

FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THE SHORT STORIES *LAO VAO LUA* AND *DEM NOI LUA* BY NGUYEN THI THUY VU: FROM PHYSICAL BODY TO EGO DIALOGUE

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Abstract - The article focuses on examining the expression of sexual elements as well as the search for the female character's ego in the two short stories *Lao vao lua* and *Dem noi lua* by Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu by applying Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Sartre's existentialism. Firstly, the preoccupation with pleasure and neglect of the body represents an escape from sadness in reality. Secondly, the rejection of life manifests as self-destruction of the ego. Thirdly, after experiencing ups and downs in life, the female character reflects on her own private life and becomes aware of her existence in relation to life itself. The body and the ego are two aspects that are closely related to each other when considering the character's life. This study contributes to affirming the role of female characters in expressing the artistic concept of human beings as well as the creative personality of the writer in her short stories.

Key words - Female character; psychoanalysis; existential; body; ego

1. Introduction

Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu entered the literary scene later than her female contemporaries such as Nguyen Thi Hoang, Tuy Hong, and Trung Duong, yet she quickly established a distinctive style through short stories that explore the fate of female characters - specifically young women working in snack bars. Sharing the creative inspiration of deep empathy for women's conditions, Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu writes about sexuality and ego as a dialogue on the female characters' existence in relation to life. The short stories *Lao vao lua* (Rushing into Fire) and *Dem noi lua* (Night of Rising Fire) depict the sadness and loneliness in the inner lives of female characters. These are young women in their twenties with beautiful dreams who, due to circumstances, prematurely enter the dark world of nightlife, surrendering their bodies to American soldiers. After moments of intimacy, they return to their inner selves, feeling isolated in the flow of life. The physical body in these two short stories transcends mere satisfaction of natural human needs, raising questions about the rejection of life. Sexuality becomes an anchor amid the uncertainties of their existential reality. Moreover, following physical encounters, the female characters reflect on their own fate. This creates a connection between sexuality and ego in Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's short stories. Therefore, applying Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Sartre's existentialism, this article examines female characters in the two short stories *Lao vao lua* and *Dem noi lua*, tracing their journey from physical pleasure to self-destruction of the ego and questioning their existence in relation to life. Through this analysis, the article affirms the role of female characters in expressing the artistic concept of humanity as well as the creative individuality of the writer.

2. Content

2.1. The issue of sexuality and ego in South Vietnamese women's prose 1954-1975

The generation of female writers in South Vietnam from 1954 to 1975, including prominent names such as Nguyen Thi Hoang, Tuy Hong, Trung Duong, Nha Ca, Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu, and Nguyen Thi Vinh, made a significant impact on the literary scene of that time. They emerged as early phenomena affirming their creative individuality and gender consciousness, contributing equally to the literary sphere alongside male writers. This achievement stemmed from new awareness and openness regarding women's roles in literary creation, establishing a solid foundation for female writers to appear in the literary forum with influential works that became focal points for various debates. The common element in their writings was the centrality of women as subjects. The inspiration drawn from personal life and worldly affairs remained predominant in their works. Themes of sexuality and the search for ego were the most distinctive content, as for these South Vietnamese female writers, writing was a means of self-liberation and a reconsideration of their condition in an increasingly modernizing society. Through these themes, readers could empathize with the profound transformations in the perception of women and explore different perspectives on the inner worlds of female characters in the writings of these female authors.

Sexuality in the literature of female writers carried a gender consciousness. It represented a space where individuals returned to the most natural instincts of humanity. The literary process before the 20th century rarely addressed sexuality due to objective circumstances, and women had even fewer opportunities to express their gender perceptions through creative journeys. At the very least, only the phenomenon of Ho Xuan Huong had voiced the echoes in her soul about the burning desires of women in love within marital relationships: "Perhaps five times, ten times, if at all,/ Once or twice a month, or nothing at all" (*Nam chung muoi hoa hay chang cho,/ Mot thang doi lan co cung khong*). By the 20th century, women's literature had undergone certain transformations. During this period, from social beings to individual beings, literary works of the first half of the 20th century delved into the internal transformations of each individual. Issues of sexuality and ego became the preoccupations of writers on their journey to find authentic life. Particularly in South

