

THE IMAGE OF SHAPELESS CHARACTERS IN THE SHORT STORIES OF NAM CAO DURING THE PERIOD FROM 1940 – 1945

Le Thi Thanh Dam¹

¹(a) College of Foreign Language, Hunan University, Changsha, China

(b) Da Lat University, Vietnam

Abstract: This article explores, analyzes, interprets, and evaluates the content of thinking and writing art when constructing shapeless characters of Nam Cao. These characters are based on the author's concept of human art in the context of the rural lives of Vietnam during the period of half-colonial and half-feudalism before 1945. Each shapeless character in the writer's frame represents the Vietnamese farmers who struggled to live in their villages, the places full of injustice and perverseness. Their formal deformities, especially the difficult, dirt-poor life of characters such as Chi Pheo, Thi No, Trach Van Doanh, Truong Ru, Lang Ran... are all originated from social causes, not from their characteristics. To clarify the problem, the paper uses systematic methods, character analysis, historical researches, literature type comparisons. From the research results, the article affirms the value of the characters lies in the sincerity, originality as well as in the author's criticism, social denunciation in the spirit of humanity, for human beings.

Keywords: article explores, shapeless characters, character analysis, historical researches.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nam Cao (1915 - 1951) was one of the most talented and best-known Vietnamese writers in the twentieth century. From 1940 to 1945, he was not only a pioneer in building modern Vietnamese literature but also a brilliant writer of realistic literature. Through his unique and outstanding writing style, Vietnamese short stories had been modernized and integrated into the genre of narrative prose of the world. With 36 years of living including 15 years of writing, he was credited with writing two novels, 50 short stories, memoirs and so on. In Nam Cao's short stories, one impressive thing is he built a system of shapeless characters. Many characters stay in the hearts of readers such as Chi Pheo, Thi No (Chí Phèo), Lang Ran (Lang Rận - Quack Doctor Lice), Trach Van Doanh (Đôi Móng Giò - Pair Of Pig Trotters), Le Van Ru (Nửa Đêm - Midnight), The Mute (Người Hàng Xóm - The Neighbor). It is this shapeless characters system that shows Nam Cao as a word artist, who always respects the beauty of human nature. In Nam Cao's views, people are full of love, sympathy and caring for the unfortunates. In general, Nam Cao was a new talent with outstanding creativity, satire ability and deep insight into life.

Since the image of Nam Cao's shapeless characters appeared on Vietnamese literature, so far there have been many studies on this type of character with several different approaches. Overall, these studies mostly affirm the humanity and the sincerity in Nam Cao's thoughts, Nam Cao's aesthetics, as well as his narrative storytelling skill. However, to classify Nam Cao's shapeless characters as a unique system, there has not been any intensive research. Therefore, when carrying out the doctoral thesis of "Comparing literary devices between short stories of Lu Xun and Nam Cao", we realized this is a distinct mark of Nam Cao's literature that needs to be understood and assessed comprehensively. For this purpose, in this paper, we describe, analyze and explain the shapeless character images in Nam Cao's works. This also includes understanding the foundations of Nam Cao's ideological and artistic values.

There are two main parts in this writing: Nam Cao's artistic conception of people and Nam Cao's special shapeless character images. Besides applying the theory of literature's narrative characters, we also use the following research methods: examining the relationship between literature, society and history, analyzing characters' characteristics, extracting and analyzing data.

2. NAM CAO'S ARTISTIC CONCEPTION OF PEOPLE

Nam Cao was an intellectual - a poor teacher from a rural area in Northern Vietnam. He was the only child in the family who received a full education. His artistic conception of people shaped his creative thinking. The early compositions of Nam Cao were written romantically. They soon turned into reality and became the culmination of his career path. From thoughts to creating, Nam Cao had extensive cultural knowledge, a thorough understanding of the impoverished lower-middle-class intellectuals and the destitute life of the farmers in the semi-colonial and semi-feudal period before 1945.

Throughout his career, he had always been thinking about living and writing, exploring and creating. In his first five years of writing (1936-1940), he followed the trend of romanticism and escapism, produced simplistic poems and psychological stories. Nevertheless, as a devoted artist who lived close to hard workers, especially the honest, poor, and overworked farmers, he quickly realized the limitations of romantic literature. Thus, he changed his writings to realistic works. This was expressed specifically in "Đôi Lửa Xứng Đôi – The Well-matched couple" in 1941. In his next works about intellectual class, he chose the main characters as writers to state his opinion of literature that literature must be true, humane, creative, valuable and able to influence all mankind.

