

Novel The Chronicle of Water by Nguyen Ngoc Tu: A Feminist Perspective

Phạm Phi Na

Kien Giang Teacher Training College, Vietnam

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.909000516>

Received: 10 September 2025; Accepted: 16 September 2025; Published: 16 October 2025

ABSTRACT

The Chronicle of Water is Nguyen Ngoc Tu's second novel. Similar to previous works by Nguyen Ngoc Tu such as *Endless Field*, *Splendid Smoke of the Sky*, *No One Crossed the River*, and *The River*. The Chronicle of Water also clearly shows the image of a woman in the Mekong Delta in real life. Applying feminist criticism, analysis-synthesis, and comparison, the article discusses the novel *The Chronicle of Water* from Feminist perspective by the image of women portrayed in it. In this novel, Nguyen Ngoc Tu explores and highlights women's awareness of gender identity. They express their awareness of their own gender identity densely. These women also do not hesitate to express their hidden gender feelings in real life and reconsider the position and role of men in their relationship with them.

Keywords: Feminism, gender, Nguyen Ngoc Tu, *The Chronicle of Water*

INTRODUCTION

Feminist criticism appeared in the West in the 70s of the 20th century. "This can be considered the enlightenment period of women and they became the subjects of activities, from the field of writing to the field of critical theory" (Ho, 2020, p.12).

On the one hand, feminist theorists champion the identity of women, demand rights for women, and promote women's writings as representations of the experience of women. On the other hand, feminists undertake a theoretical critique of the heterosexual matrix that organizes identities and cultures in terms of the opposition between man and woman (Culler, 1997, p.126).

Feminist critics focused on reflecting the gender inequality between men and women in a patriarchal society, while fighting for women's liberation. The feminist criticism movement went through three waves, if at first feminists fought for some rights like men (the right to vote, the right to participate in social activities...), "it switched its focus from attacking male versions of the world to exploring the nature of the female world and outlook, and reconstructing the lost or suppressed records of female experience" (Barry, 2009, p.117), then came the third wave, which demanded affirmation of female divinity, demanding respect and recognition of their gender as a unique existence.

Since her debut in the literary world, Nguyen Ngoc Tu has consistently devoted her works to portraying the lives and experiences of women in the Mekong Delta. Her female characters—ranging across different ages, such as Nuong (*Endless Field*), Di (*Splendid Sky Smoke*), Tran Hai Anh, San PP, Be, and her mother-in-law (*The River*)—are invariably situated within a distinctly feminine framework. If from an ecocritical perspective, Nguyen Ngoc Tu "questioned traditional discourses about natural ontology, about the countryside, about ecotourism, about myths..." (Tran, 2021, p.1241), then from a feminist critical perspective, Nguyen Ngoc Tu contributed to creating images of women with a clear awareness of their gender ontology as well as the affirmation of their gender consciousness in a patriarchal society.

Continuing the research on the source of feminist sentiment in Nguyen Ngoc Tu's works, in this article, we focus on studying the novel, *The Chronicle of Water* from Feminist perspective to clarify the lives of women in the Mekong delta.

RESULTS

Nguyen Ngoc Tu's *The Chronicle of Water* still depicts the familiar image of women in the Mekong Delta with a troubled spiritual life. Life is becoming more and more progressive, women are also increasingly concerned about their spiritual life, especially the affirmation of their gender identity and gender inhibitions and the questioning of the position of men in life from a female perspective.

