

# AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS AND REPORTAGE CHARACTERISTICS IN SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF NGUYEN THI THUY VU

## YẾU TỐ TỰ THUẬT VÀ CHẤT PHÓNG SỰ TRONG MỘT SỐ TRUYỆN NGẮN CỦA NGUYỄN THỊ THUY VŨ

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**Abstract** - Several short stories by Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu are frequently inspired by her own life experiences. The realistic portrayal of life in Southern Vietnam is also reflected through the author's perceptions of the private fates of female characters. Therefore, examining the autobiographical elements and reportage characteristics in Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's short stories contributes to affirming the significance of personal experiences in her creative journey and emphasizes the distinctive features of female writing. This article focuses on analyzing the imprints of personal life in her literary works, the reflection of social groups' lifestyles, and the role of the narrator in expressing autobiographical and reportage qualities in the female author's short stories.

**Key words** - Short stories; autobiographical elements; reportage characteristics; narrator.

### 1. Introduction

Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu was a prominent female writer in South Vietnam from 1954-1975, notable for her writings on the status of women in Vietnamese society. The author's literary works reflect her experiences of life and its principles, leaving readers with profound reflections on personal identity when confronted with challenges and temptations of contemporary circumstances. She boldly ventured into obscure territories, illuminating them with compassion for women who daily face pain, trauma, and loneliness in a disorienting world. Reading Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's short stories, one can discern glimpses of her own life interwoven throughout each narrative. Her characters include English teachers and young women working in snack bars. The social tableau depicted in her writing mirrors the society of South Vietnam during that period. Consequently, several of Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's short stories exhibit autobiographical elements and reportage characteristics. Literature is not merely fictional text; realistic material - the author's experiences and sensitivities to life - also becomes an abundant source of creative inspiration. This contributes to establishing the writer's distinctive style. Examining the autobiographical elements and reportage characteristics in selected short stories such as *One Afternoon* (*Một buổi chiều*), *Manh (Mảnh)*, *Golden Afternoon Light* (*Nắng chiều vàng*), *Rushing into Fire* (*Lao vào lửa*), *The Bed* (*Chiếc giường*), *Night Cat* (*Mèo đêm*), *Poisonous Tree Without Fruit* (*Cây độc không trái*), and *Vast Darkness* (*Đêm tối bao la*) published in the collections *Night Cat* (*Mèo đêm*), *Rushing into Fire* (*Lao vào lửa*), and *Vast*

**Tóm tắt** - Một số truyện ngắn của Nguyễn Thị Thụy Vũ thường lấy cảm hứng từ chính cuộc đời bà. Bức tranh hiện thực đời sống miền Nam Việt Nam cũng được nhà văn phản ánh từ những cảm nghiệm về số phận đời tư của các nhân vật nữ. Vì thế, quan tâm đến yếu tố tự thuật và chất phóng sự trong truyện ngắn Nguyễn Thị Thụy Vũ là hướng đi góp phần khẳng định ý nghĩa từ những trải nghiệm cá nhân đến hành trình sáng tác và nhấn mạnh nét độc đáo riêng trong lối viết nữ. Bài viết tập trung phân tích dấu ấn đời tư cá nhân trong sáng tác để phản ánh đời sống sinh hoạt về nhóm người trong xã hội và vai trò của người kể chuyện trong việc thể hiện tính tự thuật và phóng sự trong truyện ngắn của nữ nhà văn.

**Từ khóa** - Truyện ngắn; yếu tố tự thuật; chất phóng sự; người kể chuyện.

*Afternoon* (*Chiều mệnh mông*) by Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu from the perspectives of personal life to realistic social portrayal and narrative technique will help affirm the creativity in her artistic journey and provide insights into issues of human condition.

