



Female Ghosts in Southeast Asian Culture: The Narratives on Body in *Pee Mak Phrakanong* in Thailand and *The Story of The Cotton Tree* in Vietnam from the Gender Perspective



Vu Thi Trang*

[*Abstract*]

Female ghosts are relatively common figures in Southeast Asian folklore. Besides studies on female ghosts from the perspective of spiritual symbols, studies from a gender perspective expose cultural constructions and constraints that produce trauma in individuals. By comparing the Nak ghost in the movie *Pee Mak Phrakanong* in Thailand and the female ghost in *The Story of The Cotton Tree* in Vietnam, this article argues that folk authors create the figure of female ghosts to release women's desires and reveal their sense of social resistance. The openness and boldness in the concept of sexuality, sensuality, and the power of beauty since the medieval period also show the seeds of feminism in Southeast Asia before the reception of Western feminism. In addition, this research contributes to promoting the endogenous strength of indigenous and once-vulnerable areas and communities.

Keywords: female ghost, sexuality, body, *Pee Mak Phrakanong*, *The Story of The Cotton Tree*, Vietnam, Thailand.

* Lecturer, Graduate Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam. trangkhoavan86@gmail.com.

I . Introduction

Studies on the origins of feminism in the West date back to the 18th and 19th centuries with the appearance of classic works addressing the inequality of women in society, such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*; Olive Schreiner's *Women and Labor* or Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. What is notable about the women's movement in the West towards the Eastern feminist trend in general and Southeast Asia, in particular, is the shift from criticizing the so-called "cultural mentality" that regulates inequality between men and women to building a new canon of women's literature by rewriting the history of novels and poetry in which women are at the center (Barry 2009: 116-118). The rather late birth of Western feminist criticism in the second half of the 20th century made a significant contribution to paying attention to feminist texts as well as the representations of women in literature.

Although most feminisms in Southeast Asian countries developed in the context of colonialism and nationalism (Molony 2016), studies on Southeast Asian culture have shown the existence of feminist ideology in Southeast Asian culture before the reception of Western feminist theory or movement in the 20th century. For example, Barbara Molony's studies on the body of indigenous literature in the early modern period in Southeast Asia investigate "the ambiguities inherent in cultural understandings of femaleness" (2016: 122), and Olga Dror's article on Đoàn Thị Điểm's "Story of the Van Cat Goddess" explores feminist ideology and the desire to liberate women in the 18th century not only through analysis of characters but also research on the author (2002). In literature, the genre of ghost stories is usually used by women and written about women. Originally considered a genre with a special form of expression, writers used ghost stories to protest society, comment on patriarchal systems, and radically unveil the concept of sexuality (Wallace 2004). In this vein, ghost stories about female ghosts are seen as a form of female resistance (Lai 2014), in which the image of female ghosts reflects the women's desire to be free and take power over their lives (Đinh 2007). Originating in folk culture, the ghost story genre is popular throughout Southeast Asia and Asia at

large (Piatti-Farnell and Beville 2014), aiming to liberate women from social conventions and constraints on space and time, even if temporarily (Zeitlin 2007: 185).

Among the studies on female ghost stories, the female body is a topic of researchers' great interest (Kelso 2019), suggesting the issue of femaleness and its consequences on culture, society, politics, and economics. Placed in the context of research on female ghosts, the character Nak in the movie *Pee Mak Phrakanong* in Thailand and the female ghost in *The Story of The Cotton Tree* in Vietnam evoke thoughts about the collective consciousness of viewing the female body as the means to protest social and cultural orders that limit women's freedom. The narratives about bodies and sexuality are not only the stories of medieval Southeast Asian women but also evoke several issues about women's gender in politics, religion, and culture, thereby further highlighting their status in society.

In this article, we compare the two figures of female ghosts in the Thai movie *Pee Mak Phrakanong*¹ and the Vietnamese story *The Story of The Cotton Tree* in the collection of *Casual Records of Transmitted Strange Tales* by Nguyễn Dữ. Regarding the movie, the figure of Nak's ghost in Thai cinema is inspired by folk tales and even worshipped at On Nut, Sukhumvit Soi 77, Bangkok (Nathalang 1989: 127). Both female ghost characters are built with a high awareness of the body through the description of the bodies' active reactions in love and sexuality. These depictions reveal the women's struggle and resilience in medieval Southeast Asian culture. On the one hand, understanding the body and sexuality as female identity, where the basic rights of humans in general and women, in particular, are expressed, the female ghosts embody the outstanding attractiveness of the beautiful female ghost's body as a kind of power. On the other hand, this beauty evokes the self-awareness of death, the disintegration of the stinking body as a bitter reality. Although both come up with different endings in terms of religious

¹ As a folk tale, the ghost story about Naak has many versions with many different names, such as Mae Naak, Nang Naak, Mae Naak PhraKhanong. However, all have the same storylines. In this article, we will use the name Pee Mak Phrakanong to refer to the cinematic adaptation.

and cultural ideas, one is the conquering of Buddhism and the other is the conquering of Taoism, both narratives reflect the small fate of humans, especially women. Focusing on hidden sexual obsessions manifested through the issue of the body, this article discovers a way for women to release their secret desires, fight against strict conventions, and show their self-consciousness about the female body in the medieval period in Southeast Asia.