The Chronicle of Water and the Journey of Women's Self - Assertion of Gender Identity

In myths and legends about the appearance of women, patriarchal society has created stories about women's dependence on men (such as the myth about God creating women from men's ribs). Patriarchal society has created hierarchical postulates with "parallel pairs of dominant and dominated relationships: men - women, culture - nature" (Pham, 2018, p.219). The idea that women must depend on and obey men has become an institution in patriarchal society. It forces women to consider it as a dogma, as a standard for their virtue and morality. Therefore, the feminist movement has risen to demand a fairer recognition of women. They fight for women's liberation both physically and mentally. In terms of the spirit, the primary concern of feminists is to affirm women's gender identity in a patriarchal society. Gender identity is inherent in gender. It is expressed in distinctions to distinguish one gender from another. In women, gender identity is first expressed in reproductive capacity. It is both a mission and a power that makes women stronger and more capable. In *The Chronicle of Water*, Nguyen Ngoc Tu creates stories about different women, but they all had the same destination: setting foot on Le Islet in Van Thuy, to take the heart of His Majesty to cure her child or to have a child. The work opens with an event that leaves a strong impression on the reader: "On the day of two thousand forty-six, His Majesty only had a heart left. The woman who would marry it arrived on the other side of the river, holding a child in her arms." (Nguyen, 2020, p.8), and the end of the work is also that event. Those questions are gradually answered when following the stories of each woman who appears in the work.

First is a woman named Phuc in Yen Xuyen. That woman used to be a national math student. From the age of eighteen to twenty-eight, for ten years Phuc "immersed herself in studying for a second degree in Ha Do" (Nguyen, 2020, p.31). Suddenly, Phuc got married and stayed in Yen Xuyen. Then she gave birth. Phuc became a mother and was also busy with shopping, cooking, and laundry. "Phuc looked like someone who had no dreams to put aside." (Nguyen, 2020, p.32). What changed Phuc like that? Perhaps it was her motherhood. Creating a new being took up all her time and she accepted to sacrifice her dream, living the life of a mother like any other mother, "with pants still stained with baby urine and a shirt covered in milk" (Nguyen, 2020, p.32). Not only that, motherhood also urged Phuc to take good care of her child. She had a child with healthy limbs, plump and strong but not smiling. Phuc spent all her wealth to cure her child because the baby could not smile. One day, when she went to pray for peace at Mat Pagoda, she heard a rumor that there was "the heart of a monk in the island who could cure any disease" (Nguyen, 2020, p.20). So, Phuc borrowed money, using it as travel expenses to take her child.

Next is Ms. Tuy, a resident of Cho Cu. She left home to follow Vien to a faraway train station. There, Vien left her and boarded the train to leave. She waited but Vien did not return. She was pregnant. The last information about Ms. Tuy was received by a resident of Cho Cu who had married far away. She was wandering near Van Thuy Island, carrying a small child. "The child is not well, it is weeping." (Nguyen, 2020, p.53). She brought the child to Van Thuy with the hope that "she heard that someone on the island has a heart that can cure all diseases." (Nguyen, 2020, p.54), and believed that "the child will get stronger and stronger, and will run around playing everywhere." (Nguyen, 2020, p.54).

The third woman who is also said to have gone to Van Thuy is the Literature teacher Tran Thi Thu. The information that Ms. Thu went to get the heart of the Saint was reported to her younger brother by a person working for the Tropical News. The fourth woman who may have also gone to Van Thuy Island to find medicine to cure her child is Ms. Khung. Ms. Khung had a child who always cried. The escaped prisoners hid in the abandoned house where Ms. Khung and her child lived. The child's crying made the prisoners think of creating a medicine to cure the child's crying. They suggested the heart of the Saint who lives and cures all diseases in Van Thuy. The last woman who may have taken the heart of the Lord to cure her child was Cam. She had a child named Nam who developed scabies after being bitten by a fly. Cam took her child to find medicine. The man

who lived with Cam believed that she was the woman who took her child to take the human heart to make medicine when the news spread.

By a pseudo-detective narrative structure, Nguyen Ngoc Tu created different stories about women who could be the “subjects” who took away His Majesty’s heart in Le Islet, Van Thuy, to make medicine for their children. However, from the stories of those mothers, the information about who really took away His Majesty’s heart is no longer important, but the essential thing is that their maternal instinct is highlighted. With the ability to give birth and take care of children, once a woman becomes a mother, whether talented or foolish, whether rich or poor, she devotes all her love, protection, and care to her children. Therefore, female reproductive capacity and motherhood are the primary distinctive markers of female identity.

