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ARTICLES

Masculinization of Femininity: A Gender-Based Reading of Đoạn tuyệt [Breaking Off] by Nhất Linh

TRẦN VĂN TOÀN*

I. Introduction

Đoạn tuyệt was first serialized in *Phong Hóa* in 1934, then was published in the book form with the complementary words for "young males and females who suffered strictness of conflicts of the new and the old. The main character of the novel is Loan – an intellectual female who is deeply aware of the meaning of life. Loan quietly loves Dũng – a young man who is also ideological. Dũng loves Loan but because of his involvement in a revolution, he leaves Loan. Following her mother's order, Loan gets married with Thân – the son of Phán Lợi coming from a rich family. Although she puts a lot of efforts, Loan is unable to harmony with her husband's family. Thân is superficial, thus, unable to share with her about emotions of a couple life. Phán Lợi – her mother-in-law is a harsh woman, conservative; she frequently maltreats her daughter in law. The family tragedy reaches the highest point when Loan's son died due to the superstition of her husband family and she lost her productive ability. Her mother in law helps her husband get married with Tuất. Thân, since then, ignores Loan. One

* Vice Dean, Faculty of Philology, Hanoi National University of Education, toantransp1@yahoo.com

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day, while beating Loan, Thân slips his leg falling down onto one paper knife which is held by Loan. He got thrush by the knife. He died and Loan was brought into a court with the sentence of killing her husband. However, at the court, a lawyer indicates her innocence. Freeing from the prison, Loan has freedom. Dũng wrote a letter to Loan expressing his love for her. Loan happily thinks of being his lover and his comrade in future. She has completely abandoned herself from the ties of feudal family to live a freedom life.

Since its inception, *Đoạn tuyệt* has had much public attention. Trương Tửu considered Đoạn Tuyệt as "a marvelous wreath put on the issue of individualism. The author of the novel explicitly received the progression; he is excited with future believes. Trương Tửu added, "the novel is brilliant work, without being a professional writer, he would have been unable to write the novel(Trương Tửu 2007)." Moreover, the novel also create a public conflict in which the most active participant was Nguyễn Công Hoan. He issued not only responsive articles on newspapers but also a reactive novel named Cô giáo Minh [The Teacher Minh][1] Separate trands in ideas on the novel show that it became the center point of social and cultural life of Vietnam in which the most prominent content was the conflict of traditional and enovation. Time passed but the position of the novel is stable. In 1943, Việt Nam văn học sử yếu [A Brief History of Vietnamese Literature] – a work that laid the foundation for history surveys on literature in Vietnam - by Dương Quảng Hàm argued that *Đoạn tuyệt* was the representative of not only Nhất Linh's literary life but also the contemporary romantic prose(Dương Quảng Hàm 1951: 438). Since then, position of this novel is always available in collections of the histories of Vietnamese literatures and research on Tự lực văn đoàn

[1] Nguyễn Công Hoan, "From *Đoạn tuyệt* to *Cô giáo Minh*", *Tiểu thuyết thứ bảy*, volume 92 (29-2-1936), cited by Thanh Lãng.1995, *Mười ba năm tranh luận văn học (1932-1945)* [Thirty Years of Discussions on Literature, 1932-1945]. Hà Nội: Văn học – Hội nghiên cứu và giảng dạy văn học thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, p.73-5

[Self-Help Literary Group]. It is very interesting that the people who was the most uncomfortable about Nhất Linh and Tự lực văn đoàn had high opinions on *Đoạn tuyệt*. Hoàng Dung looked at the content of anti-feudal rituals in *Đoạn tuyệt*(Lý 1978). Phan Cự Đệ also considered *Đoạn tuyệt* as "a romantic and progressive wok because It fought against ties of feudal conventions to construct a better and more humanist life."(Đệ 1974). All *Đoạn tuyệt's* contributions are emphasized in the following aspects: 1) critique of the feudal family model, 2) an advocate of female and individual liberation, 3) nationalistic content, though rather vague. Based on analysis of gender power relations in the masculinization of femininity exemplified in the character Loan of the novel, this paper addresses the following questions:

- What is the real limitation of female liberation in Đoạn tuyệt? Is the female liberation in *Đoạn tuyệt* the struggle to establish new female values?

