

## STYLE OF PHILOSOPHICAL DISCUSSION IN NGUYEN KHAI'S PROSE

Pham Thi Xuan, Hoa Dieu Thuy

Received: 3 May 2020/ Accepted: 1 September 2020/ Published: September 2020

**Abstract:** *Nguyen Khai is considered a great writer of modern Vietnamese literature in the second half of the twentieth century. With the concept "The writer is also a thinker", he succeeded in building a style of philosophical discussion in literature. Nguyen Khai's literary works express topical, shrewd, perceptive and wise insights. The style of philosophical discussion in Nguyen Khai's prose is revealed in all aspects of the genres: the subject, the plot, the characters and the language. Nguyen Khai deserves the honor of researchers and readers as: "an intellectual writer" (Phan Cu De), "one of the leading writers in the literary life" in Viet Nam over the past decades (Vuong Tri Nhan).*

**Keywords:** *Philosophical discussion, Nguyen Khai's prose.*

### 1. Introduction

"Philosophical discussion - Triết luận" has the root element "triết" which means "reason, knowledge" or "intelligence, wisdom" and "luận" which means comments, analysis and evaluation. As such, "philosophical discussion" refers to the discussion and explanation of an issue in a wise way. Writer Nguyen Khai is famous for his style of philosophical discussion thanks to the combination of shrewd, wise and argumentative elements in his works. This feature is revealed in both the content and the form of the works. With the aim of clarifying the style of philosophical discussion in Nguyen Khai's prose, the article contributes to clarifying the uniqueness of a literary personality.

### 2. Content

#### 2.1. The concept of literature as "a science that expresses the human heart"

In the Conference on founding Vietnamese Writers' Association (1957), writer Nguyen Khai, at a young age and at the beginning stage of his career, expressed the concept of literature: "In my opinion, the art is simply understood as: the science that expresses the human heart, the history of the human heart (...). Let's talk about the truth of human heart, the trufulness and the results of our careful, meticulous research, etc" (*Chuyện nghề - Job story*) [3, pp.8-9]. Later, he made it clearer in the notion of the writer: "A writer is also a thinker, a social activist by his means, a humanist" (*Knowing personal ability is an important factor for every writer - Presentation at the 3<sup>rd</sup> National Artists' Congress*) [5]. Towards the objective "A

---

Pham Thi Xuan

Ph.D Candidate Vietnam Literature, Faculty of Social Sciences, Hong Duc University

Email: phamxuanth@gmail.com

Hoa Dieu Thuy

Faculty of Social Sciences, Hong Duc University

writer should think as a scientist, a writer and a thinker, a philosopher”, Nguyen Khai always pressed himself to cultivate knowledge, “learn in real life” and “learn from books”, any book in my possession is read very carefully. There are good and bad books (...). Through such miscellaneous knowledge, I select the most necessary contents for my job” [1], Furthermore, he always “judged” himself very strictly to make greater efforts: “If someone neither judges himself/herself severely nor preserve his/her modesty, then he/she will easily get worse, because he/she is satisfied himself/herself, becomes lazy, empty and he has nothing else to be praised”(Chuyện nghề-Job story) [4, pp.597].

*Nguyen Khai called his journey of literary creation a “journey of awareness” and an “endless search”. The journey's purpose is to find and realize the aspirations: “The writer must have his own philosophical ideology, his own worldview, from which he will build up his art world with a system of characters, thoughts, languages and his own structure organization. They will go to the end of their art world, in their unchanging beliefs” (Literary job is also very elaborate) [3, pp.615].* As such, The style of philosophical discussion in Nguyen Khai’s prose was formed from his viewpoint and artistic thinking. To some extent, the writer has achieved certain successes in this style when he made a conquer of his readers over the past decades.