The journey of affirming the world of women is also shown in the fact that they gradually become more and more aware of their ownership of their bodies. In the novel *The River*, Nguyen Ngoc Tu depicts the characters Tran Hai Anh and San PP with very impressive appearances. San PP “stands tall with short hair, bare face, the only thing that shows that she cares about her beauty is her thin, slightly raised eyebrows in defiance” (Nguyen, 2018, p.58). Tran Hai Anh “smokes very hard, stylishly blowing smoke in the shape of a heart, a rose or a banyan leaf” (Nguyen, 2018, p.63). It is like affirming the right to own one’s body. The body is theirs, the appearance is theirs and they have the right to decide how they appear to life, in whatever way they like. “The body is figured as a mere instrument or medium for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related. But “the body” it itself a construction, as are the myriad “bodies” that constitute the domain of gendered subjects” (Butler, 1990, tr.8) and “embodied persons as a “mark” of biological, linguistic, and/or cultural difference” (Butler, 1990, tr.9). In *The Chronicle of Water*, the awareness of the female body is once again clearly expressed by Nguyen Ngoc Tu in the character of Phuc Mat Bo. Phuc Mat Bo is not famous for his big eyes and thick eyelashes or for being good at math, but for her puberty. “The kind of blood that people discriminate against and despise, everyone wants to hide well, Phuc is often seen sitting on a tamarind branch, or jumping rope, or going to school with the bottom of his pants stained with blood, sometimes wet, sometimes dry.” (Nguyen, 2020, p.17). Menstruation in women is a physiological manifestation of female sexuality. It is a part of forming gender identity. For Phuc, the best math student in school, she accepts it and considers it an indispensable part of her body, so she calmly lives with “the blood that people discriminate against” without covering it up. It is not only Phuc with cow’s eyes. Another girl of the same age, hometown, school, and name as Phuc with cow’s eyes also thinks like her. One day after school, the whole group of students walked home in the rain. “Phuc walked in front, pouring down from her uniform skirt, now dark with wetness, was menstrual blood mixed with water running down her calves.” (Nguyen, 2020, p.18). Witnessing that image, a friend named Phuc (who studied with Phuc Mat Bo) thought, “The blood is so beautiful, the way it melts in the rain. I don’t find the blood dirty at all like my mother said” (Nguyen, 2020, p.18). Being fully aware that their bodies belong to them, women have the right to choose how they appear in front of others. Not only that, their bodies belong to them, they have the right to love all elements related to their bodies, including the menstrual blood that people discriminate against. That is the high awareness of women’s gender identity.

By affirming their motherhood and their clear awareness of owning their bodies, the women in *The Chronicle of Water* have created a profound mark on female gender identity. The affirmation of women’s gender identity in a patriarchal society is not only a demand for gender equality, that is, a demand for equal treatment of men and women, but also an affirmation of their unique existence before life. They must be recognized and respected because they are unique. In expressing this clearly, Nguyen Ngoc Tu has gone very close to the spirit of Western European postmodern feminist critics when “switched its focus from attacking male versions of the world to exploring the nature of the female world” (Barry, 2009, p.117).

The Chronicle of Water portrays women and their gendered repressions in the face of existence

The more aware of their gender identity, women seem to have to confront more and more directly the troubles of life. The problem of how to exist, what to exist for is gradually becoming a hidden problem for women.