- Is the nationalism in *Đoạn tuyệt* vague? Is there any connection between the discourses of feminism and nationalism? If so, how is nationalism represented in the female protagonist?

Ⅱ. Masculinization of Femininity and National Discourse

2.1 Masculinization of Femininity and the Image of New Women

The history of the reception of *Đoạn tuyệt* shows that *Đoạn tuyệt* is basically the story of Loan. Visibly, the title of the novel is seemingly a reference to Loan. However, the essence of Loan, if nothing else, is the desire to *become Dũng, to have Dũng's qualities, and to live Dung's life*. Such aspirations are evident in Loan's actions, conversations and most innermost expressions. The conflicts between Loan and Thân or

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the cruel mother-in-law do not arise until the middle part of the story, but Loan's desire to live the life of Dũng is shown in the very first line of the novel when Nhất Linh describes Loan's inner thoughts:

> Loan looks at Dũng, staring at his determination and sturdiness (emphasized by TVT) and quietly thinking: 'My education is no less than Dũng's, why can't I *be like him, living an independent and strong life* (emphasized by TVT), why do I bind myself within family boundaries living *a dependent and obedient life* (stressed by TVT)(Nhất Linh 1999)?

More extensively, throughout the entire novel, Dũng's various qualities are narrowed down to only one attribute in Loan's imagination: the beauty of a free and unrestrained life. It seems as if Loan does not long for Dũng but Dũng's life as her true love. Loan's love for Dũng is evident not only in her longing for seeing Dũng, living with Dũng but also in her wanting to live like Dũng. While living with Thân in materialistic fulfillments, Loan still feels the pain knowing that her life is the complete opposite of Dũng's. Conversely, after being acquitted and released from prison, Loan is in great bliss despite having to face many difficulties to make ends meet because this is when she can live the life of Dũng:

> Loan feels great happiness inside as she realizes that she was not mistaken; the long-standing desire to live a free life is what the soul truly needs. Having lived like this, she now clearly feels the dull emptiness of the previous life dependent on others and bounded by revolving family rituals. Only having lived like this, she can now taste the joy of working and struggle, and truly realize the value of an extensive independent life(Ibid: 125-126).

In the above paragraph, there is no direct mention of Dũng. Instead,

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they are only Loan's new emotions and experiences in her new life, which echo those of Dũng. *It appears that Dũng's presence here is no longer necessary as Loan completely identified with Dũng*. The novel closes with an image of Loan in her friend Thảo's description:

> There is now a happy person. She is walking in freedom, ignoring cold winds and rains(Ibid: 134).

It can be seen in the novel that the distant cold wind and rain is the space exclusive for Dũng. Such space now belongs to Loan as she and Dũng have become one. In other words, the logic of Loan's personal development flows from her initial dream of becoming Dũng to her finally being able to completely identify with him.

Following this supposition, this paper focuses especially on Loan's inability to bear children after the birth of her first son, who later died of disease because of superstitious treatment from her husband's family. Previous studies of *Đoạn tuyệt* have mentioned this detail in varying extent but not yet given it a satisfactory analysis from a gender perspective. It is a fact that Vietnam, similar to other East Asian countries, is influenced by the following Confucian view of family and sexuality:

> The jia (lineage unit, family) was the primary site for the production of gender: marriage and sexuality were to serve the lineage by producing the next generation of lineage members; personal love and pleasure were secondary to this goal (Brownell 2002).

