

THE TRANSFORMATION OF TRADITIONAL MORAL NORMS AND SATIRICAL LAUGHTER IN THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN SOUTHERN VIETNAMESE "VÈ" FOLK VERSE

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ABSTRACT

Southern Vietnamese ("vè") folk verse vividly reflects the lived experiences and cultural values of the communities inhabiting southern Vietnam, in which the representation of women appears in diverse forms. Drawing on the corpus collected in "The Anthology of Southern Vietnamese Folklore: Southern Vietnamese ("vè")" compiled by Huynh Ngoc Trang, this article examines the transformation of traditional moral norms through the representation of women. It further explores the function of satirical laughter as a means of criticizing moral deviations while reinforcing the ethical values upheld by the family and the wider community. At the same time, many ("vè") express sympathy for women whose lives are marked by poverty, social prejudice, and personal adversity. The findings indicate that the representation of women in Southern Vietnamese ("vè") folk verse not only preserves traditional moral values but also reflects their adaptation to the socio-cultural context of southern Vietnam, thereby highlighting the genre's humanistic spirit and distinctive cultural identity.

KEYWORDS: Southern Vietnamese ("vè") folk verse; representation of women; traditional moral norms; satirical laughter.

A. INTRODUCTION

Within the corpus of Vietnamese folklore, the representation of women occupies a central position in reflecting the aesthetic ideals and moral values of the community. While "ca dao" (Vietnamese folk lyric poetry) primarily gives voice to emotions, inner experiences, and individual destinies, ("vè") offers a more direct portrayal of women's social roles and lived

realities. As Nguyen Van Hau (2024) notes, (“vè”) is a form of narrative folk verse composed in rhythmic lines, serving various functions, including satire, resistance, the denunciation of injustice, and the narration or dissemination of unusual events. The development of Southern Vietnamese (“vè”) folk verse is closely associated with the process of cultural transformation in the newly settled southern region. As Thach Phuong, Ho Le, Huynh Lua, and Nguyen Quang Vinh (1992) observe in “Vietnamese Folk Culture in Southern Vietnam”, Vietnamese settlers brought with them the rich spiritual heritage and enduring folk traditions of their ancestral homeland. As these settlers established new communities, they recreated and reshaped their cultural practices, social customs, and folk artistic traditions in response to the historical circumstances and ecological conditions of the southern frontier. Within this cultural context, traditional Confucian moral norms did not remain fixed or immutable; rather, they underwent continuous transformation and adaptation to the distinctive socio-cultural environment of southern Vietnam. Through the lens of (“vè”), women are portrayed not only as guardians of family ethics but also as active participants in economic life and historical change. To criticize moral transgressions and preserve familial and communal values, ordinary people employed satirical laughter as an effective means of social criticism, while simultaneously expressing sympathy for women whose lives were marked by hardship and misfortune. Against this background, this study examines the three-volume “Anthology of Southern Vietnamese Folklore: Southern Vietnamese (“vè”)”, edited by Huynh Ngoc Trang. Specifically, it aims to identify (“vè”) texts featuring female representations, investigate the interaction between traditional moral norms and emerging social values, and analyze the distinctive characteristics of satirical expression. Through these perspectives, the article seeks to illuminate how folk authors employed both satire and compassion to construct the representation of women in Southern Vietnamese (“vè”) folk verse.

B. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODS

This study examines the representation of women in Southern Vietnamese (“vè”) folk verse through an interdisciplinary framework that integrates folklore poetics, regional cultural studies, and the theory of cultural transformation. Within folklore studies, folklore texts are regarded as products of collective creativity that serve not only aesthetic functions but also as cultural institutions reflecting historical experience, regulating social behavior, and expressing the worldview of the communities that produce and transmit them. To address the research objectives, the analysis is informed by two principal theoretical perspectives. The first is the theory of cultural transformation, which is employed to examine how traditional

Confucian moral values—particularly the virtues of “công” (domestic skills), “dung” (physical appearance), “ngôn” (speech), and “hạnh” (moral conduct)—have been transformed and reinterpreted within the socio-cultural context of southern Vietnam. The second is the theory of satire and laughter in folklore, which provides the analytical framework for examining both satirical laughter and expressions of empathy as complementary discursive strategies for criticizing moral deviations while safeguarding the core ethical values of the community.