## **2.2. Philosophical discussion in the aspect of topic and subject**

Nguyen Khai’s tyle of philosophical discussion is revealed from the topic approach and development. Depsite the aesthetic orientation in the principle of artistic creation, Nguyen Khai always had his own approach and development. It is the analytical thinking and long view that helped the writer choose, “realized” the issues of great attraction (or) significance, drawing the social attention. They include the nature, the rules of the issue, hidden corners of reality. As such, the topics and subjects of Nguyen Khai's works often express novelty, sharpness, richness of narration, and criticism and predictive prognosis. This is the quality and strength of a writer with the style of philosophical discussion.

*Topic on the new-style countryside construction in the North:* In the 50s and 60s of the last century, the Northern countryside was eager to build a new life, a new society in the collective spirit of “One for all, all for one” aiming at preparing for the objective of socialist construction. At that time, literature and art focused on propagating and encouraging this very important political task. Like many other writers at that time, Nguyen Khai went on the “three with’s” field trip with people. His works at this time received the warm welcome of readers such as: *Xung đột - Conflict, Tầm nhìn xa - Far vision, Mùa lạc - Peanut season, Hãy đi xa hơn nữa - Go further, Một cặp vợ chồng - A husband and wife, Chủ tịch huyện - District chairman*, etc. It is worth mentioning that despite the same goal of encouraging and promoting the co-operative movement, appreciating and praising the prominent examples of collective spirit, Nguyen Khai had the unique topic approach and development. He not only made description but also conducted practical research. He always analyzed, criticized instead of “caressing” and always opened the issue instead of giving an assertion. For example, Nguyen Khai “posed” the issue of the fate/ destiny of the disadvantaged, the “inferior”, where they will “stand”, and which role they play in building a new life and society. Or, in order to build a new life, a new society, what is the quality of a leader? What is the relationship between talent

and virtue, how to solve the relationship between the personal and collective interests of leaders? If a leader is virtuous but non-talented or a bit talented will neither attract the people nor play a decisive role in promoting the movement (Bien in *Tầm nhìn xa - Far vision*), or if a leader is talent but non-virtuous (arrogant, short-sighted, self-interested, etc) such as Tuy Kien in *Tầm nhìn xa - Far vision*, Dam in *Chủ tịch huyện - District Chairman*. Or the issue whether the leader can get rich, enjoy the fruits from their efforts, at that time, is very novel. It can be said that, beyond the topical and political aspects, Nguyen Khai's approach and development in this topic area are still meaningful until now because his thinking of philosophical discussion has brought his issue to a higher level and broader generalization.

*Topic related to religion:* Developing a topic related to religion is not easy when the writers are the heathen. This may be the reason why the writings on religion or related to religion are quite few. Nguyen The Phuong has *Nắng - Sunshine*, Chu Van composed *Bão biển* while Nguyen Khai possesses 4 works: *Xung đột - Conflict*, *Father and Child...*, *Thời gian của người - Time of human* related to Catholicism and *Điều tra về một cái chết- Investigation of a death* related to the Caodaism. However, Nguyen The Phuong or Chu Van only described religion in human life while Nguyen Khai “discussed” about religion, philosophy of religion: “Religion appears to make people happy to live”, however, religion goes away from itself and brings people unhappiness. People have multi-mood and troubles, therefore, don't press them into simple mechanical forms, don't shorten them”. (*Thời gian của người - Time of human*) [5, pp.345]; Or: “A religion in which the doctrine, dogmas and decisions on administration, organization, reward and punishment, and promotion and demotion are all established and taught by a strong writer as gods, such as sorceress; actually, it is inconceivable.” (*Điều tra về một cái chết- Investigation of a death*) [5, pp.208] etc. Researcher Lai Nguyen An commented on the novel *Cha và Con - Father and child and...*: Nguyen Khai “expressed the philosophical discussion of religion and socialism in narrative language” [6, pp.320].