Accordingly, the female identity and value lie in her ability to have children, especially boys. Only by giving birth to boys does a woman complete her womanly duties as a wife and a mother. Therefore, Loan's subsequent reproductive inability and the loss of her first son

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mean that she no longer carries the typical feminine roles according to traditional order. Only such mishap can result in the severely troubled relations between Loan and her family – in – law and in the forced marriage of Thân and Tuyết; all following tragedies are merely inevitable consequences. 'Tragedy' is obviously the right word to describe the situation, yet it apparently is not Nhất Linh's foremost concern. Some have commented that he did not pay enough attention to Loan's pain of losing of her son(Bào 2002). In our opinion, it is because Nhất Linh sees the abandoning of the traditional gender roles as the primary and most important premise for Loan to "break off" all ties with her husband's family. In other words, before being acquitted of murder charges, Loan can only live Dũng's life if she frees herself from the gender roles prescribed by the traditional family framework. This event further highlights Loan's identification with Dũng, even biologically speaking.

Altogether, in *Đoạn tuyệt*, Loan is the embodiment of the thoroughly masculinized femininity. The masculinization of Loan is manifested in not only knowledge, lifestyle, thoughts but also human biology. This is symbolically a crisis of femininity and the female character is therefore in search of new gender qualities by moving towards and identifying herself with the paradigms and postures of masculinity.

Remarkably, the trend of masculinized femininity was once recognized by Nguyễn Thị Kiêm[2] - a contemporary activist of feminism – as a prominent feature of Vietnam at the time: "recently there has been a remarkable revolution among female writers; that is masculinization (la masculinization), which means that women wish to transform into men". According to Nguyễn Thị Kiêm, women in the

[2] Nguyễn Thị Kiêm (1914-?): a female journalist, poet, social activist, who had considerable influences on Vietnamese spiritual life in 1930s. As an active contributor of *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, under the penname Nguyễn Thị Manh Manh, Nguyễn Thị Kiêm had important contributions to the contemporary feminism and the New Poetry Movement.

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new era "want to be equal to men in every aspects of life such as thoughts, education, knowledge, and action for social justice"(Kiêm 1932, 1995). Perhaps the most vivid evidence of this "masculinization" tendency is Loan's love for Dũng in *Đoạn tuyệt*. In addition to the theme of female liberation from the grip of the feudal family as previous scholars have already pointed out, it is necessary to add in another aspect*: women were eager to liberate themselves from the feudal rites not to construct new identities but to identify with masculine ones.*

2.2 The Image of New Woman and National Discourses

A question then arises here: why was the woman image so vehemently masculinized in this period? To answer the question, it seems appropriate to first return to the emergence of women issue itself as well as the feminist movement in the early twentieth century in Vietnam.

In a research on the history of China's women issues, Tani Barlow shows that: in traditional China, there is no general term conceptualizing women, only words denoting the gender roles carried by women in various stages of life: a *girl* when living with the family – a *wife* when married - a *mother* after having babies(Brownell 2002). It is not difficult to see here the profound influences of Confucianism where the aforementioned gender roles of women completely correspond to the principles of *tam tong* [three submisions])[3]. The situation is similar in Vietnam, at least since the tenth century, and has become increasingly intense under the prolonged Confucian influence throughout history, though there are obviously cultural differences. Ethnographers and cultural anthropologists such as L. Cadiere, Đào Duy Anh, and later Tạ

3) The woman must be obedient to her father when unmarried and still living at home (tai gia tong phu), to her husband when married (xuat gia tong phu) and to her eldest son if widowed (phu tu tong tu).

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Văn Tài(Cadiere 1997; Anh 1951; Tài 1984), all indicate that Vietnamese women have not been as mistreated as those in China were. On the contrary, they are an active part of the labor force and play an important role in family life. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the role of Vietnamese women has mostly been framed in the family context and lineage to a certain extent; they have indeed never been considered legitimate representatives in the national or social space.

