rice before the pot" (Vietnamese idiom means: premarital sex) of youth and then betrayed the official husband of her life in every thought. That harsh view of the reader will be attributed to those who do not understand Freud's Ministerial Mental Mechanism. Using the light of psychoanalysis to shine on this work, we can see how, in the end, Diu has tormented and suffered when living in a constant struggle between "consciousness" and "unconscious", between the realm of "the dream" and the "the desire" of reality. Do Lai Thuy calls it a state: "*Dreams are the manifestation of hidden and associative thoughts*" [2024, p.15]

## 2. Freud's Introduction to Psychisme in Psychoanalysis

According to Freud, the human mind is the constant struggle between the "ID" and the "ego". He summarized the diagram of the Psychisme in Psychoanalysis including 03 elements:

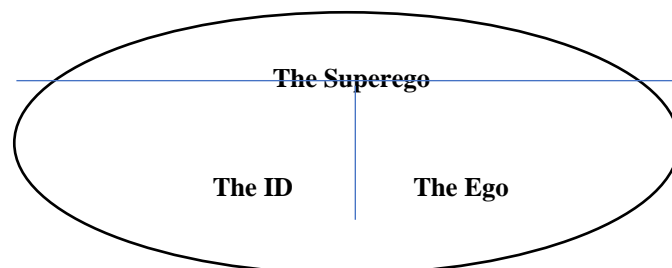


Diagram *Psychisme in Psychoanalysis* [2005, p.117]

In it, the center of the "ID" is the unconscious (libido); the center of the "ego" (self) is the conscience, and the center of the "superego" is the subconsciousness.

The "ID" is lustful, selfish, and childish in nature. It is dominated by pleasures that cannot be delayed or restrained by instantaneous desires. That is the root of human humanity. That generates energy for mental activities such as consciousness (the "ego") and unconscious (the "superego"). When this energy source increases, it causes the instinct to explode strongly, creating psychological shocks such as: irritability, stress, and irritation. When the release of these straight roots is reduced, making the energy source return to a stable state, it will lead to pleasure. Freud said that human instincts are those that belong to the unconscious, including: the sexual instinct (libido) and the death instinct (thanatos). Thus, unconsciously human beings have formed the sexual instinct, which is also the life instinct (eros) whose center is libido, which is the stimuli, desire, pleasure, hunger, and sexual craving. This will dominate the inner life of people a lot.

The "ego" is an organized part of the personality, the one that reconciles the "ID" and the "superego". The "ego" will work hard to find compromise solutions to calm the conflict between the conscious and the unconscious. The "ego" can be considered as the ability of a person to consider and behave properly. The center of the "ego" is the consciousness of the "ego", which is very strongly dominated by instinct or unconscious, but when it is imposed by social frameworks and conventions, human consciousness will be established and from there it will enter the unconscious with harmonious characteristics health and proper restraint.

The "superego" is considered by Freud to be a theoretical consciousness, it will immerse itself in social norms and learn patterns and concepts from predecessors about good – bad, right – wrong. The "superego" will rise above sexuality and ego consciousness to uphold all traditional values and social moral ideals. Therefore, the superego can be considered as consciousness when it has reached the level of perfection to create a good life according to the standards of society.

Using Freud's theories of the mechanism of the Psychisme in Psychoanalysis, we will see more clearly the subtle pain within the character of Diu than the torment of that instinctively sexual.

### **3. Character psychology as seen from the mechanism of the Psychisme in Psychoanalysis**

#### **3.1. The struggle between the "ID" and the "ego" to reach the "superego" is an inevitable journey of struggle**

The story begins, which is also the time when the love of the flesh takes place in the space of the warehouse, at night and around the items in the kitchen. Nhu and Diu had true love, it was so full of pleasure and libido that even years later, Diu was still when the pasts about Nhu kept appearing. *"The night before Nhu left, I took Nhu's hand and slipped it into my chest... the hand is raised and steamed"* [2018b, p.58].

The "unconscious" is very clearly expressed through the voice describing the naked full of living resin and human instincts in Nguyen Ngoc Tu's writing page. At the age of nineteen, Nhu and Diu may have fallen in love with a true love and then at the

end of that love path, the instinct in the "unconscious" made them come together with all the most passion. Nhu brought Diu into sexual pleasure and reached sublimation in passion. That love affair ended quickly, as if their youth would also pass quickly in times of war. Nhu went missing, and could not find the body after many years. The author left Nhu's whereabouts until the end of the story as a test in Diu's heart.