*Topic on revolutionary war:* Like many military writers at that time, Nguyen Khai shouldered his rucksack to the fronts: Con Co island, Vinh Linh, Quang Binh and Quang Tri fire lands and a series of compositions on the topic of war were released: *Họ sống và chiến đấu- They live and fight* (1966), *Hòa Vang* (1967), *Đường trong mây - Path in clouds* (1970), *Ra đảo - To island* (1970), *Chiến sĩ - Soldier* (1973), *Tháng ba ở Tây Nguyên - March in Tay Nguyen* (1976). In association with the goal of affirming the will and determination for victory of our army and people in the war against the US, Nguyen Khai still sought his own approach on this practice. He explored and demonstrated the daily life of soldiers in the fierce battle to know how they “live” to “fight”. It is miraculous and heroic to “live” calmly and confidently in extremely severe and dire circumstance, however, they made a more wonderful thing than that because they lived happily and optimistically to fight and win. As such, in addition to reflecting the reality, the writer made a philosophical discussion of living reason of a people, belief in truth, the relationship between individuals and the community, people and countries. Our cause of national liberation has the power of justice and things which symbolize the most beautiful sense of purpose of the human.

After 1987, Nguyen Khai changed the direction of topic development. If he previously focused on the stories of the times and philosophical discussion of the times, he currently

mentioned about the story of family, clan and old acquaintances. Borrowing the character's words, the writer shared about this change: "It was not until then that he completely realized the boundary between the youth and old age, between the age of living for himself and society full of dreams and the age of only living for his children, without any other hope and joy" [3, pp.195]. However, the only difference is the subject while the approach is still the same style of philosophical discussion. If the philosophical discussion had been focused on the times before, after 1978, the philosophical discussion was mainly related to the individual condition in the universe, life and times. Ms. Hien in the work *Một người Hà Nội - A Hanoian*, Ms. Bo, Ms. Dai in the work *Nắng chiều - Afternoon sun*, Ms. Vach in the work *Đời khổ - Unhappy life*, the mother in the work *Một mẹ chồng tuyệt vời - A wonderful mother-in-law*, with the philosophy and concepts of happiness - sadness, happiness - misery, rightness - wrongness, goodness - badness, etc. Clearly, in daily life, people always face and choose between these two categories.

It can be said that the discovery of issue and orientation of ideas is a special ability of Writer Nguyen Khai .

### **2.3. Philosophical discussion in the aspect of plot**

*The plot rich in knowledge information:* Knowledge is the basis for analysis, evaluation or judgment, thinking. To give conclusions, the convincing evidences are requested. Researcher Nguyen Dang Manh ever admired: "Every time I read Nguyen Khai's works, I always believe that my intelligence would be expanded by something..." [6, pp.274]. The "wisdom" mentioned by Nguyen Dang Manh is extremely abundant knowledge from politics to society; from scientific knowledge to cultural and literary knowledge; from folk to modern style, etc. For example, religious knowledge helped Nguyen Khai to vividly and persuasively demonstrate the people's lives (from psychology to lifestyle, behavior, customs, etc); Life knowledge contributes to creating intelligent, shrewd character personalities and unique and attractive details in Nguyen Khai's literature.

The dense knowledge expression sometimes creates the chronicle style for Nguyen Khai's stories. The works associated with the history - society topics have the style of chronicle and notes while the works associated with the topics in which the reflected subject is an individual have the style of essay. The writing style of dawdling, skipping from one subject to another is a method used by the writer to "show" the knowledge which seems "trivial" but hidden by an issue of the times.

It is the achievement of a writer who is eager to explore, think and always uses his analytical thinking to select the things to be accumulated.

*Orientation and logic of the storyline:* That the story idea is oriented in the title is a recognizable feature in Nguyen Khai's works. Unlike other writers who neither apply this style frequently nor create a prominent impression, Nguyen Khai orientates the coherence in the storyline and story idea right in the title of the work and it becomes the writer's personality and style. The idea is oriented and the storyline is developed to clarify/prove or persuade the reader, which creates a coherent logic in the plot: The title is the message of the story. Although there may be many characters, the storyline does not have many layers. Only one story layer goes throughout the work in a vibrant and strong way, including many new details and situations that attract and persuade readers. It is worth mentioning that the story

situations and details in Nguyen Khai's works are often associated with the political, economic, social and cultural issues of the country, therefore, they affect and attract readers. The works composed in the 50s and 60s of the last century, with the same topic of praising and affirming a new life thanks to Nguyen Khai's innovation, such as: *Mùa lạc* - *Peanut season*, *Đứa con nuôi* - *An adoptive child*, *Một cặp vợ chồng* - *A husband and wife*, *Chuyện người tổ trưởng máy kéo* - *Story of the tractor manager*, *Hãy đi xa hơn nữa* - *Go further*, *Tầm nhìn xa* - *Far vision*, etc. have simple plots and storylines proving the philosophical discussion: only revolution can radically change the fate of inferior and disadvantaged persons and only the revolution helps them regain belief and love in life and people.