Methodologically, the study employs the following approaches: - “Survey, classification, and corpus analysis”: “The primary corpus consists of the three-volume “Anthology of Southern Vietnamese Folklore: Southern Vietnamese “vè”, edited by Huynh Ngoc Trang. - “Analytical–synthetic method”: “This method is applied to examine the ideological content, cultural values, and artistic characteristics of each thematic group of (“vè”) texts. - “Historical–comparative and cultural-comparative method:” “This approach is used to compare the representation of women in Southern Vietnamese (“vè”) with traditional female archetypes found in “ca dao” and (“vè”) from northern and central Vietnam, thereby highlighting the distinctive characteristics shaped by the historical and cultural conditions of the southern frontier.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The adaptation of moral norms within the family sphere

1.1. The transformation of the confucian virtues of “công” (domestic skills), “dung” (physical appearance), “ngôn” (speech), and “hạnh” (moral conduct) in the cultural context of Southern Vietnam

The writer and cultural scholar Son Nam aptly observed: “A culture that remains static is a dead culture. Only a culture that is dynamic and capable of adapting to changing circumstances truly embodies the essence of culture” (Son Nam, 2026). Indeed, during the Vietnamese southward expansion, settlers brought with them not only their experience of land reclamation but also the traditional moral values of their homeland, including established conceptions of women's virtues. However, confronted with the ecological conditions and practical demands of life in the southern frontier, these values did not remain rigid moral prescriptions. Rather, they underwent a process of cultural transformation, adapting to the realities of everyday life in southern Vietnam.

The "vè" "**Công dung ngôn hạnh**" provides a representative example of this transformation. The virtue of *gong* is interpreted through women's diligence, industriousness, and practical competence:

"Công là đủ mùi xôi thức bánh

("Gong means being skilled in preparing every variety of sticky rice and cakes")

"Nhiệm nhặt thay đường chỉ mũi kim."

("Patiently handling every thread and every stitch.")

"Vá may khâu dệt công đầy thì thôi."

("Mending, sewing, and embroidery are mastered through tireless effort.")

(Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 40)

Here, domestic skills are valued not as accomplishments intended to satisfy aristocratic ideals of feminine refinement but as practical abilities essential to sustaining family life.

Similarly, the virtue of "dung" no longer emphasizes delicate physical beauty but instead highlights dignity, modesty, and self-respect:

"Dung là nét mặt trang nghiêm/ Không tha thướt không chiều lơ lửng."

("Dung means maintaining a dignified appearance/ Neither ostentatiously elegant nor carelessly adorned.")

The emphasis on *trang nghiêm* ("dignity") together with the rejection of *tha thướt* and *lơ lửng* reflects the pragmatic aesthetic values of southern settlers. Rather than embodying fragile elegance, women were expected to possess an appearance that conveyed integrity, resilience, and readiness to share the burdens of everyday life.

Likewise, the virtues of "ngôn" and "hạnh" are founded upon courtesy, familial ethics, and communal responsibility:

"Ngôn là trình thưa vâng dạ."

("Ngôn means speaking politely and responding with respect.")

"Hạnh là đường ngay thảo kính tin."

("Hạnh" means following the righteous path with filial devotion, respect, and integrity.")

These examples demonstrate that traditional Confucian virtues were not preserved as inflexible moral doctrines but were reinterpreted according to the practical, egalitarian, and community-oriented ethos of southern Vietnamese culture.

This process of cultural transformation is further illustrated in "*Vè mẹ dạy con (I)* (*Mother's Advice to Her Daughter I*), where maternal instruction serves as an important form of moral education:

"Đoan trang đảm thắm người khen

("A gentle and graceful demeanor earns the admiration of others")

Làm gái hiền dịu đừng thềm chuốt trau."

("As a young woman, remain kind and modest rather than seeking excessive adornment.")

(Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 27)

The advice "*đừng thềm chuốt trau*" ("do not pursue excessive adornment") once again reflects the common people's preference for authenticity over superficial appearance.

The virtue of "*ngôn*" is likewise expressed through courtesy and communal ethics:

"Chớ nên ăn nói hỗn hào

("Do not speak rudely")

Gặp người lớn tuổi hỏi chào liền tay

("Greet your elders respectfully whenever you meet the")

Đối nhân lựa chọn lời hay."

("Always choose considerate and gracious words in dealing with others.")

More significantly, "*Về mẹ dạy con (II)* (*Mother's Advice to Her Daughter II*) broadens the meaning of *gong*:

"[...] Rồi đây trăm nẻo vạn đường

("Ahead lie countless roads and countless challenges")

Con là phận gái đảm đương mọi bề."

("A woman, you must be capable of assuming every responsibility.")

(Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 33)

The expression "*đảm đương mọi bề*" ("assuming every responsibility") represents a significant shift in gender consciousness within southern Vietnamese culture. The virtue of "*công*" is no longer confined to domestic labor but instead recognizes women as active social agents capable of sharing responsibilities with men in responding to the challenges of life on the southern frontier.