Vietnam from 1945-1975, with its somewhat special historical circumstances, prose developed vigorously as writers gained access to Western philosophy and were influenced by existentialist currents of A. Camus and J.P. Sartre; psychoanalytic theories of Freud, C. Jung, and Lacan became abundant sources of energy stimulating the creative abilities of writers. Alongside prose writers like Nguyen Mong Giac, Vo Phien, and Duyen Anh, emerging female writers created new resonances in South Vietnam's literary scene. The appearance of names such as Nguyen Thi Hoang (*Vong tay hoc tro, Cuoc tinh trong nguc that*), Trung Duong (*Mua khong uot dat*), Tuy Hong (*Toi nhìn toi tren vach*), Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu (*Khung reu, Thu hoang*), Tran Thi NgH (*Nha co cua khoa trai*), and Nha Ca (*Bong toi thoi con gai, Ngươi tình ngoài mặt trần*) generated a new current stirring the previously calm waters of women's literature. The creative themes of South Vietnamese female writers were diverse, drawing inspiration from real-life experiences and female journeys that raised many questions about their condition. Women's fate had previously been constrained within the confines of Confucianism with its principles of three obediences and four virtues (*tam tong va tu duc*). When exposed to a vibrant, open culture, women were reconsidered. Consequently, issues of sexuality and the physical body appeared with high frequency in women's writings. For female writers, sexuality was the voice of liberation to live as natural human beings, representing honest aspirations that had been buried within them for extended periods. Contemporary critics such as Nguyen Xuan Hoang, Huynh Phan Anh, Mac Do, and Nguyen Nhat Duat used the term "bold" when discussing the conditions influencing the creative consciousness of female writers as they overcame gender barriers. Magazines also held different views on the subject of sexuality. The journal *Van de* (9.1971) observed: "Sexuality is indeed the most prominent color, indeed the most easily perceived atmosphere in the book world now. Of course, this is not the first time we have encountered it. But it must be acknowledged that there has never been a historical period in which sexuality has dominated literature as heavily as this" [cited in 1, p. 351]. Some perspectives argued that this literary current lulled people to sleep, constructed "motionless" characters disconnected from life's movements, merely indulging in physical pleasures, and classified it as decadent literature. However, these were merely perspectives with different viewpoints. Looking at the psychology of creativity with gender characteristics, female writers addressing sexuality were primarily engaging in gender resistance against life's complexities and asserting their latent vitality in the literary forum. Furthermore, sexuality was a space where women returned to their individual selves with the most natural aspirations of women to live as themselves. Sexuality was also a territory for women to explore and interpret the depths of their ego. This was also a place for female writers to assert their youth and individuality in the literary scene.

The deeper layer of sexuality issues raised questions about the paths to finding the ego in South Vietnamese women's prose. The exploration of the individual continued vibrantly. Raising questions about the meaning of life