In Vietnam, the issue of liberating the body through sexuality in general and its representation in the genre of *truyện kỳ* need to be explained by the cultural and social context. The Confucian worldview and philosophy, which flourished in Vietnam during the Lê dynasty (1418-1527) and has been adopted in Vietnam for centuries, governs the individual's perception of collective duties and responsibilities. Accordingly, while loyalty, kingship, and theocracy are promoted in a system (Nguyễn 2009: 124; Đào 2016: 15), the free self is seemingly suppressed. Borrowed from Chinese literature, *truyện kỳ*, on the one hand, shows the inheritance in the way of perceiving the inferior role of women in a patriarchal society as well as the denial of the right to bodily freedom. However, the tragic historical events that persistently occurred in Vietnam's Middle Ages have transformed *truyện kỳ* into a forum for expressing personal inhibitions, while also showing the endogenous nature of this literary genre combining folk literature and historical prose (Nguyễn 2021: 3). According to Nguyễn (2021), in the setting of continual conflicts between feudal corporations to vie for dominion authority, including the conflict between the Mạc and Lê dynasties during the Southern and Northern Dynasties (1533-1677), the conflict between the Nguyễn Lords in the North and the Trịnh Lords in the South (1627-1672), and the Tây Sơn army's uprising (1771-1785), Confucianism's idea of monopoly of religion, wealth and peace contradicted the reality of poverty and misery of the people. The harsh reality was the premise for non-Confucian religions, including Taoism, Buddhism, and folklore in particular, which emphasized the metaphysical realm as a spiritual escape. Characterized by the combination of unusual things and *phi kỳ bất truyện* (non-fantasy and not passed by tradition) (Nguyễn 2021: 2), *truyện kỳ* discreetly expressed the author's social dissent and sense

of rebellion, revealing personal interests and emotions, and promoting spiritual freedom. Ghost stories, which center on the metaphysical world in the legendary genre, show the author's efforts to incorporate folklore sub-narratives, such as narratives of the ghost world, women and sexuality, in establishing national identities.

The female ghost figure can be found in Asian folklore in general, such as the Onryō ghost in Japanese folktales, *Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng'en, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* by Pu Songling, or *New Stories Told While Trimming the Wick* by Qu You. However, the nature that governs how the female ghost figure is constructed in each era and each culture is different. Female ghost figures in Vietnamese legends are mainly low-ranking characters, their reincarnation and pursuit of love (and revenge) are therefore understood as the lowly person's attempt to protest social injustice. Meanwhile, the earliest Onryō was developed from the figure of Prince Nagaya and earned reverence from the public following his politically unjust death. In *Journey to the West*, various (female) demons and animal spirits are functional characters, acting as obstacles to test the will of Tang Sanzang and his disciples. Many monsters turn out to be earthly manifestations of heavenly beings, usually celestial beasts that have escaped from bodhisattvas or Taoist sages and deities. *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* by Pu Songling seems to be close to *Casual Records of Transmitted Strange Tales* because it is written in the legendary style, revolving around the strange love story between humans and fox spirits (or nine-tailed fox) or demons in a magical space. In particular, the way the female character is constructed as a type of fox helps the character's image escape the inherent structure of patriarchal society and therefore is not subject to the judgment of feudal etiquette. Thus, the difference between *Casual Records of Transmitted Strange Tales* and *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* lies in the indigenous cultural elements incorporated into each work. In the case of *New Stories Told While Trimming the Wick* by Qu You, many studies have examined the influence of Qu You's work on legendary literature in East Asia (including Japan, Korea, and Vietnam).² Among these