Since Nhu passed away, Dieu had to continue her life. Dieu got married to a husband who, according to the author, was "gentle and blunt". However, "*people, not good children, cross the river to cut off the rest of their lives*" [2020], "unconsciously" about the nights of love and pleasure have penetrated into Diu's psychology and life. That "unconscious", it followed into the couple's life. Going through Diu's wedding night, she wondered "*whether to moan to make her husband happy or not*" [2018b, p.59]. The moaning during sexual intercourse is an expression of the "unconscious" attainment of human pleasure in sexual activity. It is called "unconscious", it will naturally take place outside the "consciousness" of people, but in Calm, Gentle thinks whether or not to "moan" or not. This proves that Diu is having a very intense struggle in her heart about what has passed with Nhu and what is coming to her newlywed husband. It seems that, right in this reality, Diu has been hindered by the psychological obsession of the past that hinders the "sublimation" in reality. Just like Georges Devereux's concept of "adaptation and sublimation" was introduced and translated into a theory of the history of mental illness. If one cannot step over the past to enjoy the exam, one cannot sublimate in the present and thereby "*form an anomalous psychology of the anti-adaptive state*" [2018a, p.45]. In the years that followed, the "unconscious" gradually encroached on Diu's "consciousness". Whether walking, standing, lying down, sitting or even feeding her child, as long as there is a catalyst is the opening scent of the scene of sex with Nhu in the past, Diu's "unconscious" sexual guilt is immediately activated uncontrollably. Psychology calls this a state: "hidden obsession".

Perhaps, the love affair with the new husband also did not make up for the "hidden obsessions" in Diu's mind. As Lieu Truong said: "*Once the obsessive area is larger, the unconscious becomes stronger, leading to abnormalities in daily life*" [2011, p.49]. Diu's heart was inherently too deeply imprinted with the image of Nhu – the first boy to let her taste the smell of life. Libido returns to Nhu, it but the morning mist envelops Diu's life, fragile but difficult to dissolve, melts and returns every morning and cannot escape. Furthermore, as an inevitable process of psychology, the more hidden the memory, the more there is a need to be released. When it cannot be released, the psychological mechanism will lead people to the state of the dream realm. Dreams are a place to solve "that" by satisfying the desires that are holding back. Diu's dream appeared about Nhu's silhouette every night and that silhouette was associated with carnal pleasures. "*I keep thinking that tomorrow Nhu will come back, hug each other again, go back and forth, go up and down to make up for the rush of the night*" [2018b, p.60].

Such dreams in Diu's "unconscious" show the desire to wait for the first lover to return, which also shows that Diu cannot overcome her own boundaries in real life. Dieu already had a husband, but the dream about Nhu was like an obsession that would never

stop. So we should understand that the startling, her dreams every night when sharing a blanket with her new husband are a "betrayal" or "adultery" of a woman who is not "mature"? If you understand this in this work, there is a lack of thoroughness in the way of looking and feeling about human psychology.

Nguyen Ngoc Tu has opened up for each of us many ways to think and comment on this character. Diu's psychology and circumstances are a psychological struggle that often takes place in people's lives. When people are too loving and heavy-hearted, they will automatically form an "unconscious" instinct so that from time to time, the "ID" is deeply ingrained in the "ego" and dominates the "ego" strongly. Loving Nhu and devoting your whole life to Nhu is a precious love. But Nhu's death left Diu hurt and could not be filled. Diu embraces the figure and memories with Nhu in real life, and it is like an affirmation that nothing can rob Nhu in Diu. Diu's psychology, according to psychoanalysis is that psychology is reaching the state of the "superego" when one is faithful and beautiful to the person he loves sincerely. Due to forced circumstances, Diu was forced to marry a new husband, but in his heart, Diu could not accept it. That "superego" state has pushed Diu into a complex psychological model, full of hidden obsessions and polyvalent sensuality.