provided a foundation for writers to be moved and troubled by human existence. After the Geneva Accords, the country was divided into North and South. In South Vietnam from 1954-1975, with the support and backing of the United States, the Republic of Vietnam government was established by its first President, Ngo Dinh Diem. The influence of Euro-American lifestyles rapidly permeated South Vietnamese urban areas. Concurrently, the existentialist current entered South Vietnamese literature initially through translation, creating a new wave that awakened the generation of South Vietnamese youth to question their ego-living as free individuals. All rules of life seemed to be broken when people needed to live as themselves. Female writers in South Vietnam lived and immersed themselves in this atmosphere; consequently, their works created new perspectives on women's conditions in modern society. Through the process of appreciating and studying the works of female writers, we observe that issues of sexuality and ego are closely related. Behind the physical body lie questions about the lives of female characters when "using sexuality to express an attitude toward life, a perspective on life, an aspect of society still reflects a writer with consciousness" [2, p. 124]. If before 1975 we often doubted the presence of sexual elements in women's literature, after peace was restored, living conditions improved, culture opened up, and human thinking underwent certain changes. Sexuality was received through multiple perspectives rich in humanistic values. From this point, some works by South Vietnamese female writers from 1954-1975 began to be reprinted, appearing before the public and receiving significant reception through the writings of Nguyen Thi Hoang, Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu, Tran Thi NgH, and others. Also from the relationship between sexuality and ego, researchers and readers began to have new experiences. Writer Nguyen Thi Hoang's "In the Arms of a Student" (*Vong tay hoc tro*) was a phenomenon that shocked the literary scene at that time. The character of the Hue-born teacher Ton Nu Quynh Tram and her rebellious student Nguyen Duy Minh developed feelings for each other while in a teacher-student relationship but could not resist the concepts of teacher ethics. The novel delved into the secret desires of women when their status bound them within boundaries between gender impulses and social position standards. Or in some short stories by Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu such as *Lao vao lua* (Rushing into Fire), *Meo dem* (Night Cat), *Chiec giuong* (The Bed), the characters are women working in snack bars who, after moments of selling their bodies to American soldiers, experience prolonged loneliness as they engage in dialogue with their ego. This occurs because they are losing control over their own lives. In Tran Thi NgH's short story "House with a Locked Door" (*Nha co cua khoa trai*), the female character "I", after moments of physical intimacy with her lover, falls into a state of disorientation, loneliness, and anguish about an incomplete relationship as she is the third person. Love becomes an awakening about a life still lingering with worries about the future. After fleeting romances, characters begin to look at the reality of their lives. Life is inherently uneven and rough, and a woman's life is full of hardships. Having experienced various emotional states, sometimes including physical disgust and

weariness, the search for ego becomes an aspiration to change one's life, like pure water washing away the impurities that have clung to a barren soul. Experiences of personal life serve as motivations for change to find a new path to refine oneself.

Discussing the significance of South Vietnamese female writers, Tran Hoai Anh emphasized that "only the work can confirm the existence of the writer's personhood before life" [3, p. 453]. Female writers write to share with life. Reflections on personal life along with insights into relationships and gender awareness have inspired female writers' creativity. Sexuality and ego are not merely means to express uniqueness when constructing female characters but also dialogues that reconsider women's conditions amid various changes in life, as well as the journey to rediscover oneself and live as a free spiritual being through prose works.

2.2. The expression of sexuality and ego in the short stories *Lao vao lua* and *Dem noi lua*

2.2.1. Physical indulgence

Women's prose does not exist outside the domain of the physical body. It is a potential territory that awakens sensitivities to the body. The central focus on female characters further enables writers to express the bodily experiences of women. With Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu, the female writer has allowed her character "I" to enter early into a life of debauchery, masked by money - an innocent, pure soul that prematurely fades to a hopeless gray. She has constructed the character "I" as young, naive girls who cannot resist the temptation of the physical body. It is the Westernized urban space of South Vietnam with the emergence of bars and prostitution occurring everywhere that has drawn women into physical indulgences. They are individuals temporarily distanced from morality, deeply immersed in a path of debauchery that cannot be halted.

"The body is both a tool and a subject through which humans feel their existence" [4, p. 124]. In *Lao vao lua*, the character "I" - Tu has gone through conflicting states between body and spirit before deciding to surrender to life as a genuine bar girl. Tu's family circumstances are difficult, with her father having lost his ability to work and many children in the household, forcing her to temporarily set aside her education to struggle with life. Consequently, Tu is introduced by a friend named Lan to work at a bar owned by an aunt named Honeymoon. In the beginning days, she feels unfamiliar with the lifestyle of people there. Before her eyes are images of women ready to offer their bodies to foreign men. The physical indulgence of "I" has experienced the following emotions:

- *In the first emotional experience*, Tu was hesitant about physical contact: "I shook my head again. He grabbed my hand and squeezed it hard. This time I let go. My pride rose and I wanted to tell him that I was not a girl that he could knead like dough" [5, p. 44].