The process of moving from romantic to realistic tendency is represented by Nam Cao through the image of Dien in the short story "Giang Sang - Bright Moon", written in 1942. Dien is a dreaming intellectual who wants to be a writer. When he first enters the literary path, Dien tells himself that he would only write "interesting words", "elegant ideas", and "inspiring poetic emotions". Not only that, the readers of those works must be "leisurely women who are leaning on swinging chairs", after reading his works, they should send him "pretty perfume-laden letters..."

Though, while composing, living with every day that "cruel truth regularly shows up", Dien is miserable. Every member of Dien's family is also miserable. "The sound of suffering resounds violently", it makes Dien realize that writing cannot just be "running with the wind, dreaming on the moon or wandering with clouds"ⁱ, the writer must go back to the ordinary life. As long as Dien understands this reality, his heart keeps echoing: "Wow! Wow! Art should not be a deceiving moonlight; art may just be the sound of suffering which escapes from a lifetime of misery."ⁱⁱ That thought of Dien partly reflected the opinion of Nam Cao when it came to realistic literary. Just as the German poet Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) once said: "A poet is similar to Antée. When being lifted from the earth by Heracles, he loses all of his strengths, but when he sets foot on the mother earth, it is very firm."ⁱⁱⁱ

Rejecting easy-going works, Nam Cao believes that literature must be creative. For him, literature does not only come from social reality but also reflect reality; also, "telling everything that happens in human social life" or "naturally reflecting things" is not literature. "Literature cannot be obvious or easy", he stated. By the character Ho in the short story "Đời Thừa - Redundant life" (1942), Nam Cao declared: "Literature does not need skilled craftsmen to craft a few given models. Literature can only be created by those who know how to dig deep, how to explore and how to create sources that no one has ever started."^{iv} Regarding the significance of literature, Nam Cao concluded a good work was not only valuable for people but all humanity: "A worthwhile work must rise above all limits, all territories to be a work of all mankind. It must contain something big, something strong but still painful and exhilarating. It praises compassion, charity, righteousness. It makes people closer to them".^v

In summary, together with the creation of shapeless character images, Nam Cao's above literary notions shown his ability in turning thoughts into words.

3. THE ICONIC SHAPELESS CHARACTER IMAGES IN NAM CAO'S COMPOSITIONS

Human is the product of nature, society as well as of itself. Human in art in general, in literature in particular, is the product of the artist's figurative thinking. Figurative thinking is not only the process of restoring, sharpening, shaping but also creating new visual symbols both emotionally and rationally. Similar to abstract thinking, figurative thinking is both inductive and deductive. It is operated by the confliction between intuition and reason (or logic and super logic). One difference between figurative thinking and abstract thinking is the increasing of feeling in ensuring the advantage between intuition and reason, that is, intuition is kept specific, and vivid in reflection.

Since ancient times, in the process of developing human art, there have been many types of human images were created. From natural to exaggerated images, these characters all have actual origins such as humans-gods, humans-demons, mythical giants, epic heroes; humans as beasts, ugly and shapeless humans in fairy tales; great humans in medieval literature; ordinary humans in modern literature. For example, Quasimodo (the ugly guy who rang the church bell, the devilish ghost in the novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* of Victor Hugo)^{vi} and Ah Q (the man who only has his so-called scar and tail in Lu Xun's *The True Story of Ah Q*) are products of ideological thinking from word artists. These characters all present the objective reality, the characteristics of human culture, the gathering of ethnic culture as well as the repression in the heart, the flesh and blood of writers. The system of shapeless and ugly characters in Nam Cao's short stories including Chi Pheo, Thi No, Trach Van Doan, Lang Ran has the same characteristics. It shows the excellent creative ability of Nam Cao.

3.1 Chi Pheo - A shapeless, ugly, vulgar person who has a tragic fate created by society.

Chi Pheo is the main character in Nam Cao's eponymous work written in 1941. By depicting a unique system of characters, especially Chi Pheo, Nam Cao suddenly became the most famous writer on Vietnamese literature. At that time, he was only 26 years old with 5 writing years. The ugly, disgusting appearance, as well as the blind, vulgar actions of Chi Pheo, are not born by nature. They are generated by a semi-colonial society in Vietnam before 1945. Behind that ugly, hideous look is the gentle, spontaneous personality, the desire to have a simple life as an honest farmer.

