

FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN VIETNAMESE FOLK TALES

Dang Quoc Minh Duong^{a*}, Tran Thi Ly^b

^aDepartment of Scientific Management and International Cooperation, Van Hien University,
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

^bGraduate student of Van Hien University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

*Corresponding author: Email: duongdqm@vhu.edu.vn

Article history

Received: May 27th, 2021

Received in revised form: July 12th, 2021 | Accepted: July 16th, 2021

Available online: September 29th, 2021

Abstract

Feminist issues are one of the interesting research areas attracting the attention of many researchers. In Vietnam, so far, there have been many journal articles on feminism in medieval, modern (1930-1945), and especially contemporary literature. In studying folklore – especially myths, legends, and fairy tales – we have found that a feminism-related consciousness was long ago taking shape. Through the construction of images of goddesses, groups of anonymous people recognized the contributions and merits of women. Through the world of folklore, these people showed their dreams for a just and equal society in which the freedom to love and the right to participate in social activities are re-established.

Keywords: Fairy tales; Feminist issues; Feminist literature; Legend; Mythology.

DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.37569/DalatUniversity.11.3.896\(2021\)](http://dx.doi.org/10.37569/DalatUniversity.11.3.896(2021))

Article type: (peer-reviewed) Full-length research article

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1. INTRODUCTION

Feminism refers to equal rights between men and women. Issues associated with concepts of feminism include the right to bodily integrity and autonomy, the right to vote, to hold public office, to own private property, to education, and the rights in marriage, etc. It is also the goal of many women's activists.

The feminist literary criticism school was established along with the activities of the women's movements born in the Enlightenment period. This school aims to build aesthetics, literary theory, and a literary platform for women. In other words, this is a feminist approach to historical literature, genres, writing forms, styles, and the structure of women's writing, women's opinions and inspirations, occupational and personal influences, and the development and rules of traditional women's literature. This approach has helped develop and encourage many female writers and also allows researchers to discover many interesting messages in literary works.

In Vietnam, in recent times, there have been many in-depth studies related to feminism. These studies have taken a comprehensive view of the theory of feminist criticism, helping to raise the voice and interest in the rights of Vietnamese women, which are vividly and subtly expressed in literature. They show that the direction of feminist critical research is available to Vietnamese literature. There are many works successfully portraying and reflecting the central image of women and many works concerning gender equality issues.

When approaching the treasure of Vietnamese folklore, we have found that folk tales also mentioned feminist issues that were later addressed in both modern and contemporary literature. This is clearly shown through the images of intelligent and brave female characters. These women took part in many fields, were not inferior to men, and contributed to creating the traditions and history of the nation. In this general picture, full of prosperity and promise, there have been a few articles about feminist consciousness in folk songs and proverbs, but feminist issues in folklore generally remain unexplored. We will consider two questions. Is there a feminist consciousness in Vietnamese myths, legends, and folk tales? If so, how is it expressed in the different genres? This article examines Vietnamese myths, legends, and fairy tales to answer these questions.

2. FEMINISM IN VIETNAMESE FOLKLORE

2.1. Feminism in mythology

Mythology is a fundamental world, a creation of ancient people expressing their wish to understand the universe and to explain and conquer the natural world. Mythology is "unconscious art," so what it represents is pure and original. According to Dinh Gia Khanh, in Vietnam, "myths arose from the life of primitive people and developed according to the requirements of Lac Viet society" (Đinh, 2002, p. 274). It

was the period of matriarchal clan societies, so women had a voice and authority in the community.