### 2. Content

#### 2.1. Overview of prose with autobiographical elements and reportage characteristics

##### • *Autobiography - A Creative Method of Modern Writers*

Autobiography is a term established by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977. "Tự" means self-narration, and "thuật" means to recount; thus, autobiographical prose is a literary form of self-narration about one's own life. In the article *The Relationship Between Autobiography - Novel and Some Forms of Self-Narrative in Contemporary Vietnamese Literature*, Do Hai Ninh defines it as "a genre in which writers fictionalize themselves, based on biographical elements to construct a persona different from their actual self, blurring the recognition of truth" [1]. Therefore, some characters in autobiographical works do not necessarily bear the author's real name; rather, the author "borrows" materials from real-life experiences that they have directly encountered to create their work. Sometimes, autobiographical works merely contribute an element that offers a perspective, a feeling, or an understanding about life's principles derived from the transformations in the writer's actual life experiences.

In general, autobiography serves as a creative method that both innovates and sketches a portrait of the individual

and the era. Do Hai Ninh has identified various forms of self-narration, clarifying the trend of autobiographical novel writing - a form of self-narration in the following directions: "Novelizing one's life story, where the plot is closely related to biographical details of one's life/ Novelizing biographical details and personal experiences" [1]. Additionally, "autofiction" bear similarities to the author's biography. The creation of autobiographical works involves various approaches, depending on the writer's artistic intentions. This contributes to establishing the writer's creative style and is minimally influenced by the concept of reflecting objective reality through the artist's subjective world.

Alongside general creative approaches, autobiographical prose yields various artistic effects. The choice of narrative perspective also shows clear differences. In addition to mainstream narrative trends, autobiographical prose yields notable artistic effects. One clear distinction lies in the narrative voice: the author may choose a first-person narrator ("I") or employ an impersonal third-person narrator. Using multiple narrative perspectives serves to "blur" the factual nature of the work, while also bringing readers closer to the text as if immersing them into a comprehensive picture of life to search for its meaning. While reading works in the reportage genre, where real events and the author's personal imprints serve as guiding principles throughout the writing process, autobiographical prose often requires readers to possess a certain breadth of knowledge about the author's life as revealed through articles and interviews in order to fully appreciate the realistic portrait of life that the author has experienced.

#### • *Reportage characteristics - Genre intersection*

The concept of reportage emerged in the early 20th century as part of the modernization movement in literature. Reportage reflects objective, authentic events occurring in everyday life that the artist directly experiences and witnesses. However, sometimes reportage is conducted by recording accounts heard from others - called "chamber" reportage. For a work to be classified as reportage, it must first reflect a specific subject with broad spatial and temporal dimensions, directly related to the lifestyle of a certain segment of people in society. Therefore, reportage always emphasizes realism, as well as fully and truthfully reflecting what the artist personally witnesses during field trips. Despite being a literary genre, reportage has faced considerable debate regarding its literary nature. Research shows that scholars divide reportage into two main categories: literary reportage and journalistic reportage. Due to the close relationship between reportage and journalism, there is generally an intersection between these two aspects. Some view reportage as documentation that completely respects the facts occurring in life, like a photograph or direct video recording. Others focus on *the literary quality* (as Tran Huu Ta notes) of this genre. Consequently, reportage is both a genre rich in realism and literary qualities, expressed through various artistic elements such as literary techniques, character development, emotionally rich language, vivid imagery, and more. Nevertheless, these artistic elements do not diminish the objective reality

of the subject matter; rather, they make the subject more vibrant and associative, strongly imprinting the author's creative mark.

Vu Trong Phung was the first writer to whom literary theorists and critics paid attention regarding the *dual nature* between novel and reportage. The "king of reportage" from the North recreated a Westernized portrait of the lifestyle of "pseudo-intellectual" elites who, upon contact with Western civilization, caused tragicomic stories within society. His novel "Dumb Luck" (*Số đỏ*) documented vices, flaws, and moral degradation. Similarly, "Prostitution" (*Làm đĩ*) addressed the situation of young girls who prematurely entered harmful paths to satisfy sexual desires, resulting in unpredictable consequences that suppressed individual consciousness and values. Vu Trong Phung's reportage-colored novels were individualized when describing specific characters - who could be viewed as representatives of groups of people who were products of the era in which the author lived. His reportage-style novels functioned like videos recording scenes of life, with characters who were not embellished but emerged from reality like living organisms.