- *In the next emotional experience*, after the boss and Ms. Nam calmed me down and changed my appearance, she felt an invisible sympathy: "His hands were not as cruel as the previous Americans. We talked nonsense about the movies being shown in the theaters in the capital. He kept asking me

to drink. I didn't have to ask him once. Before leaving, he tilted his head and kissed my hair lightly. His breath smelled of mint candy. His golden hair brushed against my cheek. I saw something different about him compared to the Americans present here. I sent him off with a feeling that was beginning to grow" [5, p. 49].

- *After a few months*, she became proficient at the job, my body overcame my mind: "A strong hypnotic force swept me into a burning fever. I did not object because I felt I should escape from this hateful place. The touch of his skin on my easily irritated skin was the main reason that incited me" [5, p. 50].

- *In the final emotional stage*, she did not hesitate to enter the closed room to indulge my body for a man: "He dragged me into the room and placed me on his thigh. His hands groped my chest and waist. Sister Nam often told me that European and American men were hairy like savages, and that shaving twice a day would be unbearable. I looked at his arm fearfully" [5, p. 58].

Gradually, through the process of adapting to the bar environment and experiencing different emotions, the character "I" begins to compromise with her own body. This compromise stems from the present circumstances that are consuming her consciousness. In the unconscious, her will has been overshadowed by desire. Because "the purpose of depravities is also to seek ultimate pleasure through means other than intercourse" [6, p. 274]. The "other means" that Freud mentioned here are the countless parts of the body. Here, "I" has chosen to have her entire body touched as a form of consensual pleasure. It is the "I" that cannot prevent the instinctual self from overwhelming the rational self.

The body is also an escape from the desolation of life. *Dem noi lua* presents dark gray tones that envelop the life of the character "I". The color of a desolate life where freedom no longer exists. She is also a girl working in bars. She has sold her body to others-strangers she has never met before. A whole night filled with satisfaction in moments of pleasure. She is arrested and taken to a hospital where she lives no differently than a prisoner. Sexuality is present in the deep layers of memory, in nighttime dreams. It is a dark, cold space where all layers of life's sounds gradually give way to the inner life of humans. At night, unconsciously, the instinctive person in her arose once more, and she released her sadness once more: "The pleasant stillness takes me back to the night I am lying beside a foreign lover, in my room around ten o'clock at night" [5, p. 66]. The days the character "I" lived were just an existence because she was being constrained. The constraints of reality pushed the character "I" to seek a healing medicine through dreams. The body for the character "I" is no longer about satisfaction or instinct; but the body is the way for her to escape from her circumstances. And it is also that space that brings her back to the bed next to her lover but full of loneliness. It is the circumstantial conditions that cause the body to possess the entire soul. Even the moments of love, entering into past memories, still only provide "temporary" healing because the love of the past never truly existed: "Under the dim

light, he was swollen with abundant vitality, but I tried to search in the deepest depths of my heart and still could not find a small affection remaining after the exchange of sensations between him and me" [5, p. 67]. The body is no longer an experience of connection; the body has inadvertently pushed people to live on a predetermined path where emotions seem to have been eliminated.

The philosopher Marcel emphasized: "I am my body" [7, p. 274]. The character "I" - Tu in *Lao vao lua* loses the right to control her own body. After stages of allowing her body to be touched, she almost accepts her body being caressed under the hands of foreign men. Only when humans control their bodies-meaning the body is a subject-can they sense all the movements of life. Losing the autonomy of the body means losing a part of one's humanity. Emotions have overwhelmed reason when conditioned reflexes occur in a space full of temptations and alluring desires. The arduous life of survival has taken away a part of human character. Commenting on contemporary women's prose, Thai Phan Vang Anh observes: "Sexuality is a need, a life of women, a personal freedom. Affirming personhood in sexual life becomes the clearest expression of existential feminist consciousness, alongside the desacralization of morality, tradition,... that appeared in women's prose of the previous period" [8]. In women's prose before 1975, as in the case of Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu, sexuality seems not to be a freedom of individual pleasure, but rather states of struggle with everyday desires in the face of external conditions affecting life. Sexual consciousness is no longer the pure instinct of humans but passes through stages of conditioned reflexes.