² See further in Phạm Tú Châu. 1987. "Về mối quan hệ giữa Tiển đăng tân thoại và Truyền kỳ mạn lục" Tạp chí Văn học, 3; Phạm Tú Châu. 1995. "Truyền kỳ chữ Hán

studies, Đoàn Lê Giang's research (2010) showed the different characteristics in the two cases considered the most similar, including *The Story of the Cotton Tree* (*Cotton Tree* in short) in *Casual Records of Transmitted Strange Tales* and *Tales of the Peony Lantern* (*Peony Lantern* in short) in *New Stories Told While Trimming the Wick*. Specifically, in terms of structure, *Cotton Tree* follows a five-part structure: encounter, discovering the truth, the death of the man, turning into ghosts, and people asking the magician to destroy the ghosts. This can be considered the biggest common point between the two stories, which shows that *Cotton Tree* is an adaptation. However, the artistic space in Nguyễn Dữ's story is more indigenous. The living space of the characters in *Cotton Tree* is less noble with the character being a merchant while the character in *Peony Lantern* is more aristocratic. Both are characterized by a lustful personality, but Nhị Khanh in *Cotton Tree* is built with a beautiful soul and elegant personality (she likes to play music and recite poetry). In addition, the preaching purpose in *Peony Lantern* has been simplified in *Cotton Tree*. In general, *The Story of the Cotton Tree* and *Tales of the Peony Lantern* show the genre influences between the original Chinese work and the adaptation in Vietnam. However, it is worth noticing the creative talent of the indigenous author in combining borrowed plots, themes and motifs, and traditional narratives and indigenous beliefs to develop the legend as an endogenous genre, reflecting the issues of each country.

The basis for the comparison between literary and cinematic works is mainly based on our understanding of intertextuality between cultural texts, the role of cultural studies in film adaptation, and the impact of historical and cultural contexts on storytelling and character portrayal. The understanding of language as a system of syntactic units by the Saussureans, especially Bakhtin's sense of the meaning of the text and Kristeva's transposition proposes to study

ở Hàn Quốc và Việt Nam". Tạp chí Văn học, 10: 36-40; Kawamoto Kurive. 1996. "Những vấn đề khác nhau liên quan đến Truyền kỳ mạn lục (Lịch sử sáng tác, xuất bản, và nghiên cứu theo cái nhìn văn học so sánh)". Tạp chí Văn học, 6: 57-65; Trần ích Nguyễn. 2000. Nghiên cứu so sánh Tiền đăng tân thoại và Truyền kỳ mạn lục. Hà Nội: NXB Văn học.

the meaning of texts not only from the unique, separate consciousness of the author but also from their position in the system of language and culture. Although literary language is verbal while cinema uses the language of images and sounds, the representation of complex societal issues in literary and cinematic works offers the intersection between literature and film. Many researchers have explored the significance of Mae Nak in the resurgence of Thailand's movie market, as well as its diverse thematic implications.³ The 2013 version of Pee Mak Phrakanong is a supernatural romantic comedy-horror film directed by Banjong Pisanthanakun. It is an irreverent take on tradition that has attracted interest to this movie. The film's humor largely stems from the performances of Nattapong Chartpong, Pongsatorn Jongwilak, Wiwat Kongrasri, and Kantapat Permpoonpatcharasuk, who portray a group of friends in the movie. Most of the 115-minute film is dedicated to these characters' comedic situations, including running, screaming, falling, cowering, and engaging in physical comedy while attempting to alert Nak about his supernatural danger. The movie has attracted audiences with its transformation from a lovelorn, nostalgic fable to a slick comedy that playfully teases the source material deeply rooted in the Thai collective consciousness. However, like all adaptations of folk legends, the 2013 film still emphasizes the female character Nak and her struggles in her journey to find love and acceptance. This is the premise for our argument that the female body is used as an agency to express sexual desire and sexual freedom across cultural epochs and regions.

II. The Issue of Liberating Body through Sexuality

In the medieval period, the concept of women in Southeast Asia in general was deeply influenced by Confucian culture, which caused women to suffer much in life (Nguyễn Tài Thư 1998; Nguyễn 1998). Viewed as sexual objects owned by men, tools for procreating

³ See further in Adam Knee. 2014. "Reincarnating Mae Nak: The Contemporary Cinematic History of a Thai Icon." *Horror Studies*, 5(2) Reincarnating Mae Nak.pdf (lasalle.edu.sg); Ji Eun Lee. 2010. *Monsters in Contemporary Thai Horror Film: Image, Representation and Meaning*. PhD Dissertation, Chulalongkorn University.

offspring, and servants for the husband's family (Gao 2019: 118), women became victims of these social conventions and regulations, which made their lives miserable. It can be said that one of the biggest hidden desires of Southeast Asian women in the medieval period was the issue of liberating their physical sexuality and their weakness against men in many aspects of the family and society.