The fate of Chi Pheo is tragic. When Chi Pheo was born, he was abandoned and did not know who his parents were. One early morning, he was caught by a farmer who was dropping a tube of eel. The farmer brought him to a blind widow. At that time, *"he was naked and gray in a damned dress by an abandoned brick kiln"*.^{vii} The blind widow later sold Chi Pheo to a childless miller. When the miller died, Chi Pheo was helpless, he had to work as a valet from houses to houses. 20 years old, Chi Pheo plowed fields for Ly Kien's house. At that time, Mr. Ly was injustice, jealous of him because he knew Chi Pheo was often called by his third wife to massage her legs, stomach or back. Then, one day, Chi Pheo was arrested and sent to prison. After seven or eight years of disappearance, Chi Pheo returns to the village, he was completely different from the previous days. *"His head is bald, his teeth are shaved, his face is unruly black, the eyes are grossly disgusting! He is dressing in black loose dupioni pants with a yellow western shirt. The chest and arms are full of dragon and phoenix tattoos. So disgusting!"*.^{viii} As soon as he returns, he is drunk. He takes the bottle of wine to the gate of Ba Kien's house. He swears, slit his face and eats food. At this time, Ly Kien is promoted to be a high official in the village. He knows Chi Pheo very well. His trick of treating people is no need to treat those who are *"poor but desperate"*, instead, he would *"use donkeys to treat donkeys"*. So he is *"courteous"* to Chi Pheo. *"He kills chickens, buys wine and gives him some coins to buy some medicine"*.^{ix} Chi Pheo gladdened to leave and became *"his servant, his arms so that whenever he needs, he could give Chi Pheo a few coins then he may send him to harm other people"*.^x

Since then Chi Pheo has always been drunk. *"His drunkenness floods one after another. He eats while drunk, sleeps while drunk, wakes up still drunk, bangs his head, slit his face, curses, intimidates while drunk, drinks alcohol while drunk, then drunk again, drunk endlessly."*^{xi} Every time he is drunk, he curses, he does whatever people send him to do and he becomes *"the devil of Vu Dai village, who acts like hell to many villagers."*^{xii} Chi Pheo's life goes on like that. *"At the night of a full moon, moonlight is flowing on the pure white road, in a drunken, Chi Pheo meets Thi No. She is an ugly, ignorant woman, who is rejected by everyone in the village."*^{xiii} They sleep together. At midnight, Chi Pheo has abdominal pain and vomiting. The next morning when he wakes up, it is clearly bright. He feels a bitter taste in his mouth. He feels sad, hangover inside and afraid of wine. He shocks; his limbs tremble. Outside, birds are singing, the laughter of people going to the market, the sound of paddles chasing fish remind him of a time he wished to have a small family. *"The husband plows, the wife weaves, together they raise a pig to make their property. When they are well-off, they will buy some fields"*.^{xiv} That was his dream. Then he instinctively realizes his lonely, miserable situation. Later, Thi No returns to bring him a hot pot of onion porridge. He is touched because this is the first time he is cared for by a woman. He finds himself truly a human since he met Thi No. He recalls the time he plowed fields for Ba Kien's family, there was an evil lady who often called him up to squeeze her legs and massage her back, *"he only felt humiliated, not love"*.^{xv} Suddenly, he craves for honesty and extremely wants to make peace with everyone! Thi No would be his only way. Thi No could live peacefully with him and everyone else will get him back into that flat, friendly society of good people.^{xvi} However, when Thi No asks for advice on marrying Chi Pheo from her old, unmarried aunt, the aunt screams: *"Are all men dead, why get a man without a father. Who will marry Chi Pheo then? The only thing he knows is slashing his face and making scenes."*^{xvii} Being rejected by Thi No, Chi Pheo drinks again, he braces his face and cries. Like other times, when he drinks, he takes out his knife, goes out and curses. Eventually, Chi Pheo comes to Ba Kien's house, points at his face: "I

want to be an honest man! Who gives me honesty? I cannot be a good person anymore... Only one way... Do you know it? The only way is... this!"^{xviii} And then he takes a knife and stabs Ba Kien, no longer after that, he stabs himself to death, his fate is ended!