The short story genre is exceptional, not only in terms of length but also in its method of reflection. What short stories express is not merely a slice of life, nor should they be conceptualized as small excerpts from a novel. Rather, they contain their own distinct aesthetic ideals, often embodying the spirit of an era. Exploring reportage elements within short stories contributes to enriching literary life and demonstrates the unique storytelling artistry of writers. This approach expands research directions by allowing works to be approached from multiple perspectives.

## ***2.2. Manifestations of autobiographical elements and reportage qualities in Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's short stories***

### ***2.2.1. Personal life imprints - A distinctive feature of autobiographical elements***

Nguyen Van Trung once addressed the personal life inspiration of writers in their creative process, stating: "A true writer always seeks the vibrant spring of their own life experiences. And authentic life experiences are always uniquely personal, thus always requiring expression through specially personal forms, as if they had never existed or been seen before" [cited 2, p. 60]. As a female writer, Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu approached literature as a way to engage with life, revealing its complexities. Her works are deeply infused with life experiences, focusing primarily on women's fates. As time passed through seasons of change, through hearts stirred by nature's wonders, Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's artistic world represents a soul colliding powerfully with life to discover profound values about living. Writing was her way of being authentic with herself. For this author, literature wasn't about painting an idealized, unrealistic life, but rather about reflecting on life's meanings, on existence alongside aspirations and the thirst for living.

According to Nguyen Thi Thanh Xuan in her article "Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu has returned" (*Nguyễn Thị Thụy Vũ đã trở lại*) published in the book "Sending a Bit of

Affection - Literary Portraits” (*Gửi đây chút duyên tình đọc*), the female writer once shared that “70% of her stories are true stories” [3, p. 171]. Therefore, each page of her writing contains stories about the lives of individuals who lived in a highly turbulent society. Realism permeates each character as they collide powerfully with life. The central subjects in Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's short stories are women. Their lives experience many ups and downs, through emotional wounds, through aspirations about the seeds of life that ignite a thirst for love and living. But human life is inherently challenging; they constantly face significant challenges when their living environment somewhat contradicts the desires they harbor inside.

Autobiographical writing doesn't necessarily mean directly narrating the writer's life, but rather creating artistic images that closely relate to one's own life experiences, as we affirmed in section 2.1. This is evident throughout Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's short stories. The author's life journey involved growing up in both rural and urban environments. Characters in her short stories are people who lived in rural villages from childhood, and upon reaching adulthood, yearned to escape their sorrows and “early clouds, late lamps” to step toward new horizons. Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu herself left her hometown of Vinh Long for the city, grasping at hope for a changed life. She eventually realized that life isn't as glamorous as imagined, but rather consists of multiple shades, sometimes murky and smudged colors stretching across each person's existence. It can be observed that in the short story *One Afternoon* (*Một buổi chiều*), the first-person narrator departs from her rural homeland for the city. Life in this new land appears distant and detached from reality. In the countryside, she had longed to begin a renewed life—one that would liberate her from a monotonous existence marked by unrelenting sorrow: “I must leave, leave this house, my life will change” [4, p. 17]. Confronted with the harshness of reality, the narrator finds herself alone and disoriented, as “my rustic awkwardness did not fit with the vibrant unfamiliarity of this colorful Saigon” [4, p. 19], upon setting foot in this new space. As in “*One Afternoon*” (*Một buổi chiều*), the first-person narrator in the short story *Mảnh* is a female teacher residing in the vast urban space of Saigon. During a return to her rural hometown for the Lunar New Year (Tết), the narrator is drawn into a stream of memories-recollecting days spent with friends and stories of her village's past-evoked by a chance encounter with Manh, a fellow villager, on a bus journey. Upon returning to the city, her life seems excessively peaceful - a flatness that becomes suspect as life remains incomplete: “My mind is disturbed by complicated thoughts, questions scattered throughout books... Life is so long” [4, p. 56]. Women's lives are inherently full of hardship; as beauty fades, time becomes an endless sorrow, wandering familiar grounds as they sink deeper into “the familiar river, weary of the silent life of the neighborhood and in cold illusions?” (*Vast Darkness*) (*Đêm tối bao la*) [5, p. 27]. Thus, female characters become disgusted and nauseated by stagnant lives in desolate villages, longing for departure toward more vibrant existence. In one sharing, the female writer believed all literary works contain imagination, “but what

imagination doesn't originate from some part of truth?” [6, p. 49]. For this reason, characters in her works are bewildered by the urban prosperity, a life that doesn't belong to them, while memories of the distant past continue to echo in moments of solitude.