As a folklore tale, the ghost symbol, especially popular in Gothic literature, has a special appeal to readers. The supernatural and the fantastic setting can create their reality, providing an alternative to the notion of enchanting moments (Wang 2021). Their attractions to readers are manifested through many cinematic adaptations and Nak's ghost story is one example. Mae Naak is arguably the most famous Thai folklore ghost story of all time (Murray and Smith 2011: 109) and is so prevalent in Thai popular culture that it is even considered an influential cultural phenomenon in Thai society, inspiring many versions of films, plays, poems, concerts, comics (Nathalang 1989: 124; Leewananthawet 2016; Bräunlein and Lauser 2016: 83-86; Hunt 2013). Whether Nak is a true story or a fabrication is still arguable, but most Thai people somewhat believe that the story partly originated from a play Likay under the reign of King Rama VI (1910-1925) (Nathalang 1989: 125-127). The Nak ghost story influenced many generations and was passed down by many Thai women (Murray and Smith 2011: 108; Nathalang 1989: 124). Set in the 19th century, the story is about a love affair between a ghost Nak and her husband Mak. Mak went to war leaving his pregnant wife at home. Because the birth was difficult and there was no one to help, the wife and unborn child both died but the wife's soul still lingered on earth. Returning home and seeing both his wife and child, Mak was full of happiness at the reunion. However, the villagers and Mak's friends tried to tell him that Nak and his child were dead and that he was living with ghosts. He eventually realized the truth and fled to a nearby temple. Nak, out of anger, took revenge on the villagers but was later won over by a monk with the promise of seeing her husband again in the afterlife (Bräunlein and Lauser 2016: 84-85; Fuhrmann 2016: 50).

The Story of The Cotton Tree is one of twenty stories in the collection *Casual Records of Transmitted Strange Tales* by Nguyễn

Dữ, said to have been written in the 16th century in Vietnam. The story is about a love affair between a rich tradesman named Trình Trung Ngô and a beautiful ghost named Nhị Khanh. Nhị Khanh died when she was only twenty years old, the coffin was left in the field for half a year unburied. With her desires for love and physical satisfaction, she seduced Trình Trung Ngô. When he discovered that she was a ghost, he ran away, but Nhị Khanh was determined to chase and cling to him. In the end, Trình Trung Ngô died with her and the two became ghosts together, residing under a cotton tree. Then, the two were captured by a Taoist priest and received criticism from the villagers (Phan 2017). Although written many centuries ago, the issue of female sexuality in the story is boldly addressed, considered a marvelous writing of an ancient time that evokes human meanings and a new perspective on the body and female sexuality.

Literary research on physical relationships, especially the analysis of the body and sexuality, is popular in both the East and the West (Hillman & Maude 2015⁴; Phương 2016; Mai 2015; Trần 2015, 2017). From a social perspective, some concepts view the body as an essential aspect of a person's worldview and life. According to O'Neill (2004: 9), humans exist thanks to their bodies. However, the body referred to here is not just a normal body; it is a "living body" that engages in social interactions and experiences emotions (O'Neill 2004: 4; Trần 2013, 2017; Gallagher 2005: 103). Only when the body is a "living body" can its values be revealed in harmony with spiritual life. Sociology research also emphasizes the close relationship between one body to another, in which the basic bond is love and sexuality, to reach the fullest life. The ghosts in the two works are described as dead bodies but refuse katabasis, still lingering in the human world with a beautiful and youthful female body. But the body is not a soulless corpse but has emotions and activities, and through relationships with others, the body's existence becomes meaningful. One of the activities that binds meaningful relationships to the body is sex. However, with a dead body, which is associated with decomposition, dissolution, and stench, female ghosts are camouflaged with beautiful bodies that can seduce others.

⁴ <http://www.drps.ed.ac.uk/15-16/dpt/cxenli10110.htm>

Thus, body, sexuality, and beauty are the three main themes surrounding the discourses of the female ghosts. In the context of medieval Southeast Asia, with strict institutions for women, hidden sexuality is one of the concerns. The strongest right of a woman was the right to live with the person she loves, including satisfying her sexuality with them. These are messages of ghost stories of Nak and Nhị Khanh.

Considering sexuality as a language of the body, the ghosts are described by the beauties that every woman desires. Thanks to their beauties, female ghosts actively seduce as well as control their partners, thereby taking control of their lives. For example, in *The Story of The Cotton Tree*, Nhị Khanh actively seduced Trung Ngô with the argument: “People’s lives are just like dreams. As long as we are alive, we should find pleasures. Otherwise, if you die soon and belong to the underworld, you will become a person of Hades, and you will no longer be able to find love and joy even if you want to” (Phan 2017: 193). Considering “[t]he life is so short, not far from death. Days are lonely without anyone” (Phan 2017), the ghost characters see sexual intercourse as “breathing life into a dead body”. Similarly, in Nak’s story, death cannot erase Nak’s desire and love for her husband and even increases her desire to be with the person she loves (Fuhrmann 2016: 47; Nathalang 1989: 124-127).