For various reasons, not many Vietnamese myths are left, and they have not been completely kept in their original forms. Most of the myths we have access to today are fragments that have gone through the subjective thoughts of editors. Therefore, not only the language but also the mythological structure has been reshaped. Among the limited number of myths are several stories about goddesses, such as *Goddess of Woodwork*, *Goddess of Fire*, *Goddess of Gold*, *Goddess of Twelve Arms*, *Ba Ao The*, and *Mu Gia*. These goddesses are also considered cultural heroines, and according to the deductive logic in mythology, they are the foremothers who invented the professions and other means to help people have better lives. Several myths tell of the union between a god and a goddess, such as Tu Tuong with Nu Oa, Duc with Cai, Dung with Da, and Loc Coc with To Co. This is a consequence of the anthropomorphization of the gods. According to ancient people's thinking, gods have the same shape and personalities as humans. In procreation and creation, gods also "need male-female sexual relations to produce offspring" (Lê, 2001, p. 38). This combination also reflects "mythical logic that makes extensive use of binary opposites" (Melentinsky, 2004, p. 219).

Along with descriptions of their power, goddesses are visualized by anonymous authors as beings with large bodies whose heads are in the sky, whose shoulders touch the clouds, and whose feet sink to the rocks. For example, when talking about Nu Oa and Tu Tuong, the Vietnamese have a saying: "... goddess Nu Oa equals three acres of a field/... god Tu Tuong equals fourteen poles" or the running and jumping of god Loc Coc and goddess To Co compressed the land, creating lakes and valleys. Let us take a look at some typical forms and behaviors of the goddesses.

To the Vietnamese people, Au Co is the symbolic goddess of national origin. After parting with Lac Long Quan, Au Co takes 50 children to the forest. Among them is her eldest son, who becomes the first Hung king of Van Lang country. That the eldest son follows his mother and becomes the first king of Vietnam also partly shows the role of the mother in our national history. Expanding our examination to the myths of other countries, we have found that the image of the mother ancestor also appears in the mythology of the tribes of northern Australia and many other regions (Melentinsky, 2004, p. 236). It is one of the symbols of matriarchy; that is, at a time when "women are as important as men in social production, this fact determines the equality between men and women" (Kosven, 2005, p. 21). Not only does she have the merit of reproduction, but the goddess Au Co is also known as the foremother of many agricultural occupations such as rice farming, sugarcane farming, teaching people to make cakes, etc. These characteristics make the image of mother Au Co not only sacred and majestic, but also close and familiar to all Vietnamese people. The story of To Co tells that this goddess gave birth to a bundle from which came twelve beautiful daughters. The girls then replaced their mother to go many places to teach people the professions, and each became the queen or foremother of a region. The image of To Co has many similarities to the image of mother Au Co. In the story of Tu Tuong and Nu Oa, the following incident occurs. "Tu Tuong wants to marry Nu Oa. The goddess forces the

male god to compete with her. Within three days each deity has to build a high mountain on which to stand and look at the whole earth. If the mountain of the god is higher, then the goddess will be willing to marry him” (Lược sử tộc Việt, 2021). Eventually, the victory belongs to Nu Oa. This incident shows that the wedding challenge custom has existed since ancient times.

Another story about the goddess Mu Gia, who expands the realm during the reign of the Hung Kings describes her as an unusually tall and healthy person. She was one and a half times taller than the average person. Mu Gia eats many rice balls and walks as fast as a bird. With each step, Mu Gia crosses two or three high mountains, or five or six large hills, and she travels several hundred miles in less than half an hour (Etruyen.com, n.d.). Although she is an orphan and works as a woodcutter, everyone respects her as a leader and consults her on their dilemmas. In a walking contest with a delegation from the country of Tiet Hau to delineate the border between the two nations, she is the winner in a contest considered inherently a male’s forte.

In general, these goddesses are all “giant” symbols, meaning that they are typical symbols of power in Vietnamese mythology. They are beings of extraordinary strength, capable of undertaking heavy work; their strength is comparable to the creative power of nature. Compared with gods, they have an equal position – even superior in some respects. It once again confirms that in the ancient period, feminism was not an issue; at that time, the relationship between men and women was equal, and the role and position of the goddess were even superior to the god in some respects.

