

Water Symbolism in Nguyen Ngoc Tu's "The Endless Field"

Dinh Van Phuoc

Teacher, Thai Ninh High School, Hung Yen, Vietnam.

*Corresponding Author: Dinh Van Phuoc

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<i>From the perspectives of linguistics and literary semiotics, this paper decodes the water symbolism in Nguyen Ngoc Tu's short story The Endless Field to elucidate the aesthetic messages and philosophical insights conveyed by the author. Investigating the system of naming conventions and linguistic codes used to describe the water environment, the paper highlights the hauntingly dual nature of water symbolism across three primary layers of meaning: the source of love and family happiness associated with femininity and maternal imagery; a realm of dryness, death, and alienation when tragedy strikes; and a vivid depiction of the poverty, hardship, and ultimate impasse experienced by Southern Vietnamese peasants. Water symbolism serves not only as a polysemous artistic space reflecting human suffering but also as a core aesthetic anchor affirming Nguyen Ngoc Tu's artistic talent and profound humanitarian compassion.</i> Keywords: water symbolism, river, The Endless Field, Nguyen Ngoc Tu.
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1. Introduction

Literature in general, and modern and postmodern literature in particular, is considered a literature of metaphors and symbols. Authors of this literary current view life with a sober, deeply contemplative gaze while striving to forge new directions and establish unique conceptions of existence. These conceptions are embodied in imagery and condensed into symbols, compelling readers to decode the aesthetic messages embedded within them.

Exploring the power of symbols in contemporary literature, Nguyen Ngoc Tu's *The Endless Field* stands out as a clear paradigm. The work immerses readers in a haunting artistic world—a world of harsh reality and human emotional scars vividly rendered through delicate, rhythmically rich prose. One of the work's archetypal symbols is water. This paper focuses on exploring water symbolism in *The Endless Field* to decode the aesthetic messages and profound implications conveyed by Nguyen Ngoc Tu, thereby demonstrating the writer's role in adjusting, regenerating, and supplementing new meanings to artistic imagery.

2. Content

2.1. Theory of Symbols

Symbols have become an indispensable part of humanity's spiritual life. They not only reflect the shared cultural traits

of diverse civilizations and religions but also bear the unique nuances of each nation and ethnic group. "A symbol is something visible carrying a sign that leads us to the invisible" (E. Jünger).

According to Jean Chevalier's *Dictionary of World Cultural Symbols*: "A foundational symbol differs from a sign in that a sign is an arbitrary convention where the signifier and the signified (object or subject) are separate. Conversely, a symbol presupposes an intrinsic relationship between the signifier and the signified, in the sense that it is a dynamic organizing force" [7, p. 6]. Meanwhile, the *Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines a symbol as follows: "In a broad sense, a symbol is a prominent feature of reflecting life through imagery in literary and artistic works. In a narrow sense, a symbol is a method of semantic transformation in language or a special type of artistic image carrying strong emotional resonance. It not only condenses the essence of a phenomenon but also expresses profound concepts, ideas, and philosophies regarding human existence and life" [3]. Vietnamese linguists have also researched symbols and drawn their own conclusions, most notably scholars such as Hoang Phe, Le Ba Han, Tran Dinh Su, and Nguyen Khac Phi. A symbol is not entirely a reflection of reality because it represents a restructured

reality shaped through cognitive processing. However, it is not purely subjective, as it originates from the cognitive activities of the subject. A symbol is a subjective phenomenon of a perceived object or event. In essence, a symbol is a form of language-a semiotic system.