The body is associated with sexual desires which are impermanent according to the original Buddhist concept (Fuhrmann 2016: 47-48, 50-51). Although no legendary version specifically describes Nak’s beauty, adaptations such as cinema, theater, dance, and concerts shape Nak as a ghost with splendid beauty. For example, the 1999 film ‘Nang Nak’ by Nonzee Nimibutr presents Nak with a delicate and ghostly beauty that captivates the audience (Arnika Fuhrmann). In dance and concerts, Nak’s story is often interpreted through traditional Thai dance and music, which highlights her beauty and tragic love story (Adam Knee). These performances incorporate graceful movements and expressive gestures that convey Nak’s emotions and allure. Here, beauty is used to express desires and emotions, which is even highlighted in a magical setting. Ghostliness enhances feminine appeal, especially sexual sensuality. The fact that the story appeared in the 19th

century but still inspired many works in the 20th century demonstrates Thai society's concerns for the issue of the body and sexuality. Many discussions about sexy clothing and the body parts allowed to be displayed led to several debates related to politics, female gender regulations, and the concept of Thai Buddhism. However, Fuhrman explains the female body, especially in Nak's case, from a cultural perspective, where the figure of Nak is seen as a form of cultural heritage (Fuhrmann 2016: 58). In particular, the tale of Nak goes beyond an individual narrative to become a collective story that influences the community's identity. It unites people through shared rituals, like visiting Nak's shrine and engaging in cultural events, which strengthens the communal significance of female heritage. In addition, Nak's narrative is interwoven with Buddhist concepts of impermanence and suffering. On the one hand, her haunting presence can be seen as a result of past actions and unfulfilled desires, reflecting the Buddhist concept of karma and rebirth. On the other hand, the resolution of Nak's story through acts of compassion and forgiveness resonates with core Buddhist values, enriching the cultural significance of her narrative in Thai society.

Besides female ghosts, one of the most haunting figures of ghosts in literature and cinema is the image of a fetus. The combination of two ghosts, which implies a lot of resentment, has attracted many folktales and cinematic adaptations related to female ghosts who died during pregnancy or ghost mothers. One of these interpretations concerns the pregnant woman's feminine secrets (Ancuta 2020: 81-97). Death during the reproductive process demonstrates the helplessness of women in the process of performing an "uncontrollable" task, especially in the medieval period. Experiential knowledge about the body and the birth process makes women afraid and confused and even pressured by stereotypes about women's "natural duties." In other words, women's helplessness during pregnancy and giving birth evokes discourses on the weakness of female bodies. In *Pee Mak Phrakanong*, Nak died while giving birth in a state of pain and loneliness because there was no one to help her. Furthermore, Nak's death and her unborn child are a testament to the lack of control of the female body because if she had not given birth, Nak could

have lived and waited for her husband to return.⁵ The awareness of women's bodies and the ghost mother's body evokes conventions and priorities for women, especially pregnant ones.

Generally, through figures of female ghosts, discussion on femaleness was discussed quite early in Vietnam in the 16th century and Thailand in the 19th century. The messages of sexual obsessions that are conveyed through the image of female ghosts in a spooky, magical context become easier for readers to receive. Imagination allows these legendary tales to become familiar and serve as a tool to relieve humans' hidden desires in the medieval period. The beauty of the body, sexuality, and instinctive desires through the image of female ghosts conveyed the messages of women in ancient Southeast Asian society.

III. The Issues of Corpses and Subjugation

The issue of female bodies does not only relate to beauty and eternity. In contrast to the erotic beauty of ghosts is the reality of a dead, rotten, dirty body—something that female ghosts always hide from their partners. It can be said that the tragedy of the ghost lies between the oppositions of rotten corpses and beautiful, lively, erotic ghost bodies, between light and darkness, between vibrant sexual activities and the rotting bodies. The dark and deadly scenes where the corpses lie boldly manifest this tragedy. In both stories, the scene is associated with the raggedness and filth of the reeds and coffins, cold winds blowing from the riverbank, rotting corpses, falling hair, broken combs, and a house with rotten stairs. In *The Story of The Cotton Tree*, when Trung Ngô wanted to visit the house to learn more about Nhị Khanh's family, he encountered a scene that evoked ghostly things:

It is a place where there is a fence made of bamboo poles, sometimes mixed with a few clusters of dried reeds. Inside is a small,

⁵ Today, the Nak Temple in Thailand is primarily frequented by individuals praying for their husbands, and lovers to avoid military service, as well as for blessings related to their children.

dilapidated hut; the vines climbed all over the walls and roof.

Trinh bowed his head under the thatched roof and temporarily sat by the door. Occasionally, when the wind blew, he caught a glimpse of an unpleasant fishy smell.

In the room on the left side, there is a small rattan bed, on the bed is a red coffin, the coffin is covered with a pink sheet, with the words Nhị Khanh's Coffin written in silver sand.

She has been dead for half a year, currently lying in the field right next to the village.