In addition, if you count the number of times Diu went to find "Teacher Ba Bone Seven" (Vietnamese idiom: People who practice fortune telling and spirit calling) in hopes of finding Nhu's body through the child's account, it can be said that it is so much that it seems to be his mother's habit in this life. This detail is the rise of the "ego" whose center is the consciousness of the self. No matter how much she "unconsciously" about Nhu's flesh in Diu's dreams, she is still "aware" that she is now someone's wife, the mother of two children; therefore, to end the months of living in the bandage, perhaps, finding Nhu's body is the key to unlocking the sufferings of life. Gently searching for Nhu, even if he only knows whether he is looking for an incomplete form or just lifeless pieces of white bones, but it will help Diu return to society's standards of a skilled and faithful wife. Finding Nhu's body is also a way to return the favor and return the meaning to the deceased. Rewarding this grace is considered as suffering to the end, and the meaning of death is the end of complete love. Full of love so that Diu can continue to live a peaceful life in this present.

The "unconscious" and "conscious" in calm struggle with each other every day and every hour are also very clear expressions of Freud's conception of the Psychisme in Psychoanalysis. The complicated, non-stop struggle for people to reach the state of the "superego" is an inevitable morality because no one in this world wants to live in torment without peace of mind. Although there are many material things, if the process of mental health is stalled, life cannot be happy and peaceful.

Thus, from the perspective of psychoanalysis, we explain and understand that Diu's psychological state is completely normal, that is, the escape from the "bestly" that is writhing in Diu's very beautiful "humanity". Understanding in this way, we can reduce the harsh judgment of the character that Nguyen Ngoc Tu has built.

### 3.2. The triumph of the "superego" and the dramatic psychological state

The story of the climax is at the end, when the family sets up an offering tray to dig up thorny bamboo bushes in a wasteland more than a thousand kilometers away from their hometown. In the end, after all these years (although the time is not specified, it can be determined to be a long time since Diu and Nhu lost each other), that time, calculated by the age of Diu's two children, must have been more than seven years. That much time is not too long in a person's life, but it is very long for a girl's youth. For about a year, Diu "unconsciously" tormented herself between the struggles of the past and the present. That torment is really too great, so much so that we have to empathize with Diu's fidelity to the past.

But in the end, the "superego" has risen above and triumphed over sexual instincts and self-consciousness to uphold traditional values and social-moral ideals. The final rhetorical question closes this work: "*At that moment, I wonder what I did with my life?*" [2018b, p.62]. The moment that Diu "*collapsed to the ground*" was so that even innocent children did not understand "*what is so terrible crying*". Diu found Nhu, but not with flesh and bones, with the smell of people, the smell of the beginning of the nights of love, but with the white bones that had disintegrated over the years. The "unconscious" called back in pain pushed Diu into despair, and then from despair, the "superego" triumphed over everything when Diu herself did not understand what she was doing for her life. Diu has awakened, has overcome the "unconscious" of sex and understands that, in the years of searching in vain, I have ruined so much of my real youth in my life. "*I have done my life*" is a question of awakening of the "superego" in a dramatic psychological state.

It can be said that the author has been very successful in building a dramatic psychological plot. The climax is pushed to the extreme and is solved immediately with just a question of self-questioning. When and only when one can question oneself, it is also when one has reached the shore of awakening. After so many years, Diu finally breathed a sigh of relief when he let go of the biggest rock in his heart. Bright tomorrow will definitely return to Diu's soul, laying down the stone, Diu has opened the door to the future, receiving happiness with her husband and children in reality. After the rain, it was bright again, and Diu was at peace again. It is true that when we reach the "superego", we can live more peacefully.

According to the mechanism of the Psychisme in Psychoanalysis, when the conflict between the "ID" and the "ego" occurs, there will be 03 different states:

- If the "ID" wins over the "ego" → Sexual depravity;
- If the "ego" wins the "ego" → Normal situation;
- If the "ID" and the "ego" have a compromise → State of mental illness.

Throughout the short story, it can be seen that the victory of the "ID" with the "ego" in Diu's psychology. Libido about the months of sex with Nhu has taken up most of the space in Diu's living space, so much so that it enters even in "unconscious" dreams. It can be seen that, no matter how daily life goes, the wife and mother "*the first child just cut off the nose and drools in the heart, but the second child is in the morning*" [2018b, p.58], although life rhymes like that, Diu's the "ego" still cannot overcome the "ID". Diu's

vocation as a mother and wife is only fully fulfilled during the day, sometimes even interrupted. The "ego" rebelled and controlled Diu to remind her to take actions that were true to what was actually happening. Often, the models: night or the narrow space of the room will dominate human sexuality the most strongly, but even during the day or when feeding children, the "unconscious" of Nhu still always dominates Diu so much that, *"Once I fed my child, I was busy connecting illusions looking for a certain clue, I accidentally let my child have chicken bones"* [2018b, p.58].