2.2. Feminist consciousness in legends

Legends are a type of folklore narration concerning historical events, figures, cultural celebrities, or religious figures through mysterious fiction. This genre formed when people had escaped from barbarism to enter the metal ages – bronze and iron. It was also a time of frequent wars to expand territory and to exploit and exchange products and goods. In Vietnamese history, legends formed during the formation of the Van Lang state and have continued to this day. During this period, along with the formation of the patriarchy, the Vietnamese began to be influenced by feudal rites, which also means that women were marginalized in society.

Even though women’s lives were under the oppression of foreign invaders and the repression of feudal rites, many legends show that many women proved themselves through education and talent in literature and singing, etc. For example, ladies Que Nuong and Dung Nuong (in the Later Ngo dynasty) were beautiful, knowledgeable in astronomy and geography, and proficient in martial arts. Thuc Nuong (“Phong Chau Citadel”) had outstanding beauty and was an avid reader. The twelve-year-old Con Nuong (“Female General Con Nuong”) was a master of literature: “within the time one can walk seven steps, she can complete a poem.” At the age of fifteen, Con Nuong had intelligence and heroism that only a few men could match.

Besides talent in music, chess, poetry, and drawing, legends have praised and confirmed the military talents of many women. The most famous ones are the Trung sisters who decided to revolt against the brutal policies of the Eastern Han dynasty. With their wisdom, foresight, and military leadership, the Trung sisters called for heroines from all over the country to gather against the enemy. With the support of the people and soldiers, the Trung sisters captured 65 citadels in Linh Ngoai, proclaimed themselves rulers, took the title of Trung Vuong, and established their capital in the O Dien citadel (Phan, 2016, p. 5). In the Trung Vuong version, people praised the Trung sisters' talent: "Rejoice! A pair of heroines from the South, despite being women, are angry at the enemy and chase them away. Together with the fame of all time, they will save the ancient world's name and establish independence for future generations. Quite commendable! Quite commendable!" (Phan, 2016, p. 5). The Trung sisters are truly "national heroines of the Vietnamese people" for their achievements in abolishing the domination of the Eastern Han. The two women really "made history" because they won great victories, driving the enemy out of the nation's territory.

Vinh Hoa (in legend) was a daughter of the Phung family under the rule of the Han dynasty. Although Vinh Hoa was a girl, she liked to ride horses and do archery and sought friendship with a hero. She often said: "The blade in my right hand will be full of the enemy's blood. One day it will be used to wipe out the Han invaders from the land. That's my will!" (Nguyễn, 2019). Later, Vinh Hoa followed the Trung sisters to raise the flag of rebellion and achieved great victories ("Princess Vinh Hoa"). Xuan Nuong had martial arts talent and good health. She was good at archery and skilled in sword dancing; it was difficult for any man to keep up with her. Her skill also made the chiefs of the country admire her. That is why in her house, there were usually dozens of maids who studied and practiced martial arts to become skilled fighters.

Next, according to folklore, Lady Trieu (Trieu Thi Trinh), the leader of the uprising against the Ngo army in the third century, had the will to kill the enemy and save the country since she was a child. At the age of three, Trieu Thi Trinh decided that in the future, "I will fight against the enemy to save the country like Trung Trac and Trung Nhi" (Hà, 1997). Growing up, she worked hard and practiced martial arts. She did not get married because she preferred to "ride the strong wind, ride the fierce waves, cut the long-tailed fish in the East Sea, regain Jiangshan, establish independence, and throw off the yoke of slavery, but she refused to stoop to be a concubine for a husband" (Hà, 1997). She raised an insurgent army that followed her in large numbers. Wherever her army went, the people followed, and they won many victories, terrifying the enemy. In the end, although she failed and died, she deserves to be considered a "talented heroine among women" in the words of the 16th-century historian Le Trung, and worthy of being considered "comparable to the Trung sisters" in the words of King Tu Duc. According to Ta Chi Dai Truong, the Trung sisters and Ba Trieu are evidence of the "trace of matriarchy" (Ta, 2006, p. 18).