When analyzing literary works, exploring the meaning of symbols plays a vital role. This process helps uncover hidden messages, obscured spiritual worlds, and internal cultural strata within the text. Unlike cultural symbols, literary symbols, according to Hegel, can encompass all aspects of reality, blending with the subject's essence and inner perception to form an inseparable unity. Literary symbols are artistic structures formed through linguistic signals in literature. Therefore, the primary role of artistic symbols in literary works is to reveal the author's thoughts and feelings while expressing latent layers of meaning within their souls. Influenced by cultural and historical contexts, symbols in literary works often open up multiple layers of meaning, evoking diverse associations. Writers consciously construct aesthetic symbols to enhance the expressive power and depth of their works. Aesthetic symbols always harbor the capacity for generating meaning and exhibiting multi-layered condensation. This quality provides readers with intellectual joy, contemplation, and a sensation of both familiarity and novelty-a core aspect driving the appeal of literature.

2.2. Water Symbolism in Nguyen Ngoc Tu's Short Story "The Endless Field"

2.2.1. The Diversity in Naming the Symbol

Water is a central symbol woven from an intertwining of emotion and contemplation, fully reflecting the laborious, drifting human lot. It is a pervasive symbol that emerges in numerous states and transforms incessantly with the rhythm of life.

Our survey reveals 13 different designations for water symbolism in the work: "vast boundless river, Bim Bip River, alum-scummed water surface, thickening water current, sour alum-laden current, stagnant alum-filmed water, dark gloomy yellow-ripened alum water, sour water, splashing bathing pond, sweet water, long river, world of water, world of dryness...". Bound to this naming system are natural phenomena accompanying the water flow: "rowing boats fetching water, bathing ponds, scarce water buckets, large cajeput forests, buffer zones, dry season, prolonged sunlight...". All these spatial descriptive codes contribute to portraying a diverse aquatic world, transforming from the source of life into an "exile camp" of tragedy and poverty, leaving a haunting, lingering echo in the reader's heart.

2.2.2. Decoding the Symbolic Meaning of Water

a) Water: Love and Happiness

In ancient conceptions, water inherently possesses a feminine nature, acting as a shelter, nurturer, and preserver of all life. In Nguyen Ngoc Tu's *The Endless Field*, this current first emerges as the source of love, the inception of rare moments of happiness for the two siblings Nuong and Dien. That alluvium-thick river is the witness to the early love of Nuong's parents. It is also the space recording the most tranquil days when the two children were enveloped in the unconditional affection every child deserves.

This significance deepens when linked to maternal imagery. The father's name, Ut Vu (Youngest Rain), resembles rain refreshing the river stretch of life. The mother steps out from the riverbank, bonded to the river for life, and around her is always the rhythm of water, of budding life, of blossoming love. In this dimension, when water merges with femininity and maternal presence, water equates to origin, generation, nurturing, and the preservation of human life.

However, the cultural symbolism of water inherently bears a dual nature: on one hand, it nurtures, shelters, and protects; on the other hand, it sweeps away, driving humans out of fixed ground to drift into endless wandering. Nguyen Ngoc Tu pushes this second meaning to the absolute height of tragedy. The happiness of the small family began beside the river, but that very river became the burial ground for peace, inaugurating a chain of harrowing days. When the mother departs, the water no longer signifies life and love, but morphs into loss, dryness, and anguish in the souls of those left behind.

b) Water: A Realm of Dryness and Death

In the system of human cultural symbols, Water inherently possesses a polarity with two basic functions: nurturing, sheltering, and preserving life, versus sweeping away and driving humans into endless wandering. Yet, in *The Endless Field*, this picture strips away the first function entirely to elevate the second to its ultimate extreme.

Nuong's family journey is closely bound to water, beginning by the river and originating all tragedies therefrom. If water associated with maternal imagery was once love, life, and a peaceful home, the abrupt departure of the mother transformed that water into death and dryness. The three father-child members are forced to struggle along the water current, plunging into a world of water, but paradoxically, that journey leads them deeper into a barren world where life is eroded.

Stripped of gentle femininity with its nurturing and sustaining power, Water now lacks purity and benevolence, emerging through images of "alum-scummed water surface," "thickening," heavily saturated with destruction.