Leaving the provincial town of Vinh Long for the city, coming from a family with literary tradition and possessing a certain English proficiency, Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu became an English teacher at the Vietnam-American Association. Her time living in the urban environment allowed her to meet and teach English to young women working in snack bars serving American soldiers. She listened to the life experiences of these women who surrendered their bodies to men's caresses and touches, ultimately compromising themselves by depending on physical relationships as a remaining salvation amid their precarious lives. In several of her short stories, the main characters are often English teachers hired to teach women who immerse themselves in nightlife entertainment. In the short story “*Golden Afternoon Light*” (*Nắng chiều vàng*), the narrator is hired as an English tutor for Mi-sen-a country girl whose rustic given name, Gam, reflects her rural origins. Having left her hometown for the city, Mi-sen is illiterate, unfamiliar even with the Vietnamese national script. She hires the narrator to teach her English, not out of intellectual curiosity, but as a practical tool for communicating with her American lovers-her aim being to extract money from them: “The old Gam is long gone... What remains now is a certain Mi-sen, someone with a bit of a reputation in the city's pleasure circles” [4, p. 66]. These English teachers often harbor quiet reflections on the human condition, marked by inner turmoil and a capacity for self-examination. They sigh, disheartened by the fragility of life: “I thought again of the nights she sat at her vanity, carefully examining shades of powder and bottles of nail polish” [4, p. 66]. Through constructing the character of the English teacher, the writer wants to speak about the dark lives she had witnessed firsthand, had conversed with, had understood the fragmentations of women's lives. Looking at these girls, the teachers reflect on their own lives, which are also full of solitude, also sighing along life's journey. English becomes a tool for survival. Two people from different life paths mirror each other's hidden corners, leading to melancholy and anxiety about reality. Life stretches long ahead, with infinite space and the horizon of time. Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu seems to project her own perceptions of life, resulting in an emotional response to her gender and to experiences from reality that enter her works as a dialogue with life and with readers about the sensitive soul of a heart that beats with life.

Writing is sharing with life. Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu turned to literature as verses of life on her journey to transform fate. The days the writer lived and received many upheavals from her own life and the people she met left deep impressions in her mind as concerns and wistfulness about women's lives. Going through ups and downs, at times, it seemed as if she was surrendering her fate to the natural course of things. Although the endings of her stories may not be complete, generally, the lives of her characters, despite flying into storms, still turn their heads to glimpse the light flickering within the fluffy white clouds drifting across the blue sky.

### 2.2.2. *Reflecting the social life of groups in society - a "reportage" film of the era*

Nguyen Dinh Tuyen evaluated the temporal quality in Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's works as follows: "Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's stories are truly bold. After reading her stories, I believe these are the narratives that present the most authentic living events of our era. This era will eventually pass. Whatever belongs to this time, if not recorded promptly, will be lost tomorrow" [7]. Reading Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's short stories, one finds them resembling novels of human life condensed into each word and phrase. Nguyen Thanh Thi identified a model of "novelization" in short stories characterized by "expansion and continuation, featuring the reappearance of characters and settings" [8, p. 14]. When examining several of Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's short stories, we observe interconnection and continuity through the recurrence of similar character types, such as young women working in snack bars, harboring spiritual sorrows while feeling exposed in their physical existence. The settings frequently appear in familiar locations such as snack bars, private rooms, with darkness enveloping the scenery. Within these spaces, each character works in "the same profession" and shares common fate elements. Therefore, examining the reportage quality present in short stories with novelistic tendencies in Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's prose is entirely feasible.