When Trung Ngô saw that, his hair stood on end and he jumped out of that house. (Phan 2017: 199-200)

Similarly, in *Pee Mak Phrakanong*, the scene associated with the corpse reveals the concept of women as a place containing filth, darkness, and even sexual desire (Gao 2019: 114-125; Curti 1998: 107; Fuhrmann 2016: 68-70). Arnika Fuhrmann (2016) states:

Throughout Nang Nak we see Nak change back and forth between her beautiful spectral body and that of a decaying corpse. This kind of transformation figures prominently in Theravadin Buddhist pedagogy, where the dead and decaying female body at once represents the (temporary) object of desire and the object that is supposed to end all desire"

Women especially are supposed to realize the truth of impermanence through contemplation of the repulsiveness of their own bodies. In a key scene set late at night while Mak is asleep, Nak combs her hair with the comb that was ritually broken after her death. When a lock of her hair falls out, she mourns the dissolution of her body and the inevitable end of her fantasy. Instead of beginning to detach from this fantasy, however, she persists in her desires. That Nak's body becomes the site and medium of gender nostalgia is most evident in three scenes of flashback memory (68-70).

A lock of hair falling in front of her lover's face reminded Nak of the death she was hiding from her husband, of facing the dissolution of her body, and reminded her of the truth she was

running away from. It could be said that Nak's body is where gender issues are clearly expressed. Here is beauty, fading, and loss, including the loss of love. Thus, death and the decomposition of corpses represent the impermanence of life. The disintegration of the corpse shows the limits of the human body as well as the sense of material existence. Without that existence, concepts such as beauty and sexuality become impermanent according to Buddhist concepts. Without the body, female beauty and sexuality would no longer be attractive or harmful to men. In this vein, Buddhist teachings were fulfilled through the story's message. For monks, eliminating lust means staying away from physical sensuality, and sexuality in women is the most intense desire. According to the philosophy of Thai Buddhism, sexuality and the female body symbolize desires and are one of the greatest desires of humans, so the reality of a stinking corpse symbolizes the impermanence of human life, an endorsement of the dissolution of the body, of desire and the dirtiness of women's bodies (Fuhrmann 2016: 60-61). The immediate contrast between the image of a beautiful, attractive, and sexy ghost girl on the one hand and the image of a rotten, dirty corpse, on the other hand, makes men feel the fragile transformation of beauty—a desire for impermanent reality. That serves as an educational lesson for men's desires from a Buddhist perspective that those desires are temporary and easily disappear.

In both stories, no matter how happy the sexual intercourse between the ghost and their partners was, they were eventually separated because of pressures from the community. In *The Story of The Cotton Tree*, Nhị Khanh agreed to take Trung Ngộ "home" mainly because he pressured her. In *Pee Maak Phrakonong*, Nak murdered many people to hide the truth since the villagers repeatedly told Mak that he was living with a ghost. Here we can see the female ghost's reaction to protect her happiness, daring to fight back against the situation, using the ghost's power to protect the couple's happiness. In scenes that switch between romantic places and desolate spaces, or a beautiful and erotic body with the stench of a corpse shows the impermanence of life. Trung Ngộ's actions such as "getting goosebumps, hair standing on end, jumping out of the house" show his extreme fear of the reality that is

happening. However, the male character's panic reaction should not only be seen as an immediate personal reaction but also as a result of cultural institutional pressures in medieval Southeast Asian society. Trinh Trung Ngô was initially infatuated with Nhị Khanh and almost did not care about her origin. It was only when his business friends advised him to "find her house" that he paid attention. Even after discovering that Nhị Khanh was a ghost, he still followed her when heard her calling:

[He] often responded to her and wanted to get up to follow. When people in the boat had to use mulberry ropes to tie them up, he scolded: Where my wife lives, there is a splendid castle with the sweet scent of flowers, I must follow, I cannot hang around in this noisy and gaudy place; What does it have to do with you guys that you dare to tie me up like this? (Phan 2017: 201)

The other's deterrent to Trung Ngô shows that he himself still wants to follow Nhị Khanh. Even when prevented, in the end, Trung Ngô runs away with his lover and chooses death to be with Nhị Khanh: "Found him died in the coffin, people have to bury him right there"; "From then on, on nights, people often see two people walking hand in hand." (Phan 2017: 201). However, Trung Ngô's actions were laughed at by people and led to a tragic outcome: the villagers "turned over his coffin, destroyed his corpse, and then her remains, threw them into the river to float with the currents" (Phan 2017: 201).