Thus, is the character of Diu attributed to the first case in Freud's theory of *"Sexual Debauchery"*? Nguyen Ngoc Tu was very talented when pushing his characters deep into libido sensuality and then, from there, pulling them back and returning them to the most beautiful qualities. The "ego" has triumphed over the "ID", in the end, Diu realized many times *"while crying and carrying my child back to the infirmary, I think this must end here"* [2018b, p.58]. The rise of the "ego" is the way to prove the desire to live a peaceful and happy life, fulfilling the duties of the wife and mother to the fullest. The "superego" in Diu has finally triumphed and regained right and wrong, it directs Diu to noble things rather than embracing the shadow of the past.

This struggle, at the time of gentleness, at the climax, has shown very unique levels of emotions in the character's interior. Nguyen Ngoc Tu's work is, therefore, very precious. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, Diu's struggle between the past and the present is a very lifelong process, very normal and in accordance with the inevitable laws of reality. Reading *"Corpse of dust"* (Xác bụ), therefore, feels like it is closer to humans, more mundane and goes deeper into the reader's mind.

If you do not apply the Psychisme in Psychoanalysis to understand this character's situation, there will be many harsh views on Diu when there is infidelity with her real husband. Living with her husband, sex is a reluctance. There are nights when the moans of sex cannot be uttered. Naturally, the husband *"rarely touches the me"* [2018b, p.56], the husband is used to *"the wife suddenly sits up in the middle of the night and looks around"* [2018b, p.57]. These details make readers inevitably sulk, when they are estranged from her husband, who is inherently innocent in this story. But from the perspective of the Psychisme in Psychoanalysis, we will empathize more than sulk. The torment of what happened in Diu's past really made her not have a day to live happily for more than ten years. It was not that Diu was deliberately like that, but because of the "ID" that the center was "unconscious", the libido instinct that made it impossible for Diu to have a happy life in reality. The sensual energy of Nhu was so great that it spread for many years and haunted Diu for many years afterwards. This obsession is not merely an obsession with bodily pleasure, but in it, we also see the responsibility of a girl with a deep first love. The hardship in Dieu is the month of searching for Nhu's body, Diu feels how cold Nhu feels when the body floats in the river under the water and how painful it is when the bamboo bushes pierce the flesh. Therefore, Diu is always wondering how to find Nhu's body, hoping that Nhu will be at peace in the other world. That responsibility is the reason why Diu always has to torment himself with the years of the past.

It can be seen how strongly the "ID" has dominated people and is also the source of pleasure and suffering. It is beyond human "consciousness", so the more we understand about libido and Freud's theories, the more we sympathize and pity Diu in the face of distressing circumstances. In this way, the application of psychoanalysis to literature has greatly increased the value of literature, that is, at the height of humanity and humanity.

### **3. Conclusion**

With the title "Corpse of dust" (Xác bùi), Nguyen Ngoc Tu's short story has left many emotions and indelible impressions in the hearts of readers. The body is the external body of the human being. According to the Buddhist theory of Impermanence, the body will return to the dust, and what is left is morality and social relationships. Nhu's body has disintegrated into ashes, only pure white bones remain, but after many years, Nhu still returns to Diu's memory and "unconscious" as an unforgettable memory and obsession. "Corpse of dust" (Xác bùi), is not only the end of a human life, but it is also the beginning of the different psychological states of another human life. Diu's "unconscious" was dominated and influenced by Nhu's "dust", that "dust" not only disappeared but also existed forever with time; It is the "dust" of naked love, love and the value of true love. The story ends with Diu's awakening, which is also the time when the "superego" goes above and win.

Psychoanalysis is a very suitable theory for the social sciences, as a result, it has explained a lot of hidden levels within people, which is the foundation for literature to exploit and understand more about the inner world of people. Therefore, it is right to apply this theory when reading and perceiving literature. Understanding our own psychological structure also helps us live more humanely, live better, and live more sympathetically, loving the people around us more. Everyone has their own sufferings and circumstances, so don't rush to judge anyone if you don't understand them and their psychology. For life, Psychoanalysis also helps us live better like that!

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

### **About the Author**

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