In one sharing session, Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu expressed her perspective on women writers: "The Vietnamese literary scene greatly desires female writers who immerse themselves in life, seeking materials for creative work. One must accept society and find inspiration within it" [2, p. 456]. Consequently, perceptions of social life with various classes of people appear vividly through each theme in her short stories. The common element is proximity to and encounter with real life that the writer herself contemplated through her sensitivities toward reality. The social landscape of South Vietnam during the 1954-1975 period differed in political systems compared to North Vietnam. Within the living spaces of South Vietnamese people at that time, American and Western European cultural elements began penetrating society. The reception of the American lifestyle led to two consequences. On one hand, it represented a modernizing acceptance that kept pace with contemporary trends; on the other hand, "the presence of Americans - beyond military personnel- included diplomatic staff, economic advisors, construction contractors building roads, bridges, culverts... Americans brought with them American currency, American lifestyles, American cultural products, etc. This was the cause of many profound changes in South Vietnamese society. The lifestyle of Americans, especially American soldiers, fostered the development of entertainment venues and social vices such as snack bars, prostitution, dancing girls..., and proliferated drug addiction and organized crime" [9, p. 25]. Subsequently, for a time, gangster phenomena and playboys dominated Saigon society.

Prostitution appeared with high density at snack bar venues catering to American soldiers, representing the most distinct element in depicting the reality that the author shared with women working in these establishments. As mentioned,

she was an English teacher, and these young women studied foreign languages to communicate with American soldiers. Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu herself had spent time interacting with these women. They were victims of physical and spiritual alienation in their struggle for survival and pursuit of love. While their lived reality was faded, obscured, and deeply hidden in darkness, Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu, through her artistic talent, brought them closer to readers to provide a perspective on the stories behind the bar lights - stories containing persistent sadness followed by traumatic consequences that slid down the slope of life. These were women in their twenties, with beautiful dreams and innocent simplicity that quickly became stained with dark mud, restraining their steps in search of life, gradually plunging into bodily pursuits. In "Rushing into Fire", Lan transforms from an innocent girl entering the world of physicality, moving from initial bewilderment to "conceiving" herself as a full-fledged professional who must abandon her self-identity. The rationality and emotions of these young women quickly hardened to everything. Their days consisted of extracting money from American soldiers in Saigon. Their living space was condensed in suffocation and uncertainty; thick like molasses candies stuck together beyond untangling. The temptations of pleasure beckoned these women away from their aspirations and virtues, accepting self-commodification for the ugliness, baseness, and falsity of life - filling the painful, harsh reality that could hardly heal their wounds. The character Tam in the short story "The Bed" compromises with cruelty and brutality, ready to kill the fetus in her womb while thinking, "Ten years in this life has eroded all her faith in life and morality. Karmic retribution seems too distant for her" [10, p. 17]. Her existence was confined to the bed alongside American soldier lovers who came and went, leaving emptiness and fear of fading beauty. ove for these women was awkward - sometimes passionate, sometimes wild, but occasionally representing dreams of "reforming" their lives: "Loan waited aimlessly, while waiting for something unexpected to arrive and change her way of life" (*Night Cat*) (*Mèo đêm*) [4, p. 92]. And in "The Poisonous tree without fruit" (*Cây độc không trái*), after numerous encounters in bed, the narrator reflects on her life: "I must look back at my situation! I must look back at my situation! I have been anxious, and heavy sleep comes, then the next morning, I calmly face life" [5, p. 127].

Abortion was also an issue the author addressed in her short stories. This problem stemmed from snack bar girls who, after nights of "intimacy" with American soldiers, were left with fatherless pregnancies. The hardships of life coupled with loneliness drove these women to coldly decide to end their children's lives. Human compassion retreated, giving way to unbridled pleasure or worldly sorrows deeply embedded in the minds of these women. The nightlife with flickering lights alongside Western liquor seemed to stimulate human pleasure. Instinctual humanity triumphed over rational humanity in the vast darkness. The result was a forming fetus abandoned: "During my first abortion, I was terrified to the point of madness. I kept thinking: a potential human life will soon leave my body, making me anxious and shudder as if narrowly escaping execution" (*The Poisonous tree without fruit*) (*Cây độc không trái*) [5, p. 115].