1.2. Conceptions of physical beauty in relation to moral virtue

The aesthetic conception reflected in Southern Vietnamese "*về*" consistently situates women's physical beauty within an inseparable relationship with moral character and socially appropriate conduct. In "*Về gái ngoan* (*The "về" of the Virtuous Girl*), although the heroine's portrait is constructed through conventional motifs commonly found in Vietnamese folk poetics:

“Diện mạo như tiên Miệng có đồng tiền

Cười tươi rạng rỡ,”

(*“Her appearance is as graceful as a fairy's; dimples brighten her smile, and her cheerful laughter radiates warmth.”*)

“[...] Cái mặt nó tròn

Như trăng mười sáu,”

(*“...Her face is as round as the full moon on the sixteenth night.”*)

“[...] Mắt phụng môi son

Mày ngài tợ liễu.” (*“...She has phoenix-like eyes, vermilion lips, and eyebrows as graceful as willow leaves.”*) (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 43)

the purpose of this idealized depiction is not merely to glorify external beauty or ornamental elegance. Rather, these conventional images are immediately validated through the moral ideal of a *gái ngoan* ("a virtuous young woman"), whose defining qualities are modesty, propriety, and moral integrity. Physical attractiveness is therefore valued not as an end in itself but as an outward manifestation of inner virtue.

A comparable aesthetic orientation can be observed in *” Vè cô Trích (The “Vè of Miss Trích)*, where feminine beauty is vividly portrayed through the following verses:

“Nghe vẽ nghe ve, nghe “vè” cô Trích

Tay xem hình tích, tốt tợ như tiên

Miệng cười có duyên, nói xây mảng cải

Năm người đều ái, ai cũng ước ao

Lịch sự làm sao, duyên đà cha chả

Đà sắt duyên cầm, đem về làm vợ

Để coi duyên nợ, gái đó với ai

Con gái con trai, coi ai có phước.”

(*“Listen to the story of Miss Trích. Her appearance is as lovely as a fairy's; her charming smile accompanies eloquent and engaging speech. Everyone admires her and longs for her affection. Her refined manners and natural grace make her an ideal wife. Let destiny decide whose fortune it will be to win her hand.”*) (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 47)

The “vè” does not merely praise Miss Trích's physical appearance through expressions such as *“tốt tợ như tiên”* ("as beautiful as a fairy") and *“miệng cười có duyên”* ("a charming smile"). More importantly, it foregrounds her remarkable communicative competence through the expressions *“nói xây mảng cải”* and *“lịch sự làm sao”*, qualities that make *“năm người đều ái, ai cũng ước ao”* ("everyone admires her and longs for her"). The Southern

Vietnamese dialectal expression *nói xây mảng cải* refers to speech that is coherent, vivid, and persuasive, metaphorically evoking the tightly layered leaves of a mustard plant. This metaphor demonstrates that feminine beauty in Southern Vietnamese culture is conceived not as passive physical attractiveness confined to the domestic sphere, but as a dynamic quality manifested through articulate speech, confident demeanor, and refined social conduct. It is precisely this communicative competence and the ability to foster harmonious interpersonal relationships that elevate Miss Trích into an ideal female figure, transcending superficial evaluations based solely on physical appearance.

By refusing to dissociate physical beauty from moral virtue, Southern Vietnamese "vè" articulates a progressive and profoundly humanistic aesthetic philosophy. Female beauty is portrayed not as an ornament for display but as the natural radiance of an upright and compassionate character, nurtured by communal solidarity, ethical integrity, and the cultural values that have evolved through generations of life in the southern frontier.

1.3. Women in Affinal and Kinship Relationships

Within the traditional patriarchal family system profoundly shaped by Confucian ideology, the relationship between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law has long been characterized by strict hierarchy, absolute obedience, and persistent tension. However, when these familial norms were transplanted into the more open and flexible cultural environment of southern Vietnam, Southern Vietnamese "vè" reinterpreted this relationship through a distinctly humanistic ethos grounded in mutual affection and communal solidarity. " *Vè dạy dâu* (*The "vè" of Advice to a Daughter-in-law*) exemplifies this transformation by presenting a progressive code of family ethics in which the mother-in-law is portrayed not as an authoritarian figure but as a compassionate mentor and moral guide:

"Đừng cho nhiều tiếng

Gây gỗ đua tranh

Tập tánh hiền lành

Dạy điều lễ nghĩa

Chớ có nói trái

Lão xược cùng quần

[...] Cù lao dưỡng dục

Lo lắng vuông tròn

[...] Dâu cũng như con

Thương dâu hơn gái."

(“Do not stir up gossip or needless disputes. Avoid quarrels and rivalry. Cultivate a gentle disposition and uphold propriety and moral conduct. Do not speak disrespectfully or behave arrogantly toward others. Always remember the devotion and sacrifices of those who have nurtured you. A daughter-in-law should be regarded as one's own child—even cherished more dearly than one's own daughter.”) (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 41)

The repeated admonitions to avoid “*gây gổ đưa tranh*” (“quarrelling and contention”) and “*lão xược*” (“insolence” or “disrespectful conduct”) are not intended to impose another form of domestic authority. Rather, they seek to preserve harmony and cohesion within the household. The most remarkable conceptual shift lies in the affirmation:

“Dâu cũng như con

Thương dâu hơn gái.”