In the film adaptation of *Pee Mak Phrakanong*, inspired by the Nak ghost story, the director uses a magical space to create a strong and impressive effect on viewers. When Mak and his friends returned from the war, as soon as they reached the beginning of the village, they saw a very gloomy, gray scene covering the entire village, a harbinger of death and strangeness. Right when returned to Mak and Nak's house, Shin, Mak's friend, had a strange dream in which Mak's house was in ruins. This raises doubts about whether Nak is still alive and whether that beautiful body is real. When Shin went to Mak's house and witnessed Nak stretching her arm to pick up a lemon, he was extremely troubled. Another friend of Mak's, Ter, also saw a human skeleton, which was the dead Nak,

with a ring in her hand. In the movie, there is a scene where the couple go to a haunted house together, but the ghosts are even afraid of Nak. In the haunted house, famous Thai ghosts such as the Krahang ghost, Krasue ghost, or Kuman Thong appear. The temple space, the sound of chanting sutras, knocking on gongs, the Buddhist worship space with candles, sacred rice, holy water, unjust souls, pagodas, temples, Theravāda monks, and so on create a Buddhist context and traditional spiritual space in Thailand. In this vein, it is possible to explain the idea of the relationship between the body, death, and nothingness according to the Thai Buddhist concept. The images of ghost Nak's very long arms when picking up the lemon, holding Mak's friends, and especially putting the female and male toy figurines next to each other reflect her effort to hold onto Nak's happiness and love. It also shows the inability to freely enjoy married life in the context of medieval Southeast Asian culture. Just like Nhị Khanh's case, when Mak discovered that his wife and child were ghosts, he ran away to a nearby temple. In the latest film version called *Pee Mak Phrakanong* (released in 2013), which attracted many viewers and earned a huge profit, the producer also focuses on the contradiction between individual and community. The influence of the collective over the individual in Southeast Asia is again highlighted. Wherever Mak went, everyone was shunned. Even when buying food, the vendors did not sell it to him. When he went to the bakery, fish, or wine shops, he saw everyone being shunned. The wine seller even said, "If you want to know the truth, go home and look under your wife's feet and you'll know." (*Pee Mak Phrakanong*: 21') Also, Nak was always separated from Mak by her husband's friends, and the villagers tried to chase her away and forbid her. However, although being afraid of ghosts, Mak deliberately pretends not to know the truth to be with her. He even secretly threw away his amulet, showing that Mak had overcome his limits to choose happiness. Mak's words at the end of the movie touched viewers, which made his friends accept Nak and nurture the couple's happiness: "Even though I'm stupid, I'm not stupid enough to not know that my wife is a ghost. I'm very afraid of ghosts, but I'm even more afraid of losing her." (*Pee Mak Phrakanong*: 1h43') Nonetheless, despite a rather humane ending, the two were only able to be together for a short time before Nak

was taken to another world with the hope of being reunited with her husband in the next life. In general, even when Trung Ngô and Mak show sincere feelings for their wives/ghosts, the misfortunes and disadvantages that Southeast Asian women suffer largely come from social oppression.

When being revealed as ghosts, which means dissolution and loss of love, both female characters become stronger. For example, Nak was ready to kill those who dared to interfere with her happiness. Similarly, Nhi Khanh's reaction shows her proactivity and fierceness to pursue her happiness. When Trung Ngo ran away, Nhi Khanh was determined to hold him back with fierce words and actions: "There is no reason to return anymore," and "Please follow each other as soon as possible so that we can fulfill our curse of being in the same grave"; "Lying alone for so long, I could not let you go"; "[she] reached out and grabbed the hem of his shirt"; "[she] sometimes stood on the riverbank and called out, sometimes came to the window and whispered" (Phan 2017: 200-201). Nhi Khanh's boldness is shown not only in seducing sex but also through expressing her deep love. In the context of Vietnamese society in the 16th century with strict concepts of Confucianism, *The Story of the Cotton Tree* is one of the most daring works expressing the hidden sexual memories of Vietnamese women. The image of Nhi Khanh reveals a desire for sexual satisfaction and a strong feminist spirit. Compared to Nhi Khanh, Nak is somewhat fiercer, which might be thanks to the change in gender concepts a few centuries later. Nak not only uses every means to protect her happiness but also takes revenge on those who prevent and destroy her happiness (Nathalang 1989: 131). From this perspective, through the image of ghosts, the woman in Southeast Asia has been able to overcome physical as well as mental weakness in real life. It is the repression of frustrations in everyday life that, when allowed to be released, are revealed through violent actions such as revenge or even murder. Only when they turn into ghosts, did their revenge become legal and reasonable in the social context of that time (Lai 2014; Ainslie 2014: 163; Leewananthawet 2016; Ancuta 2020). Ancuta states:

Ghost-wives/ghost-girlfriends wait for the return of the men who left them, ready to forgive them and eliminate anyone who dares come between them. Their love, often tinged with jealousy, can easily turn toxic. Vengeful ghosts of wronged women wait for a chance to avenge their deaths, prevent more violence towards women, and, ultimately, for gender equality. Constructed in the image of submissive Asian femininity, the waiting-woman has turned her ghosthood into an opportunity to transgress restrictive gender norms”⁶