Disregarding life caused the character Tam to become increasingly indifferent toward human souls, even her own flesh and blood: "A month after the abortion, Tam regained her rosy complexion. She felt no trace of worry or unease like during her first abortion" (*The Bed*) (*Chiếc giường*) [10, p. 17]. Even rural girls who came with aspirations of love, after moments of intimacy, were abandoned by men with a human form rising in the mother's womb then disappearing, leaving her to "startle, feeling like a murderer. In the future, in the underworld, I alone will bear this sin. Even more sinful is that initially I felt no remorse from conscience" (*Vast Darkness*) (*Đêm tối bao la*) [5, p. 50]. Abortion was illegal in South Vietnamese society before 1975. Human needs and unsafe abortion services appeared frequently, becoming a hotspot for misguided girls seeking to terminate their children's lives. In addressing abortion, Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu recreated the social conditions that pushed these risks, while also raising questions about human ethics and existence. These women were victims of a period with significant exposure to new cultures, but lack of understanding led to serious consequences. The author raised contemporary issues about the right to life, freedom, and self-determination connected to human nature that today's society is reconsidering as it begins new steps in the integration process.

Thus, Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's reportage style individualized stories; the author deeply understood life, listened to intimate, private stories, and penetrated the pathways of the heart to examine women's entire lives. As a female writer who herself left her homeland early for urban life, she experienced life's hardships firsthand. Within each snack bar girl's life, there were moments when they kindled glimmers of hope about life, feared the passage of time, worried about fading beauty, and yearned for a happy home and complete love - like a singular remedy that could return them to their true selves, allow them to live authentically, and escape the immoral activities that pushed them into the mire. Through this, the writer "expressed humanity's great realistic aspiration for the right to live, the right to freedom, and the pursuit of happiness in life, especially for fragile, impoverished fates, those 'adrift in rivers and markets,' the bottom layer of society" [11]. Moreover, the fate of these snack bar women served as an authentic "reportage" about a group in society typically categorized as social evils, but through literature, they also carried a story, a destiny, and a zest for life. The relationships in their lives and interactions with various people in society became material reflecting a humanistic perspective on life. Evidently, Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's short stories featuring American soldiers during the war against American aggression in South Vietnam illuminated a multicultural space with various dynamics. Western lifestyles seemingly coexisted alongside everyday life, creating two distinctly opposing spaces with different human perceptions - on one side, intellectuals who encountered Western civilization early and became young talents in various fields advancing society, and on the other side, vices causing disturbances within society. The consequence was that young victims who stepped into this shadowy world found it difficult to escape. From this, Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu partly depicted the uncertainties of urban life, where humans as separate living beings experience contradictions with

social relationships and themselves, causing disturbances in the soul, with the writer serving as a historical witness to that era. From her experiences of life, the author contemplated existence, expanding her vision more broadly and deeply by boldly revealing secrets hidden behind urban glamour. The writer seemed to understand the full spectrum of human emotional states. From individual fates, she shared about the stages in her life where she immersed herself in every breath of existence.

### 2.2.3. *The role of the narrator in short stories rich in autobiographical elements and reportage style*

#### • *First-person Narrator with an Internal Perspective*

In reportage works, narrators always have a specific narrative position and perspective when addressing a concrete subject. Writers like Tam Lang, Trong Lang, Hoang Dao, and Ngo Tat To, when writing reportage, typically used first-person narrators referring to themselves as "I" with an internal perspective to record their process of immersion into the lives they experienced, observed, or assumed the roles of their subjects. These works belong to the reportage genre.

The majority of autobiographical works are typically narrated from the perspective of a first-person narrator, the "I" through which the author directly witnesses and experiences events, conveyed through the recollections of the past. As a female writer from South Vietnam, Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's success came from writing about issues related to private affairs. This writing approach established the distinctive characteristics of her creative style. The shadow of the author's personal life lingers throughout her pages. The autobiographical elements in Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's short stories differ in that the writer "blurred" the boundaries of reality. This means that the first-person narrator, the "I" is not entirely the author. Reading works like "One Afternoon" (*Một buổi chiều*), "Manh" (*Mãnh*), "Vast Darkness" (*Đêm tối bao la*), and "Golden Afternoon Light" (*Nắng chiều vàng*), we see characters with backgrounds as English teachers and living spaces that changed from rural to urban areas, similar to the writer's own life. Therefore, her short stories contain both non-fictional and fictional elements. The fictional quality enriched the artistic world in her short stories. The first-person narrator, though sharing the same profession and undergoing a shift in their environment, experiences life's struggles in deeply personal ways. A common thread between them is the desire to escape, to break free from the stagnation of an existence that seems predestined for them. Through the first-person narrator - the "I" - the author grants the narrator the power to reflect the author's own life, voicing their doubts, musings, and aspirations for a different reality: "As I combed my hair in front of the mirror, I gazed absently at my reflection. The arrogant brow, sharp eyes, flushed cheeks, and lipstick-stained lips transformed me into Tina for real" [10, p. 59]. Thus, reading her short stories, we observe a narrator, "I", who is highly sensitive to life, one who prepares and reflects upon their own existence. This character looks towards the future, yet also turns back to the past, carrying with