Thus, through Chi Pheo, Nam Cao visualized a reality in rural Vietnam before 1945: people were brutally suppressed and exploited by the harsh, inhuman society. Then a part of farmers opposed this society by vulcanization. The special thing is when depicting the vulcanized farmers, Nam Cao did not smear them, but on the contrary, he went deep into the characters' inners to detect and state their dignity. From the time Chi Pheo met Thi No until the end of the story, Nam Cao had shown the awakening in Chi Pheo's soul and tragic mood. This tragedy, the tragedy of a person who is not accepted to be human is the most profound of the story. Also, in this segment, we can see the essence of the human being which is "the milk of human kindness".

3.2. Thi No - A disfigured, bewildered, but gentle, honest

Thi No is a gentle supporting character in Nam Cao's short story "Chi Pheo". The story is 30 pages long, 14.5 x 20.5 in size, Thi No only appears in the last 10 pages, which is about one-third of the story. Although only appearing shortly, Thi No is still portrayed as a unique and immortal figure alongside the main character Chi Pheo, who stays in the minds of many generations of Vietnamese readers.

Referring to Nam Cao, Vietnamese readers relate to "Chi Pheo". Relating to "Chi Pheo", they often mention the character Thi No. Thi No from the time of appearance has always been described in a particular way. She is so ugly that no woman in the world is worse: "*Silly like a fool in a fairy tale. Thi No's face is truly an irony of creation: Her face is short, the width of the face is shorter than its length, the cheeks are pulled in. It's better if her cheeks are chubby, then her face could be like a pig's face. The nose is short, big, red, it is rough like an orange peel. Maybe the nose wants to compete for its position with the huge lips.*"^{xix} Thi made Chi Pheo feel like being a real person. Thi No loves Chi Pheo, but her aunt did not agree. Thus, she does not come to Chi Pheo's tent anymore. When she discovers that Chi Pheo killed Ba Kien's and suicided, Thi No thinks, "*Why was he so gentle sometimes?*"^{xx} Remembering when she was having sex with Chi Pheo, Thi looks at her belly nervously: "*Speaking foolishly, he just died, if I am pregnant, what should I do?*"^{xxi} Then in the mind of Thi, an image of "old brick kiln" appears (the place where Chi Pheo was abandoned at birth). Chi Pheo died, Thi No lives with anxiety about a dark future.

From the fictional perspective of Nam Cao's literature, Thi No is an exaggerated figure, exaggerates in shape to express the artistic intent of the writer: an ugly person in form, being rejected by society but still has her innate kindness. Regarding the characters' system, Thi No is an alternate character, who involves in the movement of the plot. Along with Chi Pheo, she reveals the main theme of the story which is praising the honesty and the kindness of farmers. In general, Thi No is a unique character: an ugly, unhappy woman who created by society.

When the plot of Chi Pheo's story reaches its climax, Nam Cao let Thi No met Chi Pheo. Her identity at that time was not clear. Thi No had no husband and lived with an old widow. The whole village was afraid of Chi Pheo but she was not afraid of him. Thi and Chi Pheo met on a beautiful moon night by the river near Chi Pheo's tent. They made love and then slept together. Near the morning, Chi Pheo woke up and vomited, Thi brought Chi Pheo into the tent, then she went home to cook onion porridge and brought it back to him. Thi No felt proud of herself since she had "saved a person" who drunk and vomiting.

From the cultural perspective, Thi No is like a type of character that is expressed in the absolute opposite method in the past literature. If the personality is cruel, then it has no humanity. If she is an honest person, then she would always be deceived. If she is poor, the only property of her is a cover-up cloth. Her ugliness must be the most. That means the characteristics of the character are described to the extreme. In general, Nam Cao's creative thinking is influenced by modern Western culture. But his talent and personality are nurtured by Vietnamese culture. Vietnam is a long-standing wet-rice culture that produces fairy tales and rowing stories with metaphorical, creative symbolism. Therefore, when portraying Thi No, Nam Cao's writing style had been influenced by Vietnamese fairy tales. The writer himself wrote: "Thi No is as dumb as a fool in a fairy tale".