Although Duong Van Nga, the queen of two kings (Dinh Bo Linh and Le Dai Hanh), did not directly participate in battle when the country was in danger from internal and external enemies, she thought not for the sake of her family and her son's

position but as a consul, she took a wise and bold political decision to change the dynasty. Specifically, as the successor to the throne was still young, Queen Duong Van Nga honored Le Hoan as the new king before his departure to fight the invaders (Nguyễn, 2021). This action illustrates that she was a female politician with both morals and talent, leading the court as well as the state and nation in facing a dangerous and complicated situation in the 10th century” (Lê, 2011, p. 23). Her role, position, and behavior prove that women are not inferior to men in any field, including the realm of government. Her image is an example and a source of encouragement in the struggle for equality between men and women.

Nguyen Dong Chi’s *Treasury of Vietnamese Fairy Tales* contains two stories that we believe belong to the legendary genre, namely “A Tale of Two Princesses of the Tran Dynasty” and “A Tale of a Dao and the Ming Invaders.” These stories tell that when facing a situation in which the country and its inhabitants are devastated by aggressive invaders, the two princesses of the Tran dynasty and the Dao are angry. They ask for their father’s permission, consult the villagers, use their tactics to destroy the enemy, and obtain many glorious victories. Referring to the Tran dynasty, we recall the story of Huyen Tran, the princess who expanded the realm. At the age of 19, she “wiped her tears off and went south by boat to become the queen of Champa.” (HN - Phụ nữ Việt Nam, 2018). “Since then, the two provinces, O and Ly, became the land of Thuan Hoa of Dai Viet. The above legends once again affirm the quality of women in the country: “When the enemy comes to the house, the women have to fight” (HN - Phụ nữ Việt Nam, 2018).

Due to the influence of mythical poetics and with the wishes of the people, legendary characters were endowed with extraordinary talent and great size. Moreover, many female characters are described in folklore as having a strange appearance different from others – especially in the size of their breasts. For example, the breasts of Princess Binh were so big that when she worked, “her big breasts hit the handle of the rake or hoe, and the blows made a clapping sound all day long. In sewing her husband’s clothes with her breath, Lady Trieu was described as having a flower face, rattan hair, pot eyes, peach lips, tiger nose, swallow jaw, long arms above the knee, voice like a big bell, height of nine feet, three-foot-long breasts, and a ten-person-wide waist to hug. The Lady with Huge Breasts was “passionate about martial arts, and the more she practiced, the faster she grew and expanded. The strange thing was that her breasts were so huge she had to tie her nipples behind her to avoid entanglement” (Truyện xưa tích cũ, 2015). The image of a giant, long-breasted woman is associated with the myth of Mother Earth (Terre-Mère, Déesse-Mère). Later, these characteristics of appearance were given to any heroine. The authors of *History of Vietnam (Volume I)* also said that “the myth of a woman with “three-meter-long breasts” was very common in the South from Hop Pho to Cuu Chan” (Phan et al., 2012, p. 224). This art of depicting appearance also reflects the lingaism belief of the Vietnamese people.

Not only were they recognized for their merits and talents, but many of these women were also worshiped by the people as goddesses. From north to south, we can recognize hundreds of goddesses worshiped in different lands. According to the