2.2.2. Self-destruction with the ego

Vietnamese society in the 20th century went through particularly important events. It was a time when the entire nation lived in an atmosphere of heading to battle, determined to fight against the French and Americans to regain peace for the country. Literature at this time was a "weapon to fight against foreign invaders". Waves of poets and writers went to the battlefield with a noble mission following the sacred call of the Fatherland. Literature therefore aimed to build the image of the social human. They lived in an atmosphere of the "collective" the great and noble, both at the front lines and the rear. The country was then divided into North and South. The epic tendency was still present in both regions. The fighting consciousness of soldiers heading to battle still boiled with hope for peace. However, the urban literature stream in the South, in the heart of Saigon, took a different branch. Because in social life, the reception of Western trends and movements - notably the existentialist movement when Euro-American culture directly influenced this living space - became a hot spot for young generations in the South to engage in the search for life. Therefore, Vietnamese literature branched into many different directions, most notably the existentialist literature stream. It was precisely from this existentialist trend present in social life to literary life that further encouraged female writers to have more conditions to express their individuality in their works. Writer Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu

had gone through periods when all of Saigon lived in an atmosphere thick with Western qualities, so she understood human emotions through sensitivity to every movement of life. Therefore, in some of her short stories, the "I" is telling the story about the time immersed in the groaning flow of life to the point of shock and pain.

In the section "A Level of Development of the Ego: The Ego Ideal" in the book "Studies in Psychoanalysis", S. Freud pointed out the clear difference between the "ego" and the "ego ideal": "the ego and the ego ideal are not completely identical, both can coexist, the ego at least retains some of its narcissism" [9, p. 206]. And the "ego ideal" is more or less bound to the organization of the common cultural life of society. The first barriers come from the relationship between people. In *Lao vao lua*, "I" - Tu is an employee of the owner. Every word of the owner is always obeyed. From the "ego ideal", Freud questioned the "collective ideal" that these two ideals can directly influence each other and greatly influence the "ego ideal". These manifestations are concretized as follows:

- *The first manifestation*, she rejected her own name as a way to forget her real self. The name represents the identity of each individual. The outward existence of each individual before establishing a name. Therefore, for a long time, everyone has had a proper noun for their name. Tu (*Lao vao lua*) is the proper name of the character "I", but since the girl stepped into the path of becoming a bar girl, she changed her name to Tina as instructed by the owner: "Tu! You should find a new name, from now on I will call you Tina. Never use your real name here. It's sad!" [5, p. 42]. Resistance is not expressed because the harsh environment makes people easily submit to "hidden power". The identity of her is only recorded through identification documents. Even the real identity is concealed in a space full of risks.

- *The second manifestation*, the "collective ideal" at the bar where the character "I" works is to build the image of a sensual, seductive woman who knows how to wear down men's money. Throughout the days working at the bar, the character "I" is always in a state of changing herself, both in appearance and inner feelings under the control of the owner and sister Nam - those with "seniority" in the profession. "I" is like a puppet of life. The life of "I" is strings swinging in the flow of life. The dialogues with herself of "I" are always influenced by someone outside. The "ego" is in a state of "being overwhelmed by the *libido* of the crowd" [9, p. 206]. The crowd *libido*, which sister Nam represents, is someone who has directly experienced pleasures with men, so this becomes a living experience in bar society. Therefore, sister Nam has repeatedly reassured "I": "Tina, don't be discouraged. Everyone who just starts working is as shy as you. You're exactly like me seven years ago", "Don't be embarrassed. That's how it is here", "You have to know how to hit their pressure points, make their pleasure boil up so you can empty their wallets" [5, p. 43-45]. Female characters are always led into a state of conflict with emotions and internal consciousness. The impact of external conditions inadvertently pushes the "ego ideal" to identify with the "collective ideal" - a common

method to exist. The individual is placed in the thinking of people sharing the same fate in a miniature society.