(“A daughter-in-law is like one's own child—even loved more dearly than one's own daughter.”) (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 41)

This declaration symbolically dissolves the conventional boundary between consanguineal kin and affinal relatives by acknowledging the daughter-in-law as a legitimate member of the family. Such a perspective represents a significant departure from the rigid logic of the traditional patriarchal household.

The humanistic spirit of the “*về*” is further reinforced through its challenge to prevailing social expectations:

“Mình cũng nài dâu

Gái mình người chế!”

(“People may ridicule me for cherishing my daughter-in-law more than my own daughter.”) (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 41)

The willingness to endure public ridicule for showing affection toward one's daughter-in-law, in exchange for the peace and happiness of the younger generation, vividly reflects the Southern Vietnamese settlers' pragmatic value system, which privileges genuine familial well-being over social prestige or public opinion. In this respect, the “*về*” revises the conventional stereotype of the harsh and domineering mother-in-law inherited from traditional patriarchal society, replacing it with a new ethical model founded upon compassion, empathy, and mutual respect.

By subverting the oppressive power structures embedded in patriarchal family relations, Southern Vietnamese “*về*” articulates a profoundly humanistic process of cultural transformation. Within the social and cultural landscape of the southern frontier, family harmony is sustained not through fear, rigid hierarchy, or unquestioned obedience, but

through affection, trust, and reciprocal care. Although relatively few "vè" explicitly portray changes in the mother-in-law–daughter-in-law relationship, these texts nevertheless constitute valuable historical and psychological evidence of the transformation of interpersonal ethics among Vietnamese settlers as they adapted to and reshaped the cultural order of southern Vietnam.

2. Satirical laughter, social criticism, and its didactic function

2.1. Critiquing laziness, incompetence, and deviant conduct among women

Satirical laughter in Southern Vietnamese "vè" does not originate from misogyny or the denial of women's social value. Rather, it functions as a community-based mechanism of moral regulation through which collective behavioural norms are maintained. By repeatedly exposing deviations from accepted standards in labour, domestic life, and everyday conduct, folk authors transformed laughter into a powerful didactic instrument for safeguarding family ethics and the moral order of ordinary communities in southern Vietnam.

Above all, satirical laughter targets laziness and irresponsibility in labour—traits regarded as particularly unacceptable in the pioneering environment of southern Vietnam, where survival depended upon diligence, resilience, and industriousness. The existence of numerous "vè", including " *Vè làm biếng* (The "Vè of Laziness), " *Vè đàn bà làm biếng* (The "Vè of the Lazy Woman), " *Vè đàn bà ngủ ngày* (The "Vè of the Woman Who Sleeps during the Day), and " *Vè đàn bà hư* (The "Vè of the Wayward Woman), establishes a repertoire of behaviours identified as violating communal moral expectations. A representative example appears in " *Vè cấy cấy (II)* (The "Vè of Rice Transplanting II):

"Bà già hụp xuống lặn lên

Con gái ở dưới lên trên treo bìa."

(*"The old woman repeatedly bends down and rises again in the paddy field, while the young girl quickly climbs onto the field embankment to avoid the work."*)

The comic effect arises from the striking contrast between the elderly woman's relentless labour and the younger woman's deliberate avoidance of responsibility. While the older woman continues working tirelessly, the young girl hastily escapes to higher ground in an attempt to evade the task. Here, laughter functions not merely as ridicule but as an affirmation of the ethic of labour, elevating diligence as the fundamental virtue that enabled Vietnamese settlers to survive and prosper on the southern frontier.

Moving from agricultural production to the domestic sphere, Southern Vietnamese "vè" continues its critique by exposing clumsiness and negligence in women's

everyday household responsibilities. Through the hyperbole and exaggeration characteristic of folk poetics, a series of comic portraits of *gái hư* ("wayward girls") is vividly constructed:

“Ngủ thì quên tuổi quên tên

Mặt trời mọc đã lên ba con sào.”

(*“She sleeps so soundly that she forgets even her own name; by the time she wakes, the sun is already high in the sky.”*) (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 78)

“Nấu cơm bữa thiếu bữa dư

Bữa sống bữa khét cũng như cháo bồi.”

(*“When she cooks rice, one meal is too little, another too much; sometimes it is undercooked, at other times burnt—hardly better than thin porridge.”*) (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 86)

“Ăn rồi chén bát, rửa dĩa còn dơ.”

(*“After eating, she washes the dishes carelessly, leaving them still dirty.”*) (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 78)

Carelessness extends beyond domestic chores to personal hygiene and daily habits:

“Lỗ mũi lò thò, lấy tay mà quẹt.”

(*“With mucus hanging from her nose, she simply wipes it away with her hand.”*)

“Cái đầu không gội

Tóc để đến vai.”