Thi No has the same characteristics as beasts in Vietnamese fairy tales. They are all supporting characters and often in the form of animals like toads, or an ugly, shapeless shape like "So Dua" in the fairy tale "So Dua". This type of characters often appears to challenge other characters, or to punish the wicked, to save the honest ones. Thi No also has the same mission. She has an ugly, dull, silly appearance, still, she saved the life of Chi Pheo. Through the love and kindness of Thi

No, Chi Pheo had changed from a hoodlum to a man who desired to live an upright life. In the story "So Dua", the main character So Dua had been shunned by the rich man's eldest daughters because of his ugly appearance. Yet, he was still loved by the rich man's youngest one. They two live together happily later. The character Thi No in "Chi Pheo" was also ignored by Vu Dai villagers. Unlike So Dua who still had a happy life after many unexpected events, Thi No could not live with her lover. She could only save Chi Pheo's humanity but not the fate of Chi Pheo. This difference is due to the differences in storytelling styles.

Chi Pheo belongs to the style of modern short stories. This style started with the reality of Vietnamese society in the period of 1930 - 1945. This was a period full of injustice and inequality.

In fairy tales, the foolish characters are often helped by charm or gods. At the end of the stories, they will become rich or get married to rich people. On the other hand, Thi No in "Chi Pheo" is described differently. she is an isolated character who usually abandoned by social prejudice. Although the end of the story is not the end of Thi No's fate, the reader can still imagine the outcome of the character. In a feudal society, the "unmarried but pregnant" women like Thi No will face with many criticisms. As can be seen, Thi No is the representation of the type of character "human in the form of animals such as snake, frog, toad, turtle". This represents a creative aspect of the writer Nam Cao. Some motifs in fairy tales are used by the writer but not the magical. It is easy to see his realistic thinking has replaced romantic thinking.

Through the character Thi No, the message that the author wants to send to readers is: In fairy tales, despite many injustices, people can still take the philosophy of "Gentle good meet" as their faith. In the time of Thi No and Chi Pheo, people did not know what to believe in to live. That is also Nam Cao's political and humane thinking. In conclusion, Thi No is a unique shapeless character of Nam Cao. The artistic characteristics of the character image are the crystallization of traditional creative thinking of Vietnamese folk tales and the thinking of modern Vietnamese short stories in the 30s and 40s of the twentieth century. The realistic value exerted from the image of the character is the exposure of a still discriminatory human life. The value of thought is reminding people to recognize human nature like human beings, not just in form. Human values are respected for the good nature of people and respect for people.

4. OTHER SHAPELESS CHARACTERS

In Nam Cao's short stories, apart from the two typical characters that impress the readers, Chi Pheo and Thi No, there are other notable deformities such as Trach Van Doan in "Doi Mong Gio", Lang Ran, Mu Loi in "Lang Ran". These deformed characters are not very special, but in a certain aspect, they also show their characteristics. First, they contribute to the diversity of deformed characters in Nam Cao's short stories. Second, they reflect the reality of daily life with tragic situations in rural Vietnam before 1945.

4.1. Trach Van Doanh - a shapeless, grotesque person.

Trach Van Doanh is the main character in Nam Cao's short story "Doi Mong Gio, published in 1942. This shapeless character has an inherently ugly face, with a negative background and unrestricted living lifestyle.

He is the only son of a dumber old man. Because the old man's wife died early, plus having a hobby of fishing and alcoholism, the old man eventually went fishing and fell into the river and died. Thus, when growing up, Trach Van Doanh also likes to go fishing and is a binge-like father. Since Doanh lives alone, he is free to leave the village to go across the country. He used to join the army to go to France. When the war ends, he is taken back home by the French. Then he goes back to the village with a wife. At that time, he is in a high position and has lots of property, he spends money on slaughtering cows and pigs to invite the whole village to eat. The villagers are fed so they call him Mr. Cuu Doanh^{xxii}. As Mr. Cuu, he intervenes, scrutinizes many things of the villagers like teaching them how to display a tray of food, how to share food when eating meals and so on. Everything he does make the villagers' contempt, "a compliment in front of him, swear in his back."