At the time Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu wrote her short stories, South Vietnamese society saw the emergence of Western-style bars. These were places that satisfied entertainment, parties, dancing, usually for the upper class, the elite. This was also the operating area for working girls. Their lives were often difficult, they had to venture into this path as a way to make a living. Selling their bodies for vile things, they had to resign themselves, had to trade with the perception of their bodies. Time instantly transformed them into different people; narrowed their living space; confined in dim lights, in music, in alcohol, in wild encounters with their bodies with a strange man as a matter of course. Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu has allowed the "I" to witness her own youth full of regret, nostalgia, and inability to resist living circumstances.

Gain and loss are no longer a matter of choice in life for females because now women are completely separated from their ego with all the movements of time. The profession has left many severe consequences. The girls cannot avoid sudden police interrogations. When everything is revealed, they are arrested and sent to hospitals to test for addictive substances. Their lives only revolve around certain spaces: the bar space, the dark private room space, the hospital prison space. Each space affects the human soul. Therefore, the character "I" in *Dem noi lua* is in a situation of living as if dead - immobile with the present. Withdrawing into memories, the only thing left showing existence in the flow of life as a shelter: "I remember the mornings at home... I always woke up late. Sometimes I rolled over to one side, touching the body of my American lover, and suddenly I had the feeling that my life would never change. (...). Sometimes I woke up alone looking at the crumpled pillows and blankets, feeling my flesh soft with the smell of alcohol, and all the stimulants of coffee, Chinese tea I had used the night before. That's when I pitied myself and knew that when night fell, looking at the city lights twinkling outside the window, I would again forget all the morning's feelings" [5, p. 70]. The memory zone coexisting in the mind of her is temporary for the character "I" to find support for herself, but the support is also just years of being lost that have pushed the character "I" into a meaningless reality.

Self-destruction with the ego but not seeking death. They bear the report of the rest of human life. It seemed that when escaping from the womb of Confucianism, women would be strong, enthusiastic to conquer life, but the reality and social conditions created different paths that needed to be chosen. The formation of modern female social groups has forced women - the character "I" to gradually abandon their ideals to identify with the "collective ideal". The perspective on female experiences is associated with concepts about life. Social reality pulls people between choices to form a lifestyle and it is difficult to leave the collective nature.

2.2.3. Questioning existence with reality

The female characters in *Lao vao lua* and *Dem noi lua* struggle with their existence in life. J.P. Sartre, in his

speech "Existentialism is a Humanism", conceptualizes that "Man exists not only as he is conceived but also as he wants to express himself" [10, p. 33]. This means humans always desire to experience themselves alongside becoming a model molded by society. The wanting to express" is always influenced by circumstances. The consciousness of the character Tu in *Lao vao lua* is unfamiliar with her work. With increasingly difficult family circumstances, the character "I" is forced to leave school to work. The job that she hopes for differs from the job the character "I" is about to be assigned. It seems the character "I" is gradually losing direction with the actual circumstances. She has become disillusioned, hiding from her own profession: "Last night I only told my mother the truth that I was going to work at a bar. Afraid that my father would become enraged when he learned about this, I lied to him that I had found a job at the same office as Lan" [5, p. 41]. It is also a state of confusion and worry when "Soon I will step into a world different from what I dreamed of" [5, p. 41]. A world completely opposite to her imagination. These are complications, feelings of precariousness, uncertainty when the character "I" is gradually losing self-awareness about herself. Between the ideal and reality, there is a separation.

The dialogic nature with the ego is a highlight in the character development by female writers. After life's upheavals, after swaying with circumstances, after experiences of debauchery "conceived" from reality, female characters reflect on their fate as a return to the inner self. The character "I" (*Lao vao lua*) has officially entered a path of sin against the way of life and morality nurtured since childhood. Distancing from herself, the "ego" freely lives in the atmosphere of a bar girl, becoming a common model among the sisters. Then, that very "ego" is heartbroken when recognizing her own reality: "Lan! Don't come here often. You shouldn't visit me anymore. Your Tu has now gone too far, Lan" [5, p. 57]. And standing before the mirror, a free being has officially given way to the constraint of a soul rooted in a land full of sin and complexes: "When I spread my head before the mirror, I stared blankly at my reflection. The arrogant eyebrows, sharp eye corners, flushed cheeks, and blotchy lipstick transformed me into a genuine Tina" [5, p. 59]. From here, the character "I" - Tu - Tina are just names abandoned when the soul has been seized for the ugly, dull, and tasteless.