(*“She never washes her hair, leaving it unkempt as it grows to her shoulders.”*) (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 100)

These images are narrated in an unembellished colloquial style that captures the immediacy of everyday life. The critique reaches its climax when laziness evolves into the deterioration of familial relationships:

“Chồng về quát nạt

Chửi bới om sòm.”

(*“When her husband returns home, she greets him with shouting and loud insults.”*) (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 116)

Through these examples, folk authors skilfully employ exaggeration and humorous narration to criticize behaviours that violate communal expectations concerning labour, domestic responsibility, and family harmony. More importantly, laughter gradually transcends entertainment to perform a normative function by constructing an ideal model of womanhood. An exemplary woman is expected not only to possess the capacity to “*đảm đương mọi bề*” (“*shoulder every responsibility*”) in society but also to demonstrate refinement, orderliness, and responsibility in managing household affairs.

The frequent appearance of stock characters such as the *gái hư* ("wayward girl") and the *đàn bà làm biếng* ("lazy woman") is by no means incidental; rather, it reflects a deliberate cultural strategy embedded within Southern Vietnamese "vè". These satirical portrayals embody the traditional educational philosophy encapsulated in the Vietnamese proverb *thương cho roi cho vọt*—disciplining out of genuine care and concern. By placing undesirable behaviours under the illuminating lens of satirical laughter, Southern Vietnamese "vè" transforms seemingly trivial episodes of domestic life into vivid lessons in social ethics. Instead of relying on rigid moral injunctions, the community employs the persuasive power of humour to correct behaviour, preserve family traditions, and sustain core cultural values amid the profound transformations accompanying the settlement of southern Vietnam.

2.2. Condemning Materialism, Filial Impiety, and the Erosion of Family Values

Within the cultural landscape of southern Vietnam—where urbanization and commercial exchange developed relatively early and rapidly—ordinary people were among the first to confront the temptations accompanying material prosperity. Southern Vietnamese "vè" sensitively records the earliest signs of moral tension as material aspirations began to challenge the traditional ethics of kinship and mutual obligation. *Vè khuyên vợ* (*The "Vè of Advice to a Wife"*) provides a representative example, portraying a husband's anxiety over his wife's growing obsession with material display:

"Sớm mai em đi chợ Cần Thơ

Mua đồ về bán em chê không lời

[...] **Nhìn em anh thấy rõ ràng không sai**

Lỗi gì mà em cắt áo bà lai

Lỗi gì mà quần lãnh em may rõ ràng

Lỗi gì mà em bịt mấy cái răng vàng

Lỗi gì mà cà rá hột xoàn em đeo

Em ơi trong lúc hiểm nghèo

Đẹp chi mà hông thấy làm phiền lòng anh."

("Early in the morning you go to Cần Thơ market. You complain that trading brings no profit, yet why spend money on a fashionable áo bà lai? Why have elegant satin trousers tailored? Why cover your teeth with gold? Why wear a diamond ring? My dear, in these difficult times, why pursue such adornment when it only weighs heavily upon my heart?")

(Huynh Ngọc Trang, 2022, p. 53)

Through a series of rhetorical questions beginning with "*Lỗi gì mà...*" ("Why incur such losses by...?"), the folk author exposes the irrationality of consumption that exceeds a

family's economic means. References to luxury items such as the “áo bà lai”, satin trousers (*quần lãnh*), gold teeth, and diamond rings not only depict contemporary fashions but also symbolize the encroachment of materialism upon traditional moral values. Against the backdrop of economic hardship (“*trong lúc hiểm nghèo*”), excessive concern with personal adornment is portrayed as a form of selfishness that weakens the solidarity and mutual support expected within marriage. The satire does not reject women's legitimate desire for beauty; rather, it articulates a practical philosophy of life among Southern Vietnamese settlers, according to which genuine beauty should remain in harmony with one's material circumstances and shared family responsibilities.

Southern Vietnamese “vè” further extends its moral criticism to filial impiety and records the community's collective response to such behaviour. Whereas materialism represents a deviation in lifestyle, acts of disrespect toward parents are portrayed as a far more serious violation of the community's ethical foundations. “*Về dâu có nghĩa và dâu bạc tình*” (*The “Vè of the Dutiful and the Ungrateful Daughter-in-law*) intensifies its condemnatory tone by depicting daughters-in-law who openly insult their parents-in-law:

“Cha chồng là: Trâu già, ngựa già, chó già

Mẹ chồng là: Bà trâu, bà ngựa, bà chó.”

(“*The father-in-law is called an old buffalo, an old horse, an old dog; the mother-in-law is called an old buffalo, an old horse, an old dog.*”) (Huỳnh Ngọc Trang, 2022, p. 54)

By reducing parents-in-law to animals through such abusive language, the “vè” deliberately creates a profound moral shock. The intention is not realistic representation but rhetorical exaggeration designed to provoke the audience's indignation and reaffirm the ethical obligation to honour those who have provided nurture and care.