The desire for happiness is always present in humans and that desire is even stronger in women. However, in the face of the unpredictable life, their desire seems too far away and becomes an obsession that weighs heavily on the souls of women. It is the disappointment and suffering of not being loved and respected. In *The Chronicle of Water*, stories about women of different ages and circumstances with different hidden feelings are revealed one

by one. That is the situation of Phuc's mother. She was a family woman, who was always busy selling mangoes to take care of her family. That job was so ingrained in her that even the money wrapper was stained with mango sap. However, she died suddenly in an accident. She and her mango cart fell into a ditch on the way to sell mangoes. That death raised many suspicions among the people in the area because not long after that, her husband brought home another woman. The story was left hanging there, making the reader wonder. Perhaps because she was frustrated by her husband's betrayal, she chose to jump into the ditch to protest. Next is the story of Ms. Tuy from the Old Market. She had a mother who spent all day at the casino and did not pay any attention to her daughter. Even her name Tuy originated from her indifferent answer when the registrar asked what to name her daughter, she snapped out the word "Tuy" when making her daughter birth certificate. The lack of love caused Tuy to leave home to follow Vien. She left in a hurry while doing laundry and forgot to turn off the water valve. The water started to overflow and caused a big flood. Only then did people remember her and tried to find her to turn off the water valve because they believed the temple keeper's words "that faucet will only stop when the person who turned it on" (Nguyen, 2020, p.53). Nguyen Ngoc Tu used a mystical way of speaking to convey the problem. The water from the valve opened by Ms. Tuy overflowed into a flood, perhaps because the depression that had accumulated in her for a long time and could no longer be contained overflowed. And only when those depressions overflowed into a flood did people remember her. The patriarchal society has pushed women into the "second gender". Those "second gender" people always have a quiet life in their houses, with their husbands and children. Over time, those women became obscure in life. Ms. Tuy was no exception. She "blends in with the distant group of girls, with the same hair tied back, the same brown skin color, sitting somewhere behind the market stalls, tailor shops or appearing and disappearing in restaurants. They are there but no one remembers them clearly" (Nguyen, 2020, p.58). That oblivion over time creates repression and the woman is forced to rise up. Some portraits are "removed from the surface of the dream when someone kills her husband, someone gets lost in Africa, someone has an incurable disease, someone gets pregnant out of wedlock" (Nguyen, 2020, p.59).

Not only are the women portrayed in *The Chronicle of Water* depressed because they are pushed into the "second gender" situation, they also have to endure the loneliness of their current life. That is the character Tran Thi Thu, a Literature teacher. She also has a family including her father, mother, younger brothers and sisters, but her family is broken. Her parents are divorced. Her sisters each live in a different place. She lives alone in her family's old house. Her loneliness makes a man named Ki, a nearby convenience store employee, believe that she has no relatives. When he was informed that his sister was missing, Thu's younger brother went to her house. His impression of the house that used to be his family's and now became Thu's house was that "even during the day, there was no life at all" (Nguyen, 2020, p.69). Because she lived alone and was lonely, Thu started raising Nubian cockroaches. The sight of the dark house full of cockroaches made Thu's younger brother think: "Sister Thu walked around the house, talking about the storm that felled the royal poinciana tree in the school yard last night, about a student who dropped out of school and went to the mountains to grow marijuana. Was she speaking in human language or cockroach language?" (Nguyen, 2020, p.75). The memories of Ms. Thu in the eyes of her siblings are also not worth mentioning: "The high nose and double eyelids could not save the cold, stiff facial muscles, the tangled hair, the dry figure, especially she rarely smiled." However, Ms. Thu was not like that when she was young, "the picture of her taken when she was ten years old, holding Tuyen in her arms, she smiled broadly" (Nguyen, 2020, p.73). Why did the broad smile of that ten-year-old girl gradually fade over time? Perhaps that laughter gradually disappeared because life became more and more complicated, because the broken family pushed that innocent girl into a rigid, lost and lonely teacher.

Ms. Tuy at the Cho Cu is also a case of being lost in the middle of existing life. She followed Vien to Xep station. She was "stuck in this strange place" (Nguyen, 2020, p.92). She had to join other female street vendors at Xep station because "sitting there, I became one of them. As long as I was an accomplice in all the midday market's travesties, I would be safe" (Nguyen, 2020, p.92). On her journey to leave the Old Market with Vien, she must have hoped for a more meaningful life, but the reality was very bleak: "Not knowing what to do all day, I sat all day at the Station market, poisoning myself by sneering at other people's stories." (Nguyen, 2020, p.96).