Thus, in the form of ghosts, Asian women in general and Southeast Asian women in particular have partly achieved gender equality. They are granted the “right” to take revenge, protect love, and live as they wish without fear of being punished by the law or strict institutions around them. Ghost stories, along with their imagination, allow for the opening up of gender discourse, where all expressions of revenge, rebellion, or female power are ways to overthrow the prejudices and constraints of patriarchal society. In both works, the ghosts actively and fiercely hold on to the persons they love by chasing, killing, and calling out to them. When they fail to win happiness, the female ghosts’ reaction is very drastic. (For example, the Nak ghost is upside down on the ceiling.) This is also a metaphorical image of the desire to overturn male domination, even the domination of Buddhism, in Thai society during this period.

The two works end with religion’s subjugation of female ghosts, implying that the female rebellion has come to an end. Subdued by a Buddhist monk, Nak accepts the fact that she has died with her rotten body to be reincarnated in another life. Seen from the Buddhist perspective, this ending means desire has been eliminated. As a work originating from Thailand, a place deeply influenced by Buddhist culture, *Pee Mak Phrakanong* shows the imprint of Buddhism in the story’s details and plot. According to legend, in the end, ghost Nak was conquered by monk Somdej Toh, the most respected monk in Thailand at that time. The monk even “cut off part of Nak’s forehead to attach it to his belt and wore it for the rest of his life” (Nathalang 1989: 135). Buddhism’s control

⁶ <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/full/10.3366/gothic.2020.0039>

over Nak's body implicitly shows the absolute victory of religion over women's rebellion, which means that social institutions continue to shackle women. Similarly, Nhi Khanh was conquered by a Taoist, which is consistent with the Confucian concept of that time in Vietnam. Although Vietnamese society in the 16th century witnessed signs of the decline of Confucianism (Nguyễn 2006: 36-39), Nguyễn Dữ's critical perspective at the end of the work shows the author's desire to preserve Confucian values. Nguyễn Dữ even ends the story with the image of "six or seven hundred thugs tying up two people and leading them away" as well as criticizing "lustful people," considering those things to be condemnable. The subjugation by several hundred thugs proves the subjugation of personal happiness to the institutions and concepts. Here, Nguyễn Dữ's concept is still influenced by the concept of male power in feudal society, which serves the interests of the ruling class rather than aiming to liberate women.

Thus, the death and reactions of the female ghost as well as the submission to concept and religion show the seeds of feminist consciousness. Being proactive and taking specific, the women's strong actions to protect love and happiness show that they dare to speak up against the power of male authority as well as collective beliefs. Through the image of ghosts, women have the power and strength to take revenge, something that they cannot have in the context of medieval society.

IV. Conclusion

In general, the female ghost narratives in the two works *Pee Mak Phrakanong* and *The Story of The Cotton Tree* suggest ways of understanding women's bodies, including beauty and sexuality, from a gender perspective. In the context of Southeast Asia, influenced by Confucian and Buddhist culture, narratives about women in general and female ghosts in particular partly represent the voice of women in the medieval period. The case of Thai and Vietnamese female body narratives shows that respect for women's bodies and spiritual worlds was an endogenous cultural element in Southeast Asia before

the reception of Western feminism. Even in the medieval context, in Vietnam in the 16th century and Thailand in the 19th century, the symbol of the female ghost speaks about sexuality and the body as very strong and bold, no less than Western countries at the same time, even in contemporary times. The reception from the West in Southeast Asian countries is not by chance as brilliant as it is today, nor is it enlightening, it only increases and develops. It is the spirits and ghosts in literature and art that show the changes in culture, ideology, religion, politics, and society in Southeast Asian countries, evoking interest in views from the outside. (Bräunlein 2016).

Vietnam is a country deeply influenced by Confucian concepts, especially strict regulations for women (Nguyễn 1998: 148-149). However, through the story of *The Story of The Cotton Tree*, right from the 16th century, the seeds for awareness of human rights and feminism appeared, showing strong and very humane desires. Besides, Thailand is also a country deeply influenced by Buddhist concepts with strict concepts about women and the female body, but ontological desires are always a strong urge. In Southeast Asia, when the concepts of Buddhism and Confucianism have a profound influence, causing women to suffer, literature demonstrates the seeds of a reaction for feminism and women's rights to liberate the body's sensuality. In that context, perceptions about the female body, sexuality, feminism, and the relationship between the individual and the social community, as studied in this article, is a small effort to contribute to current area studies in general, aiming to reveal the enduring but persistent voices of women in particular and marginalized communities in general, which have always had their own identities and values, but have been marginalized.

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