This moral deviation is examined further in “*Về dâu dữ bị trời hành tội*” (*The “Vè of the Ill-tempered Daughter-in-law Punished by Heaven*), where material wealth breeds arrogance and erodes respect for kinship:

“Ỡ mình tiền bạc

Tuy không khoát nạt

Về làm chủ nhà

Không kính mẹ cha

Không kiêng thúc bá

Xưng hô ồng bả

Không chút kiêng dè

Nói tát nước bè

Hồn nên là hồn....”

(*“Relying upon her wealth, she assumes authority in the household. She shows no respect for her parents-in-law, disregards her uncles and elders, addresses them without proper honorifics, displays no reverence, and speaks with utter insolence.”*) (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 199)

Although presented through fictional narrative, the behaviours described—*“không kính mẹ cha, không kiêng thúc bá, xưng hô ông bà”*—are understood as serious violations of the moral order governing kinship relations. In Vietnamese culture, forms of address constitute an important expression of respect toward elders; consequently, their abandonment symbolizes a breakdown of traditional ethical values. Here, satirical laughter develops into a moral warning framed through the belief in supernatural justice, expressed in the title itself: *“bị trời hành tội”* (“punished by Heaven”). This demonstrates that, despite the openness and adaptability often associated with Southern Vietnamese culture, filial piety and respect for kinship remain non-negotiable ethical boundaries essential to maintaining family stability.

Beyond defending filial ethics, Southern Vietnamese “vè” also functions as a form of social chronicle by documenting social vices that undermine household economies and destroy family happiness, particularly gambling. Among these, gambling addiction and marital irresponsibility receive especially strong criticism. ” *Vè các thiem đánh bài giờ* (*The “Vè of Women Gambling Nowadays*) vividly portrays a woman's gradual descent into gambling:

“Thiem thì cứ một nghề cờ bạc

Ban đầu lạ hầy còn tứ sắc

Sau quen rồi bày đặt câu tôm

Me, phé, cào, xó hủ đủ môn.”

(*“Her only occupation becomes gambling. At first she merely plays tứ sắc; once accustomed, she moves on to “câu tôm”, then “me, phé, cào, xó hủ”, mastering every gambling game.”*) (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 418)

The cumulative listing of gambling games creates a rhetorical progression that exposes the systematic moral deterioration of the character. More seriously, gambling inevitably leads to deception within marriage:

“Thiem Thông thường kiếm có gạt chồng

Mỗi một tại ngồi sòng

Lại khai rằng bệnh hoạn.”

(*"Mrs. Thông constantly invents excuses to deceive her husband. Exhausted from long hours at the gambling table, she falsely claims to be ill."*) (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 418)

The erosion of trust becomes the invisible force that gradually destroys the foundation of marital life.

Family tragedy reaches its most dramatic expression in "*Về ông Chín Quân bị vợ thiêu* (*The "Về of Mr. Chín Quân Burned by His Wife*), which recounts a contemporary criminal case through the emotional voice of folk narrative:

**"Vợ chồng tình nghĩa trăm năm
Thời gian ân ái ăn nằm gối chăn
Sao bà nữ tạt xăng như vậy
Rượu ồng say nói bậy dừng hờn
Lỡ rồi bà chịu cô đơn
Suốt đời lạnh lẽo sớm hôm một mình."**

(*"Husband and wife are bound by a lifetime of devotion, sharing years of love and companionship. Why did you pour gasoline upon him? Though he spoke foolishly in drunkenness, you should not have harboured resentment. Now you must endure a lifetime of loneliness, living in solitude forever."*) (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 520)

Drawing upon a real contemporary incident, the "*về*" laments the disappearance of tolerance, forgiveness, and emotional restraint within marital life. The extreme act of "*tạt xăng*" ("pouring gasoline") symbolically destroys the "*tình nghĩa trăm năm*" ("lifelong marital devotion"), leaving only loneliness, suffering, and irreversible loss. Whether expressed through tragedy or satire, these "*về*" ultimately convey the same ethical message: family harmony depends upon the mutual cultivation of responsibility, compassion, and respect by both husband and wife.

Satirical laughter in Southern Vietnamese "*về*" therefore extends far beyond the ridicule of individual shortcomings. It performs the broader social function of regulating behaviour and safeguarding communal values. Through its condemnation of materialism, filial impiety, gambling, and marital breakdown, folk discourse articulates an ideal vision of the family founded upon filial devotion, mutual affection, and shared responsibility. This enduring moral vision constitutes one of the most distinctive cultural and educational values of Southern Vietnamese "*về*".