If middle-aged women like Ms. Thu and Ms. Tuy carry existential depression because of their loneliness and confusion in life, young girls who grew up in powerful families in the city have their own instabilities for their age. They are Mi and Doi (nicknames of girls who like to wander around at night), who often "go out at night to find friends to go storming, eat grass, gamble or get drunk and have sex." (Nguyen, 2020, p.118). Mi burned cars on

Sao Bridge and toppled the central monument in the square. She threw stones at the lights in the square, opened the fire hydrants... Those rebellious actions were like anaphylactic shocks to the dullness and tastelessness of life. Those girls seemed to be searching for something, so “sometimes she suddenly stopped the car, jumped out the door and disappeared into a dark alley, then quickly returned with a disappointed and confused look”. She muttered “not here” (Nguyen, 2020, p.123). What were those “orphaned owls” looking for? Was it the true meaning of life or freedom from being constrained by families trying to shape their children according to their expectations. Whatever the answer, the current situation of those young girls was still deadlocked and lost.

Portraying women of different ages and backgrounds, all facing the uncertainties of life, Nguyen Ngoc Tu seems to be portraying a current situation in our lives: Women in modern society are not only busy with worries about food and clothing but also face mental pressure. The greater the desire to liberate oneself, the greater the desire to live according to one's gender identity, the more intense the gender repression becomes. If these hidden feelings are not revealed and resolved, they will lead to serious consequences, even becoming persistent gender obsessions because “more than anyone else, women are the ones who need a truly peaceful life, peace of mind and even in their daily desires for happiness” (Nguyen, 2013, p.86).

The de-sacralization of the male position from a woman's perspective

“Feminist literature not only opposes (the culture of) masculinity but also exposes, exposes, deposes, ridicules, ironizes, and de-illustrates male power.” (Tran, 2016, p.178). Re-examining the world of men from the perspective of women has always been a constant issue in feminist criticism. Deposing men, pulling them from their “ruling” positions is easily seen in many works by Vo Thi Hao, Da Ngan, Tram Huong, Doan Minh Phuong, Vo Thi Xuan Ha... There, “women put themselves in a privileged, advantageous position, while men are placed in a “status” that women had previously had to silently accept.” (Tran, 2016, p.178). However, reading Nguyen Ngoc Tu's novels from *River to Water Chronicle*, we realize that the men appearing in the two works such as the publishing director, old man Mai Trieu, doctor Quyen or Tuong (novel *The River*), Phuc's father, journalist, Mr. Nhon, the owner of Truong Phuc's wood workshop, Mr. Bang, Vien (novel *The Chronicle of Water*) are not necessarily brought down or exposed but are only viewed from a neutral perspective. They are ordinary people with very ordinary desires, thoughts and actions.

The first man is the father of journalist Phuc. When Phuc's mother died, he quickly brought another woman home. When his wife died, it was normal for him to remarry, but he remarried too soon. Next is Anh Nhon, who waited for journalist Phuc's third sister for seven years. In Phuc's mind, “I hate Anh Nhon's chastity as much as my father, who quickly threw away his wife's funeral on the occasion of the 7th week's ceremony, in time to bring home a new woman” (Nguyen, 2020, p.19), but if you consider carefully, Anh Nhon is a man who values love, there is nothing to blame. Perhaps he was blindly waiting for the hopeless. The owner of Truong Phuc wood workshop had a concubine and a mistress, but he always balanced the two sides, “the business, the skilled workers were equally good, the orders were divided equally between the two workshops” (Nguyen, 2020, p.24). The arrangement of the owner of Truong Phuc wood workshop was quite smooth, so the first wife still accepted his going back and forth between her and the concubine. Vien took Ms. Tuy to Xep station and left her there. Although Vien did not return, he still provided money for her. Mr. Bang was so passionate about photography that he forgot his responsibilities as a husband and father and eventually went missing on a photography trip. In general, the men above are all incomplete versions. They have their own desires and pursue them. Their actions may cause consequences, but they are family and personal matters.