The shapeless and grotesque of the character are shown throughout the work. "He drags his shoes across the boys, they cheer him with a series of explosive laughter. ^{xxiii}*It is as loud as the sound of car honk*", from the naming of the character (Trach Van Doanh) to the ending image, Nam Cao wanted to emphasize the character's odd. His name - Trach Van Doanh is "hard to hear", "sounds like a cannon poking our ears". His face is "ugly, displeasing" with "protruding cheekbones as if causing trouble with people. The cheeks are pulled in so that the bottom of the jaw has bulged. He carries his big belly sitting on a black rim of a half-moon, ... the mustache whips up completely. The buck-teeth makes the lips completely dislocated... But all of that could be forgiven because it is the fault of nature, the fault of the midwife."^{xxiv}The ugliest

thing in his face is the eyes. The eyes are small but it keeps "rolling and sparkling as he is laughing and disdainful. His eyes never look down or look straight at others." "His head is different from anyone. It looks like a grapefruit". He has long curls to comb up^{xxv}. He calls it "pre-civilization, post-monk".^{xxvi} His style of clothing is also very chic with "the overcoat that lost all buttons", adding "two very large strips as a pair of paddles". When he looks at the village girls, he often puts his hands into pockets and shows his majesty.

Trach Van Doanh's figure is ugly, rugged, but what uglier is his personality. When he returns to the village from France, he invites all the villagers to a big party. At the party, he knows he has money and position; thus, he ignores the elders to sit on the upper mat. He scrutinizes and harasses everyone in the village, so everyone scares him. Once, the village has a big party, with his position, he has to come to the communal house early to burn incense, but he overslept at home and arrives late. When the elders in the village finish the ceremony, he comes in with an arrogant gesture. He "pushes his hands into two overcoat pockets, buckles the face". He goes to the party and secretly took two pig's trotters into his overcoat pockets. When the foods are served, people found that they are lack two pig trotters, which are not enough to divide it among the four oldest elderly in the village. People argue even more bitterly. After eating and drinking, he goes back to the venue, where the singers are singing. He says if they sing to please him, he will reward them. The first two women believe that he is generous, so they sit down on his sides and sing. When they finish singing, he stands up, puts his hands in the pockets of his overcoat and says, "I promised I would reward, of course, I would, but the money was gone."^{xxvii} I give you this, maybe it is more valuable than money. "Then he pulls out of a sleeve a trotter for one singer and pulls out of the other hand another pig's trotter for another one. Then he turns his face to the elders and says: "Goodbye elders! I must be rude".

His behavior, clearly lacking morality. He is hated by everyone in the village. Because he has a high position, in front of him, everyone pretends to respect but in their hearts, they hate him intensely.

Through Trach Van Doanh, Nam Cao exposed a social status quo of rural Vietnam in the period of half colonialism, half feudalism before 1945. That is the degeneration of some farmers who have rogue backgrounds. They served as soldiers for the French colonialists, learned a Western European style, returned to live ridiculously, unkindly in the villages, where they were born, although they were still poor.

4.2. Lang Ran and Mu Loi - Two ugly ones who are more pitiful than obnoxious

In the short story "Lang Ran" of Nam Cao printed in 1944, Lang Ran is the main character, Mu Loi is a supporting character. These two shapeless characters have a humble, inferior fate though they are hated, despised by the rich people around them. When reading these characters' stories, the readers may feel sorry, thankful, painful because of the loss of the good tradition of Vietnamese farmers which is "the leaves protect tattered ones" before 1945.

"Ran" is not his real name. Working as a traditional medicine man, people call him "Lang". Besides, when he lives in Mr. Dau's house - a wealthy family in the village, people see him with lots of lice so they named him after them. "Lang Ran", being called like that means he was despised, rejected and looked down upon.

Lang Ran has an ugly shape and he is extremely dirty: "The guy has a really dirty face. The face is swollen like a person suffering from edema disease; the skin is like a silkworm, always covered with freckles. The forehead is short and rough; the eyes are narrowed as a pig's eye. The lips are very well arched, clogged up to the two nostrils. And the clothes are rugged, the eyes are full of rust. People stand three steps away and still feel his sour smell. Lice in his body are more than maggots, they even crawl under his bed."^{xxviii}

Therefore, he is despised, glared, laughed and mocked by everyone. Every time he opened his mouth, someone shut him up. They smirk slightly on him, he is embarrassed and then walks away.

Lang Ran has a sad past. Mom died when he was just able to walk. Growing up, he gets married to three wives, but every wife criticizes him. So, he is upset and determines to leave. He goes everywhere to be relieved then he fails. Lang Ran always wishes to meet a certain woman to share. Later, he meets Mu Loi, a woman who lives in the house of Mrs. Cuu.