3. A compassionate voice for women of ill-Fated beauty and unfulfilled lives

As **Jane Pilcher** and **Imelda Whelehan** argue, “Throughout history and in most, if not all, societies across the world, sex and gender have constituted major bases of inequality: men have generally occupied higher social positions and enjoyed broader political and legal rights than women” (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2016). Likewise, the authors of the article *The Image of Women in Traditional Vietnamese Folk Songs from a Gender Perspective* observe that “such inequality became even more pronounced in societies governed by feudal institutions” (Pham Thi Phuong Thanh, Le Tu Anh et al., 2024). Although Southern Vietnamese society developed distinctive cultural characteristics, it nevertheless remained influenced, to varying degrees, by these patriarchal conceptions of womanhood. Southern Vietnamese “vè” records these social realities while expressing profound sympathy for women whose lives were shaped by poverty, social prejudice, violence, and circumstances beyond their control. Whereas many texts celebrate women's virtues within the family and the broader community, others turn their attention to those whose lives were shattered by hardship and injustice. In doing so, “vè” reveals the humanitarian spirit and moral compassion of ordinary people in southern Vietnam.

A representative example is “ *Vè cô Năm chủ sự* (The “*Vè of Miss Năm, the Clerk*), a lament for a woman whose life is overwhelmed by misfortune, social constraint, and personal tragedy. From the opening verses, the heroine is introduced through the conventional imagery of ideal feminine beauty:

“**Cô Năm chủ sự**
Phải người tình tự,
Da tuyết má đào.
Số hệ vì đâu
Lòng son phận bạc.
Mười năm lưu lạc,
Bướm đấm say ong.
[...] Tư bề phong kín,
Nhà rộng mệnh mông.
Cá chậu chim lồng,
Than ôi thân gái!
Biết bao kinh hãi,
Xiết nỗi kinh hoàng.
Đánh đổ đá vàng,

Một cơn mưa gió.”

(*“Miss Năm, the clerk, possessed remarkable grace and beauty, with skin as white as snow and cheeks like peach blossoms. Yet for reasons unknown, her faithful heart was matched with an unfortunate fate. For ten years she wandered through adversity. Though surrounded by a spacious house enclosed on every side, she lived like ‘a fish in a bowl, a bird in a cage.’ Alas, what anguish for a woman’s life! One violent storm shattered what had once seemed as enduring as gold and stone.”*) (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 224)

Employing the familiar folkloric contrast between ideal beauty and tragic destiny—*“da tuyết, má đào, lòng son”* ("snow-white skin, peach-blossom cheeks, a faithful heart") versus *“phận bạc”* ("an unfortunate fate")—the “vè” “elevates an individual tragedy into a broader representation of women’s condition within the traditional social order. Although she preserves her moral integrity, she remains powerless before circumstances beyond her control. Her living space, depicted through the images *“tư bề phong kín”* ("enclosed on every side") and *“cá chậu chim lồng”* ("a fish in a bowl, a bird in a cage"), functions as a metaphor for confinement and the deprivation of personal freedom.

The emotional intensity deepens in the following verses:

**“[...] Thương để bụi trần,
Cát lấp ngọc trắng.
[...] Sương tuyết dãi dầu,
Phen này hai lượt.
Đầy cho đến nước
Ghét bỏ chi trời?
Nghĩ đến nửa thời,
Nổi trôi trôi nổi!”**

(*“Alas, precious jade lies buried beneath dust and sand. After enduring frost and hardship time and again, why must Heaven continue to subject her to such suffering? The more one reflects upon her fate, the more it becomes an endless life of drifting and uncertainty.”*) (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 224)

Metaphors such as *“cát lấp ngọc trắng”* ("pure jade buried beneath sand") and *“đánh đổ đá vàng”* ("shattering what is as enduring as gold and stone") juxtapose purity and virtue against the destructive forces of prejudice and adversity. Particularly striking is the inverted repetition *“nổi trôi trôi nổi”* ("drifting endlessly"), whose poetic force transcends individual experience to become a symbol of the precarious existence of women in traditional society. Through the story of a single woman, Southern Vietnamese “vè” articulates a profound

humanitarian consciousness by aligning itself with the vulnerable and the socially marginalized.

Whereas Miss Năm's tragedy arises primarily from oppressive social circumstances, " *Về lỡ thời* (The " *Về of the Woman Past Marriageable Age*) portrays suffering generated by harsh communal prejudices concerning age and marriage.

"Gốc tre khô người ta còn chuộng,

Bậu lỡ thời như ruộng bỏ hoang.

Ruộng bỏ hoang người ta còn cấy,

Bậu lỡ thời như giấy trôi sông.

Giấy trôi sông người ta còn vớt,

Bậu lỡ thời như ớt chín cây.

[...] Bậu lỡ thời ai muốn làm chi."