Immersed in vengeful and resentful romantic conquests, the father—Ut Vu—falls into the fire of alienation, losing his kind human core. He is no longer the cool, sheltering river of the past but an entity gravely wounded: "Father is like a ceramic object having just survived a great fire, still having the same shape but cracked, so we only dare look from afar, caressing and cradling gently, lest it shatter." The world experienced by the three family members overflows with bitter ironies and paradoxes: clearly there is water, even surrounded by water, yet water has lost its nurturing essence. It is merely alum water "ripened into a gloomy yellow hue," barren and heavy.

The endless journey along the waterways ultimately drives them to parched lands drained of vitality and happiness: "The dry season comes early. Therefore, the sunlight is very long. Recently, we stopped at a small hamlet by a vast boundless river. Ironical, the people here have no water to use (like us walking on endless ground without a clay pellet to hurl at a bird)." In such lands, life withers to the point of leaving no room for love, hope, and change. That pain condenses in the choking question: "Your mother's two scarce buckets of water, how could I bear to share any more?"

Thus, water symbolism in the work no longer signifies rebirth or pilgrimage to origins. It is a haunting space where the water is truly the embodiment of drifting life, unhealed emotional wounds, and evidence of the tragic exile and impasse of humans on their native soil.

c) Water: Symbol of Poverty and Impasse Among Southern Peasants

Beyond harboring family tragedies, the aquatic space in Nguyen Ngoc Tu's work emerges as a canvas of hardship and toil among Southern peasants. The vast, boundless river seemingly acts as the source of life, yet ironically imprisons humans in a vortex of extreme poverty and deprivation.

Living amidst vast waters, people burn with thirst for fresh water: "They go buy sweet water by rowing boat, holding their breath to prevent water from splashing out because the distance is far and water is expensive. In the afternoon returning from hired labor, they slip into the pond to bathe in water sour with alum, then rinse off with exactly two buckets. Rice-washing water is used to wash vegetables, and after washing vegetables it is used again to wash fish." This deprivation extends beyond minimal living standards into flesh and bone, torturing tiny lives: children suffer from sores across their bodies from wading in stagnant, alum-scummed water. Everything seems to strangle life, weighing down every human effort to rise. No matter how much they struggle and toil, poverty and suffering loom large, enveloping their lives and driving Ut Vu's family into a hopeless impasse: "Where we pitched our tent and

anchored our ducks, the water has ironed down to a gloomy yellow hue. But we have nowhere else to go; from the other bank of the Bim Bip River lies the buffer zone for large cajeput forests. This season, people draw water from all the small rivers and canals to pump into the forests for fire prevention."

Through these pages, Nguyen Ngoc Tu does not indulge in describing extreme peasant circumstances for its own sake; rather, through the lens depicting natural harshness, she highlights the impoverished, toil-worn rural landscape while reflecting the ultimate impasse in the drifting lives of the two siblings Nuong and Dien.

3. Conclusion

Exploring water symbolism in the short story *The Endless Field*, Nguyen Ngoc Tu successfully constructs familiar imagery of Southern regional literature. Through the author's talented and contemplative pen, water is not merely a geographical background or picturesque natural scenery, but a polysemous artistic symbol carrying profound ideological weight and philosophies of human life.

Through a rich naming system and multidimensional movement in symbolic meaning, water emerges with a hauntingly dual nature. It was once the source of life, love, home, and initial family happiness tied to maternal imagery. Yet, when upheavals and tragedies strike, that current transforms into a realm of dryness, death, and exile for drifting souls. Not stopping at the fate of Ut Vu's family, water symbolism broadens its amplitude to reflect the arduous, impoverished, and desperate lives of Southern peasants facing natural harshness and social circumstances.

Through water symbolism, Nguyen Ngoc Tu not only sounds an alarm bell regarding alienation and human suffering on the journey of exile but also displays profound humanitarian compassion for unfortunate lives. This symbol forms a vital aesthetic anchor contributing to the enduring vitality of the work, while affirming the unique talent and creative imprint of writer Nguyen Ngoc Tu.

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