With a perspective that normalizes men, Nguyen Ngoc Tu also recreates the portrait of frivolous men. That is the first husband of the character who calls himself Doi. A Japanese man with a passion for cosmetic surgery. Her second husband is a “simple man, who often asks simple questions, do you love me, where do you love me, have you seen your ex recently?” (Nguyen, 2020, p.119). The man with semicolon legs at the Old Market expressed his joy, hoping that the flood would last because when the water was high and everyone was wading in the water, he would be able to hide his crippled legs. He even thought he would be a hero when he helped the people of the Old Market find Ms. Tuy to turn off the water valve to end the flood, but he lost his way, his boat drifted and had to anchor himself hopelessly on an electric pole. The village chief was impatient because the flood was rising so he went to find the deputy district chief. “As usual, when school friends met, they had to get drunk.” (Nguyen, 2020, p.48). The deputy district chief put on his shoes and went to Ms. Tuy's house, looked

around for a while, and concluded with a sentence that everyone knew: "The water comes from this faucet." (Nguyen, 2020, p.49). The provincial chief came to inspect the flood with his entourage and many modern equipment. He was confident that "the provincial chief smiled, rubbing the tip of his western shoes on the still-smoking cigarette butt, his orange protective suit burning brightly under the midday sun. But by afternoon, his face and shirt had cooled down." (Nguyen, 2020, p.50) because he could do nothing about the flood.

The portraits of men depicted above, from peasants to those in positions of authority, are all ordinary people. They have positive aspects and are also full of faults. They are not superior enough to be placed in a "dominant" position. Seeing it that way is clearly a de-mystification of the status of men in modern life. At this point, men and women are all ordinary people, only different in terms of gender, not in terms of social position. We think that seeing the issue of gender in this way is a clear way of looking at it.

CONCLUSION

Feminist criticism is no longer strange to our country's literature, but how to exploit it in each work is the writer's choice. Talking about women, Nguyen Ngoc Tu's *The Chronicle of Water* focuses on reflecting their spiritual life. There, the journey to affirm gender identity and gender inhibitions are the top concerns. The women in this novel with a strong postmodern imprint are not only concerned about economic life but also concerned about their presentation and existence in life. By portraying those women, Nguyen Ngoc Tu seems to have added a voice to women in today's life: women need to live according to their true gender identity and that needs to be seen as obvious, as well as respected, not just accepted.

Survey Materials

1. Nguyen, N. T. (2018). *The River* (15th printing). Tre Publishing House.
2. Nguyen, N. T. (2020). *The Chronicle of Water*. Vietnamese Women Publishing House.

REFERENCES

1. Barry, P. (2009). Feminist criticism. In *Beginning theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory* (3rd ed.) (pp.116 - 133). Manchester University Press.
2. Butler, J. (1990). *Subjects of sex/gender/desire*. In *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* (pp.1 - 24). Routledge.
3. Ho, K. V. (2020). *Feminist criticism and women's prose contemporary in Vietnam and China: Studying the case of Da Ngan and Tie Ning* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City]. Ho Chi Minh City.
4. Nguyen, T. T. X. (2013). *Gender issues and feminist resonances in contemporary Vietnamese prose through the works of some typical female writers* [Doctoral dissertation, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences]. Ha Noi.
5. Pham, N. L. (2018). Returning to the nature: The immensity fields by Nguyen Ngoc Tu from an ecofeminist perspective. In Bui, T. T. (Ed.), *The ecocriticism with the Southern prose* (pp. 218 – 239). Culture - Art Publishing House.
6. Tran, T. A. N. (2021). The journey of River (Nguyen Ngoc Tu) from the ecocriticism point of view. *Science and Technology Development Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 5(4), 1233–1243.
7. Tran, T. K. (2016). Improving voicelessness: Voice as a status and as an action. In Phung, G. T., & Tran, T. K. (Eds.), *Literature and women: Some theoretical and historical issues* (pp. 169–194). World Publishing House.