There was a turning point in Vietnamese society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when Western culture permeated into Vietnam. This first contact with the West brought Vietnam out of the China-centered zone and into a new and global world order. It was also the first time Vietnam came to an in-depth and bitter understanding about its relatively inferior position on the world map. National pride about traditional civilization and long history was not sufficient to mask the truth about the poor education level, backwardness and inferiority of the nation. This psychological self-realization was the premise for Vietnam to construct its new nation discourses by learning from the West. In comparison with the West, contemporary Vietnamese intellectuals found out that one of the reasons behind the backwardness of the country was that women in Vietnam, different from those in the West, were subordinate to men and completely disregarded from national discourses. To renovate the nation was to broaden people's knowledge and the definition of "citizen" to include not only men but also women. Feudal mandarins, French-educated intellectuals, and communist leaders all shared the same calling for enhancing the female role and paying special attention to women in the national project. In this regard, we fully agree with David Marr when he pointed out:

> A new generation of Vietnamese literati emerged in the first decade of the twentieth century, determined to work for national

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> independence and to modernize Vietnamese society. At first dimly, later more coherently, some of them came to understand that any serious cultural revolt required an attack on the subordination of women, just as any serious national struggle had a far better chance of succeeding if women were actively involved(Marr 1984).

Thus, the national spirit and ambition for national modernization were the backdrop against which women issue and feminist movement emerged in the early twentieth century. From that point onwards, Vietnamese women started to be included in discourses of nationalism. Their roles were no longer confined in the family context and instead, they were recognized in a close relationship with society and the people. Since 1907, the authors of the Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục (Tonkin Free School) had delivered these messages to the common people:

> Trong trời đất âm dương nhất lý
> Chớ bảo rằng nhi nữ vô tri/ (...)
> Người giúp của kẻ giúp công
> Làm cho rõ mặt nữ trung anh hào.[4)]
> [This world comes into an agreement
> Please do not think that women are ignorant
> Some contributes their properties; some contributes their labor forces.
> To indicate the female heroism]

More than twenty years later, *Phụ nữ Tân Văn* continued to affirm the Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục's ideas:

> The situation of women in our country nowadays is unlike before, when their domestic lives were hell and when nationalist issues were kept from women.

4) "Quốc văn tập độc" [Reading National Writings] in *Văn thơ Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục* [Writings by Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục], Đỗ Văn Hỷ ed., Archives, École française d'Extrême-Orient, Culture Publishing House. P.119

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Being aware of the role of women in the future fate of the nation, Phan Bội Châu encouraged them:

> Competing [with men] in any skill in schools; we [women] are determined to fly and run to catch up with men. (...) We can do anything that is so tough and great that men could not do(Châu 1929).

It can be seen here that *woman* (with her new position and conceptions of feminism) and *national modernization* were two closely tied themes, reflecting and transforming each other. From this perspective, Loan is *the symbol of not only new girls thirsty for freedom but also a nation in the process of freeing itself from traditional constraints for new fortunes*. Later communist criticisms on Tự Lực Văn Đoàn [Self-Strength Literary Group] mostly came from the artificial separation between the liberation of women and national issue. As we have seen from above, however, the novel was born in a cultural context in which the discourse on women liberation and nationalism constituted each other. In other words, a new discourse on femininity was built based on the new discourse on nation.

Yet, the foundation of rising nationalism neither gave Vietnamese femininity a distinct cachet nor guaranteed a woman's independent existence. Even in relation to nationalism, the man was still the official and sole representative, as Tamar Mayer had concluded:

> Despite its rhetoric of equality for all who partake in the "national project," *nation* remains, like other feminized entities—emphatically, historically and globally—the property of men… [Thus], what the nation is, its "ego," becomes imbedded in what men are and what women are assigned to be(Mayer 2007).

In other words, only men had a direct relationship with the people

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and were able to take on national projects. Whichever roles carried by women in the nation project were assigned by men. Huỳnh Thúc Kháng reaffirmed this mindset when he publicly discussed women issue on *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn:*

> In the world, now and then, East or West, even in the most civilized country, men always take prominent roles in their civilization and women follow. (…). There is no case that men are ignorant and women get higher position(Kháng 1929).

Under the context of such a solid order of "men first, women following", *masculinization of femininity is the only way for modern women to affirm their roles and identities.*

Understanding this principle would help explain why the nation is only described in direct relationship with men in novels by Tự Lực Văn Đoàn in general and by Nhất Linh in particular, as only men are legitimized to voice their aspirations and attach their lives to the national space. For example, even male characters such as Ngọc in *Hồn bướm mơ tiên* and Lộc in *Nửa chừng xuân* (whose main storylines seem to revolve around love affairs) still speak out passionately about humanity and society. These statements, once considered vague and unconvincing for not closely aligning with character development, actually already lie within the predetermined gender framework.