Mu Loi is a woman with an ugly shape: "fat, porous face like a honeycomb, white eyes, dark lips, black cheeks like a devil"^{xxix}. Mu Loi's clumsy appearance terrifies the children of the village. Therefore, whenever the children cry, the adults often sooth, "Stop! Hold on! Mu Loi is here!"^{xxx} Then, the children stop crying right away. Mu is gentle, she knows how to yield to others. Like Lang Ran, Mu also has an unhappy past, her parents died prematurely, her family is

too poor, her fate is miserable, her love is in trouble. Mu has to work as a maid all-year-round until she is 30 when she meets a person. This man asks Mu to be his second wife but it is just a lie. Then she continues to work as a maid in houses after houses. When she meets Lang Ran, she is living in the house of Mrs. Cuu with sorrow since she is already 36 years old.

Mu Loi's love arises with Lang Ran starting from a unique story. That's when the two of them talk about Lang Ran's lice.

"One day, Mr. Lang is catching lice, Mu Loi comes over and asks:

- Why did Lang catch lice yesterday and still catch them today? Why do you have so many of them?

- Oh man! I don't know why lots of people in a lifetime don't have a louse, but I have so many?

- Other fleas are bitter. Sweet fleas have lice.

- Really?

Mr. Lang looks up at Mu Loi with surprised eyes, Mu Loi smiled.

- Really.

- How do you know that?

- Why don't you know? People say that. Dog meat is sugary, so they have many lice!

Her reason is still unclear. But Mr. Lang laughs out loud. He loves it! He feels great because his flesh is better than other flesh."^{xxxii} After that day, they become intimately involved in the other's lives, they often confide their feelings for each other. One day, Lang Ran enters Mu Loi's room, the two of them have sex. Some people in Cuu's family immediately see it. They lock the door, mock, and humiliate on them. Later, Lang Ran commits suicide by strangling, ending the tragic fate of a humble human in a caste-class society. Mu Loi sees his lover die, she screams, struggles and "cries like a dog which unfamiliar with its chain".^{xxxiii} This image shows the madness of a small, lonely woman with no escape.

Through the ugly shape, the poverty and the tragic circumstances of Lang Ran and Mu Loi, Nam Cao describes a true picture of rural Vietnam before 1945. This picture calls for people to save the less fortunate people in rural Vietnam from 1930 to 1945. To do that, there is only one way is to change society. Although it is not known how to change society, definitely it must be humane, fair and charitable.

5. CONCLUSION

The shapeless characters system in Nam Cao's writing was not only formed from the social reality of half colonialism and half feudalism in Vietnam before 1945 but also from the Nam Cao's artistic concept towards the human being. Together with the unity between creative object and creative subject, Nam Cao's mainstream content and image building art have made his characters stand out. Nam Cao's characters are both common and unique. They are either the unfortunate people who pushed into the path of poverty, vulgarity (Chi Pheo) or self-alienated (Trach Van Doanh, Lang Ran). Some are born with ugly shapes (Thi No), others are created by society (Chi Pheo). The fates of them are predetermined. However, their characteristics in a certain moment still flash of human love. They are the kindness, caring of Thi No; the honest, innocent of Chi Pheo or a little self-respect of Lang Ran. This shows the creative ideology of Nam Cao when building the shapeless character image. He does not mean to smear the good qualities of Vietnamese farmers but very much appreciated and shared.

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ⁱ Giang Sang, Nam Cao Collection, Literature Publishing House, Hanoi, 2016, p.36.

ⁱⁱ Giang Sang, Nam Cao Collection, Literature Publishing House, Hanoi, 2016, p.112

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^{iv} Doi Thua, Nam Cao Collection, Literature Publishing House, Hanoi, 2016, p. 341.

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^{vii} Nam Cao, Nam Cao Collection, Literature Publishing House, Hanoi, 2016, p. 32.

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^{xx} Nam Cao, Nam Cao Collection, Literature Publishing House, Hanoi, 2016, p. 62.

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^{xxii} Note: Cuu is the title for a village's leader in Vietnamese feudalism.

^{xxiii} Nam Cao, Nam Cao Collection, Literature Publishing House, Hanoi, 2016, p. 113.

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^{xxx} Nam Cao, Nam Cao Collection, Literature Publishing House, Hanoi, 2016, p. 275.

^{xxxi} Nam Cao, Nam Cao Collection, Literature Publishing House, Hanoi, 2016, p. 276.

^{xxxii} Nam Cao, Nam Cao Collection, Literature Publishing House, Hanoi, 2016, p. 281.