statistics of Vu Ngoc Khanh, Mai Ngoc Chuc, and Pham Hong Ha, there were 362 goddesses worshiped in the Red River and Ma River deltas. This number is much higher if the whole country is taken into account (Nguyễn, 2013). Princess Lieu Hanh, one of the “four immortals” of Vietnam, was worshiped as “Mother of the World” and worshiped as a saint in many places of the country, such as Hanoi, Thanh Hoa, and Quang Binh, etc. In particular, the Vu Ban District of Nam Dinh Province has the area of Phu Giay, which includes Phu Tien Huong built during the Le dynasty, Van Cat Palace, and Ba Chua Mausoleum built in 1938. In addition, in Phu Tho Province, there is a mausoleum to worship Founding Mother Au Co, Tay Ninh Province has Ba Den Pagoda on Ba Den mountain to worship Linh Son Thanh Mau and Ba Ria. Vung Tau Province has Dinh Co (Co Palace) and Mo Co (Co Tomb) in Long Hai, and Vinh Phuc Province has Ba Chua Thuong Ngan Temple. The communal houses, temples, and shrines for the worship of female figures in history and legend – folk belief establishments that have existed throughout the history of the country – are a tribute to the women, especially elderly women, when there was no concept of equality between men and women. The reason for the worship of many goddesses in such places is because, in terms of cultural traditions, scientists believe that “the ancient Vietnamese inhabitants belonged to the Austro-Asiatic race, originating from ancient Southeast Asia with typical characteristics of the religious life of polytheism, preferring the feminine, with a tradition of mother goddess worship. The cultural tradition that prefers the feminine – a vital element of Vietnamese agricultural culture – remains the basic foundation until today. According to Nguyen Ngoc Tho, “Mother Goddess worship in Vietnam is so dominant that when it comes to religion, people think of goddesses” (Nguyễn, 2013).

Thus, as a literary form that reflects events and characters related to the nation’s history, legends have many stories about heroines. We can see that, although under the influence of feudal rites, many Vietnamese women broke out of the control of these social and gendered norms, joined the government, fought against foreign invaders, and claimed victories. Many of the heroines have become goddesses worshiped and beloved by the people from generation to generation. Their behavior and success once again affirm the talents and dedication of women in all fields. The spirit and willpower of these women are the sources of encouragement for the later movement to fight for equality between men and women.

2.3. Feminist consciousness in fairy tales

The fairy tale is another form of folklore narration, mainly using elements of fantasy to express the people’s realistic view of life, revealing moral concepts as well as social justice and the dream of a better life for normal and vulnerable people. Fairy tales originated after mythological times when the primitive communal system disintegrated and was replaced by separate families and society began to have a profound class division. Therefore, fairy tales give priority to reflecting personal destiny, explaining problems and contradictions of family life, and resolving conflicts in society. Besides nostalgia, Vietnamese women had to live under the control of feudal rites. Life in that period was too cramped and frustrating; therefore, people expressed their moral

conceptions and dreams of a better life through fairy-tale characters. The following characters reflected their dreams and aspirations.

The first dream is of an equal society. When the primitive communal system disintegrated, society began to have a profound class division. Accordingly, all privileges were in the hands of kings, mandarins, and the rich; orphans and other poor people continually suffered the injustices brought by the upper classes. Reality, though full of difficulties and challenges, did not prevent the hopeful dreams of the people. In other words, despite the painful and unfair reality, they had daring but humanistic dreams. They dreamed of a life where the commoner daughter could marry a prince or a king, as in “*Tam Cam*” or “*Lo nuoc than*” (“The Magic Water Bottle”), where the king fails and is forced to marry a commoner, or where a poor, ugly girl can marry a scholar. These dreams represent the desire for a change in life of many women who were pushed to the margins of society and are also an expression of the dream for a more equal society.

In a feudal society that follows Confucian rites, marriage is not the result of love between a man and a woman, but is an arranged marriage and seen as a duty. According to this concept, the marriage of children is arranged by the parents on both sides. The two families must also be compatible with each other and must register for each other. In marriage, children – especially women – completely lack an opportunity for their voices and opinions to be heard. In contrast to real life, the *Treasury of Vietnamese Fairy Tales* has many stories about marriages in which the woman actively fights for love, as in the story “*Su tich Trau Cau va voi*” (“The Story of the Betel Nut, Areca Nut, and Lime”), which tells of the daughter of a Taoist with the surname Luu who “shows a trick” to determine who is the brother of the twins to have “many encounters” and then get married. The story of “Chu Dong Tu and Princess Tien Dung” is so daring that it destroys the concept of marriage that parents arrange and children have to follow. Princess Tien Dung dared to marry Chu Dong Tu even though she was not of the same class, did not have the permission of her father, and was even rejected by her father. Therefore, their marriage shows a breakthrough of the barrier between the rich and poor classes. They are the embodiment of equality, the freedom to choose their love and happiness.