("Even a dried bamboo stump still finds someone to value it. Yet you, a woman past the customary age of marriage, are like an abandoned field. An abandoned field can still be cultivated; a sheet of paper drifting downstream may still be retrieved. But who would care for a woman who has passed her marriageable years?") (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 45)

The "về" employs an escalating chain of comparisons as a distinctive poetic device. The repeated refrain "*Bậu lỡ thời...*" progressively compares the unmarried woman to an abandoned field, a drifting sheet of paper, and a ripe chili left unpicked. Each comparison is followed by a painful contrast: abandoned fields can still be cultivated, drifting paper may still be recovered, whereas the woman "*lỡ thời*" is perceived as having lost all social value. These cumulative comparisons are not intended to diminish women themselves but rather to expose the cruelty of traditional social prejudices surrounding age, marriage, and female worth. Beneath the lament lies the deep sympathy of ordinary Southern Vietnamese people for women excluded from the possibility of marital happiness and marginalized by prevailing social norms.

The emotional rupture of romantic love is explored further in " *Về than thân* (*Về con gái đồng trinh*)" (*The Lament of a Virgin Girl*), where tragedy is expressed through loneliness and the anguish of unwavering fidelity:

"Kể từ ngày đôi ta kết tóc

Đến bây giờ đã đặt mấy trăng

Đường cái không thấy ai lui tới

Dầu anh ở nơi nào bạn mới

Tổ nỗi cho em hay sự tình

Em ở đây vắng vẻ một mình
Thức mấy cũng đem lòng tha thiết
[...] Nay tức mình giận mấy ông tơ
Sợ chỉ thắm, se nơi không thiết
Chấp phôi tơ, chấp nổi nên lia.”

(“Since the day we pledged ourselves to one another, many moons have passed. The road remains deserted, and no word comes from you. Wherever you may be, let me know your circumstances. Here I remain alone in silence, spending sleepless nights filled with longing. Now I find myself blaming the Matchmaker Gods, whose crimson thread has joined a bond only to tear it apart.”) (Huynh Ngoc Trang, 2022, p. 136)

The deserted road—“Đường cái không thấy ai lui tới”—mirrors the heroine's emotional isolation as she waits in vain for her beloved. Her suffering is embodied in the image “*Thức mấy cũng đem lòng tha thiết*” (“remaining awake through countless nights, holding steadfast to her devotion”), reflecting an unwavering attachment to a promise that may never be fulfilled. The climax arrives in her bitter reproach of the Matchmaker Gods (*ông Tơ*), whose “*crimson thread*” has failed to unite true lovers. Here, Southern Vietnamese “*vè*” moves beyond documenting failed romances to express profound compassion for women's legitimate aspirations to love and marital happiness—aspirations too often frustrated by forces beyond their control.

Taken together, Southern Vietnamese “*vè*” presents a multifaceted and deeply humanistic representation of women. Alongside its satirical laughter, which functions to correct deviations from communal norms, the genre also gives voice to profound compassion for women whose lives have been shaped by poverty, social prejudice, violence, and unforeseen misfortune. The convergence of incisive social criticism and humanitarian concern reveals “*vè*” not merely as a vehicle of entertainment or moral instruction but as a cultural discourse through which ordinary Southern Vietnamese people expressed empathy, protection, and enduring respect for women confronting the harsh realities of life.

D. CONCLUSION

Examining the image of women in Southern Vietnamese “*vè*” through the analytical framework of ethical norms and humanitarian sensibilities leads to the following conclusions. **First**, Southern Vietnamese “*vè*” constructs a rich and multifaceted representation of women, resisting any single stereotypical portrayal. Rather than merely documenting social realities, the genre actively intervenes in the psychological and social life of Southern Vietnamese

settlers. Within this cultural discourse, satirical laughter functions not only as a powerful instrument for criticizing deviations from communal norms but also as a mechanism for regulating behavior, reinforcing family cohesion, and safeguarding the traditional moral order.

Second, beneath its sharp satirical voice, Southern Vietnamese "vè" possesses a remarkable humanitarian dimension, directing its sympathy toward women of tragic destinies and those whose lives remained unfulfilled because they had passed the socially prescribed age of marriage. Through distinctive folkloric poetic devices, anonymous folk authors expose the harshness of contemporary social prejudices concerning gender and age. Consequently, Southern Vietnamese "vè" transcends its role as a performative oral genre associated with everyday communal entertainment and emerges as a vernacular literary forum imbued with profound humanistic values, consistently giving voice to society's vulnerable and marginalized individuals.

Overall, the image of women in Southern Vietnamese "vè" constitutes a coherent artistic construct that embodies the cultural consciousness, resilience, and emotional experiences of Southern people as they confronted historical and social transformations. Its enduring ethical teachings and profound humanitarian values have enabled "vè" to maintain its vitality over time and affirm its irreplaceable position within the cultural and literary heritage of southern Vietnam, as well as within the broader tradition of Vietnamese folklore. The findings of this study also suggest several promising directions for future research, including investigations into gender representations in relation to the ecological environment of southern Vietnam and the transformation of Southern Vietnamese folk genres in response to changing contemporary contexts.

Conflicts of interest

The author declare that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publishing of this paper.

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