Indeed, in *Đoạn tuyệt*, all passionate, heartfelt and touching reflections about the people and nation come from Dũng(Nhất Linh 1999). In comparison with other female characters in Khái Hưng's novels, Loan has gone much further. Different from Mai's love for Lộc in *Nửa Chừng Xuân*, Loan's love for Dũng is not about traditional family obligations, but about a break from the constraints of typical gender roles and towards a free and independent life. As seen before, Nhất Linh never lets Loan directly address the national issue; instead,

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it is reflected in her love and identification with Dũng.

Altogether, national modernization is the mainstream discourse of the early twentieth century Vietnam, which is evident in the move of female roles from the traditional family to national development. *Yet, national modernization were initiated and led by men*; only by moving forward and identifying with men can women find their true feminine values. This fully corresponds to the plot of Đoạn tuyệt: Loan refuses to stay Thân's woman (a man within a rigid family frame) to instead become Dũng's, who belongs to a vast space and carries great ambitions about the nation and the people. In such a relationship with the discourse on national modernization, the masculinization of Loan's femininity is bound to happen.

Ⅲ. Masculinization of Femininity – the Crisis of Vietnamese Masculinity in the Context of Colonialism

There are also other reasons explaining the masculinization of femininity in Đoạn tuyệt.

According to T. Mayer, the interaction of masculinity-nationalism and femininity is as follows:

> the nation is virtually always feminized and characterized as in need of protection; women are figured as the biological and cultural reproducers of the nation and as "pure" and "modest," and men defend the national image and protect the nation's territory, women's "purity" and "modesty," and the "moral code." Thus women are represented as the nation's social and biological womb and the men as its protectors(Mayer 2002).

Naturally, such model cannot be applied to every culture in every

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period but still useful as a umbrella category to evaluate the variants.

In Vietnam in the 1930s, the role of men as protectors of the nation was severely challenged. From the anti-French movement in Cochinchina, to Cần Vương [Aid the King] movement, to Đông du [Eastern Study] movement, to the Yên Bái uprising (which was closet in time to the birth of *Đoạn tuyệt*), from the traditional macho figures sacrificing their lives for the nation such as Nguyễn Trung Trực, Thủ Khoa Huân and Hoàng Diệu, to wartime heroes such as Phan Bội Châu and bourgeois-oriented revolutionists like Nguyễn Thái Học, all had tragically failed. Phan Bội Châu's bitter encapsulation "Alas! What is my history for! It is one of only failures"(Châu 2000) and Nguyễn Thái Học's statement of "though it [the revolution] is not successful [in saving the nation], it will be successful in maintaining the dignity of people" both reflect the inferiority complex of the men's inability to act and protect the nation. Here there is a profound crisis of traditional masculinity in the face of historical challenges to the fate of the nation.

In such situation, *the masculinization of femininity allows the man to establish his masculine identity.* One should not forget the fact that most of the new female identities seen in newspaper and novels in this period were largely created by male revolutionists, journalists and writers including Phan Bội Châu, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, Phạm Quỳnh, Phan Khôi, and Nhất Linh(Chi 2008). Through masculinization, men projected their own images and expectations into the female characters. In *Đoạn tuyệt*, Loan mirrors Dũng's desires and life ambitions. Her triumph over traditional entanglements and customs also symbolizes the desire for changes which Dũng best exemplifies. It is through Loan that Dũng's qualities become clearer and better-rounded. It is therefore understandable why Nhất Linh does not describe Dũng's love of Loan because of his attraction to her physical appearance or elegant inner world. *Dũng loves Loan because he sees himself and his own ambition in her*. The career that he is pursuing, though only vaguely described in

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the novel, is solidified by Loan's victory. Moreover, her moving forward to identify with him makes Dũng the perfect man. In the love of Loan, Dũng (the symbol of Vietnamese masculinity) finds his position as the ideological leader and ideal role model for women to aim for. *This way, men reclaimed their leading and guiding roles in the struggles for both women liberation and national modernization*. Those are perhaps the belief and message that Nhất Linh – a writer and a social activist – was trying to convey in his novel.