them the sadness of a life fraught with challenges, while holding onto the hope of an ideal life they have longed for. Therefore, readers sense that the years spent in two different spaces and cultural zones provided the writer with abundant life sources to write as if speaking truthfully from the heart.

• *Third-person narrator with perspective primarily placed on characters*

In works rich with reportage elements, the use of narrative perspective is flexibly chosen by the writer depending on their intention. It can be said that the narrator in Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's short stories is typically selected from two narrative positions: first-person and third-person narration. With third-person narration and the perspective primarily placed on the characters, the narrator has a complete view of their fates. These are the women working in snack bars. Beyond the main character, the third-person narrator's character-focused perspective through the individualization of a life - opens up viewpoints about a group of people sharing the same fate due to the tight-knit relationship between individuals and the social community. People in a specific time period are precisely the products of a culture from that very space.

Viewed objectively, several female characters in her short stories are victims in a society experiencing East-West cultural intersection. This was a reality that existed in South Vietnamese society before 1975. The portrait of life thus becomes vivid, with the narrator functioning like a cinematographer capturing complete scenes from an individual's life to societal life when American soldiers appeared in the lives of young women through short stories such as "Rushing into Fire" (*Lao vào lửa*) "Night Cat" (*Mèo đêm*) and "The Bed" (*Chiếc giường*). The narrator focuses on portraying the lives of these women with their internal psychological developments. Through these inner worlds, the narrator makes broader generalizations about how reality impacts the characters' thinking. Issues prevalent in South Vietnamese society such as abortion and prostitution are depicted with intensity. These are all portraits of life reflecting an actual historical period that the author herself experienced. The use of a third-person narrator enhances the reportage quality, helping readers gain a thorough understanding of the characters' fates and social phenomena. By deeply exploring the characters' inner lives, "this choice allows the stream of memories and psychological developments to emerge quite naturally, while also creating conditions for the writer to delve into and discover the obscured areas in the characters' souls, allowing them to appear with all the depths of their inherent nature" [12, p. 52]. All life events are profoundly reflected with an understanding of the fluctuations in the soul, thoroughly exploring character psychology to bring different perspectives and thoughts, thereby enriching literary works and affirming the writer's talent in constructing an artistic world.

### 3. Conclusion

More than half a century has passed, yet the echoes from Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's writings continue to resonate through time. Life isn't just about laughter; it also

encompasses tears and worldly sorrows as one traverses through the light and dark spaces of existence. The writer doesn't detach from reality; rather, from within reality, Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu has followed the path of literature by writing about people. Writing is a way to liberate one's soul. The autobiographical imprints in several of Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's short stories serve as a harbor for the writer's memories and hidden repressions. Art provides artists with the light of conscience and love when they are ready to listen to the intimate thoughts flowing from their pen across the page. When writing about women's fates, the author seems to write about her own destiny, and more broadly, about a class of people engaged in "physical" work whom she had encountered during her years in Saigon. Going forth to live, to write, to immerse herself in the era, the reportage quality in her writing has given readers a key to enter the world of psychological and social life. The dynamics of society influence the actions and thoughts of individuals in ways characteristic of their time. Although the lives of these female characters are individual fragments, we encounter in them empathy and resonance about one's own gender. Today and in the future, when reading her works, the timeliness of her voice remains valuable a voice expressing the thirst for life, the thirst for love, and the embrace of tomorrow's dawning light.

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