The clearest expression of feminist thought in marriage is in the concept of virginity and the concept of a virtuous woman. According to this concept, a married man is allowed to have “five wives and seven concubines while a girl is allowed to have only one husband. Analyzing fairy tales such as “*Su tich Trau Cau*” (“The Tale of the Betel Nut”), “*Su tich Ong Dau Rau*” (“The Tale of the Head of Vegetables”), “*Hon Truong Ba da hang thit*” (“The Soul of Truong Ba and the Butcher’s Skin”), “*Dong Tien Van Lich*” (“Van Lich Coin”), and “*Sao Mai, Sao Hom*” (“Morning Star–Vesper”), we can see that for many different reasons, a woman with two husbands is a popular element in fairy tales! Many of the women were even praised in the folk tales, “People like these are rare. It is necessary to make three people live together forever” (“The Tale of the Head of Vegetables”). Some characters are also respected and worshiped, such as the kitchen god (Tao Quan), or a symbol of a couple’s love as in “*Su Tich Trau Cau*” (“The Tale of the Betel Nut”), as is especially the case of the woman in the story of

“The Virgin of Two Husbands.” Although she is married to two husbands, both of whom are alive, she is still recognized by the people as a virgin! This case is quite similar to the union in the ending of Nguyen Du’s *The Tale of Kieu*. Its main female character is the beautiful and talented Thuy Kieu who is forced to separate from her family. Through Kim Trong, Nguyen Du expresses a humane and daring idea: “The virgin can be evaluated in many ways.” It is not clear here whether Nguyen Du was influenced by folklore or if folklore received these ideas from scholarly literature. It is an interesting topic for future research.

According to the feudal rites, women must obey the Three Obediences and Four Virtues. The Three Obediences are obeying her father before marriage, obeying her husband once married, and obeying her eldest son if her husband passes away. While many stories clearly show this concept, other stories show equality in the husband-wife relationship, in opposition to the aforementioned concept of the Three Obediences. For example, even the names of the fairy tales, “*Gai ngoan day chong*” (“A Good Girl Teaches Her Husband”) and “*Giet cho Khuyen Chong*” (“Kills a Dog and Advises Her Husband”), ably reflect the power and voice of the wife toward her husband. It is indeed an antithesis to the rigid notion outlined above. These stories all tell that thanks to her ingenuity, intelligence, and sophistication, the wife has a way to admonish her husband to be sober or to change his temper in a more positive direction. Regarding this issue, we are reminded of the image of Princess Tien Dung taking the initiative in marriage, instructing her husband on how to do business and trade, thereby turning a desolate place on the riverbank into a bustling and prosperous city.

Reality is cruel, but dreams are beautiful. However, when we learn and understand our dreams, they also help us open up our ideas and thoughts. By revealing the moral concepts and dreams of female characters in fairy tales, we have seen ancient feminist ideas expressing social justice, breaking down the unequal notions of Confucianism on marriage, and confirming the role and position of women in the family.

3. CONCLUSION

In summary, we have explored three types of folklore narration: myths, legends, and fairy tales, from the point of view of feminist consciousness. The survey of the goddess images shows that feminist consciousness took shape in folklore. By building images of goddesses, folklore emphasized the contributions and merits of women. Moreover, the stories also convey dreams of a just and equal society in which the freedom to love, the right to education, and the right to participate in social activities are re-established. This “original awareness” was received by medieval literature and continued to develop in the literature of later periods.

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