The creation of masculinity through woman images can also be explained by *the inferiority of the Vietnamese men in relation to the colonizers,* whose discourses on national modernization, as analyzed above, considers the West the stronger side by default. In the relation between the colonizers and the colonized, "the positions of colonizers are generally set to be men(Mills 2004)", which emasculated and feminized the masculinity of the colonized nations. According to K. Louie, many scientific studies reinforce the following view of Edward Said:

> Discourses pertaining to the Orient emasculate it to such an extent that it "is penetrated, silenced, and possessed" (Said 1978: 207). Even though Said's Orient refers to the Middle East, the portrayal of Chinese and Japanese men seems to confirm his assertion that under the Western gaze Asian men are feminized(Louie 2005).

From this perspective, *the masculinization of femininity*, the process of projecting male identities into the creation of femininity (as seen in the relationship between Dũng and Loan), is an evidence of feminised masculine in the colonial context. Males – once the legitimate representatives of the nation – were no longer confident enough to present themselves and instead had to hide behind the transformation of femininity.

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Ⅳ. Conclusion

From this analysis we can draw two conclusions:

First, Đoạn tuyệt by Nhất Linh introduces a new "version" of Vietnamese women. For the first time in the history of literature, women escaped from the family scope to appear in the social and national space. Yet, this did not mean that they had acquired an independent subjectivity. Loan, for example, has neither her own experiences nor her own view of life. Instead, women in *Đoạn tuyệt* are merely the men's creation, instrumental characters through which male writers express their views and social ideologies. This was not new, as the strategic use of female image to convey men's experience and outlook on the world had become a common practice in the works of male writers: Kiều in *The Tale of Kiều* by Nguyễn Du, the imperial maid in *Cung oán ngâm khúc* [*The Song of the Imperial Maid*] by Nguyễn Gia Thiều and the soldier's wife in *Chinh phụ ngâm* [*The Song of Soldier's Wife*] by Phan Huy Ích. In these cases, women exist as "empty" categories subject to constant recreation by male writers. In other words, the woman is simply the signifier without an identity. This interesting theoretical issue will hopefully be further discussed in a separate paper later.

Secondly, implied in the masculinization of femininity presented in *Đoạn tuyệt* are many types of power interrelations: males and females, national identities, the colonizer and the colonized. They are the interrelations between these powers that make the thesis novel (tiểu thuyết luận đề) lose its clarity and coherence to make room for the ambiguity and polyphonic layers of meaning. Theoretically then, is the polysemy of the work more determined by the discourse interaction and power relations than dependent on their sub-category labels and characters?

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<Abstract>

Masculinization of Femininity – A Gender-Based Reading of *Đoạn tuyệt [Breaking Off]* by Nhất Linh

TRẦN VĂN TOÀN

Hanoi National University of Education, Vietnam

Đoạn tuyệt is the representative of not only Nhất Linh's literary life but also of the Tự Lực Văn Đoàn [Self-Strength Literary Group]. *Đoạn tuyệt's* contributions are emphasized in the following aspects: 1) critique of the feudal family model, 2) an advocate of female and individual liberation, 3) nationalistic content, though rather vague. Based on analysis of gender power relations in the masculinization of femininity exemplified in the character Loan of the novel, this paper addresses the following points:

- In *Đoạn tuyệt*, the woman is eager to free herself from feudalist ties not to construct her own identity but to identify her with men's identities.
- The construction of new feminine identities was conditioned in new rising discourses of Western modernity-based nationalisms in pre-revolutionary Vietnam.
- The feminization of masculinity echoes the crisis of Vietnamese masculine in facing colonial power.

Key words : Vietnamese literature, discourse, masculinity, femininity

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