One more loss is one more time the female character struggles to find herself. Groping with the past, returning to the quiet space of late night, the loneliness becomes more encompassing; at times, they tighten themselves with the moral habits of society: "I am a girl living outside society, condemned by morality, surrounded, imprisoned..." [5, p. 70] and suddenly realizes "The white lime walls and the overlapping iron beds enclose me. This is the moral world responsible for changing my circumstances" [5, p. 70-71]. Every breath that she takes is extremely suffocating, oppressive. Everything happens as a punishment when the character "I" is selling herself to the ugly and evil. Reformation only comes in a sudden moment, but the character "I" still cannot reassure herself.

Dialogue is a way to re-cognize life; it is the awakening of the ego.

In *Dem noi lua*, the character “I” is in a state of loneliness when her life is dull. Without relatives or family, she wanders into a space of familial affection. Those imprisoned in the hospital always have relatives visiting, while she stands alone looking up after the cold metal plate. Her spirit is only fragments crushed under shoes on the path “I” is choosing to transform the aspiration: “Before their warm scene, I had the feeling of being lost amid chaotic intimacy. I searched aimlessly, and finally, despair suddenly made me exhausted, tears welling up. I craved a familiar face, a small gift from the lovers in this temporary detention life. (...) I was struggling in a cold zone of complexes” [5, p. 73]. At the end of her life, the existence of the character “I” was lost, leaving her with a pain. The waves of her life had passed, and after many collisions, she realized the truth of life, that people need to connect with the world, need to live in love, in the warm embrace of loved ones. A sincere lover to help her step to the beautiful blue sky to rejuvenate, pushing the character “I” out of the dark reality that the character “I” has entered and cannot change. After all the bitterness that the character “I” has tasted on the tip of her tongue, she has decided “And tonight perhaps gives me an opportunity to live for the wildness, the generosity for myself” [11, p. 78]. The struggle with the desire for liberation stimulates the spirit of liberation for oneself.

Searching for the ego is a method to experience female experiences anxious about their fate. And, looking at life through broken pieces, Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu places the character “I” in a state of imbalance with life. These are young girls with a pure, naive spirit who early on enter a path of debauchery with their bodies. Temptations prevent them from controlling their own bodies, becoming callous to emotions as a matter of course. After the upheavals in their souls, the female characters remain indifferent to reality, lost, acknowledging a different self because they cannot find salvation for their own lives.

3. Conclusion

Over the years, Vietnamese prose has achieved remarkable accomplishments. Notably, female writers in the modern era have continuously expressed themselves. Looking back in time, returning to the literary atmosphere of the South - a place that had received the cultural interchange between East and West - is an approach that contributes to re-experiencing the portrait of the spiritual life of people at that time. Human life has therefore

undergone certain changes. Female writer Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu has sketched the faces of women and their experiences with life through her literary works. The female characters in her short stories live in a life full of temptations when facing difficult, challenging choices. Choosing a path in life is always a torment, a heartache in their continuously beating hearts. The short stories *Lao vao lua* and *Dem noi lua* are like diaries telling the journey of the character “I” with spiritual traumas. Living in a society full of temptations pushes them to choose desperate paths. But in their hearts, they are both lonely and isolated, yet still nurture rays of tomorrow's sunshine even though the window to the new world consists of only small, weak gaps. Therefore, the perspective on bar girls and night workers has changed. Behind the reality that is often dark, rejected, even abandoned in body, there is also a life struggling to find itself. Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu has opened a door for us to enter a world where previously, people had prejudices about the fate of women in the snack bar space. From here, we - today's readers - approach the works and reconsider the fate of these girls with respect and empathy because deep in everyone's soul, regardless of circumstances, there is a desire for an honest and fulfilling life true to oneself.

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