For groups of works with the same anti-Americanism topic such as: *Ra đảo* - *To island*, *Đường trong mây* - *Path in clouds*, *Chiến sỹ* - *Soliders*, the topic idea is not clearly revealed in the title, however, there is a consistency of topic idea and storyline, specifically: affirming, praising patriotism, revolutionary heroism which has turned normal people into heroes, a small nation into a heroic nation. The plots of these works are in the same situation. They does not have many layers. They have only one storyline that tells the silent work of unnamed heroes, including the people and the soldiers who are ready to sacrifice, fighting for national independence and freedom: "I have decided to go to the end of life, going through all the ways to go and utilize all my strength. And at that moment, if I have not reached the destination, I will fall down very peacefully because I have been striving to the last minute, being a soldier to the last minute" [4, pp.429].

After 1978, Nguyen Khai's works achieved renovations in the topic subject and approach, however, the thinking of philosophical discussion still governed the reasoning logic and structure of the works. It is a method of introduction in association with a specific orientation towards a philosophical overview or discussion. Therefore, the plot can be "split" into pieces, forming a "non-central" plot type, however, the logic of the storyline is still consistent. *Gặp gỡ cuối năm* - *Year-end meeting* are the no-start and no-end stories of the Saigon "upper class" guests at the year-end meal. Each person is a "piece of story", however, such pieces focus on the issue: the tragedy of the "a bad patch", although each character is in a different situation, all of them are powerless and for survival, they have to "lean" on the illusion of golden days.

The "clusted" and "scattered" plots create a new feature for the plot format of Nguyen Khai after 1978, however, thinking according to "the issue", the logic of the storyline in linear order aimed at "explaining" and "lecturing" for a certain reason have not changed: respecting and admiring a "golden dust" of Hanoi; regardless of many changes, ups and downs of social circumstance and regimes, the Hanoians are still wise to keep themselves and their families a dignified lifestyle, standards in character, elegance and bravery in behavior (*Một người Hà Nội* - *A Hanoian*); Affirming and appreciating any effort of people towards happiness and caring for life (*Nắng chiều* - *Afternoon sun*); The philosophical discussion of humility: "*Một giọt nắng nhạt* - *A drop of pale sunshine*", specifically, it is "sunshine" but "it is pale", anyway, it is still "sunshine" which functions to shine and warm the space and the surrounding relationships. Anyway, it is a valuable contribution even just a little! Coming back to the issue that the work is named as the propositions of philosophical discussion: *Sống ở đời* - *Living in life*, *Danh dự* - *Honor*, *Lạc thời* - *Lost in time*, *May hơn khôn* - *An ounce of luck is*

*better than a pound wisdom, Phía khuất mặt người - Hidden side of the face, Thượng đế là hàng hóa - God is a commodity*, etc. The establishment of structure of the plot which explains, comments, generalizes the “issues”, the logic and consistence in the idea line contribute to shaping the plot with Nguyen Khai’s outstanding style of philosophical discussion.

### 3. Philosophical discussion in the aspect of characters associated with the story language

*Type of character with an shrewd ego*: The protagonist is the “idea spokesperson” of the writer in his work. Nguyen Khai's world of protagonists is quite diverse in terms of class, social position, age, however, whoever they are, they are very “alert” and wise. Such wise and shrewd “ego”s are often the “strong”, energetic, brave and “thinking” characters, who always analyze, assess situations and judge things based on the two-pole boundary: “pros-cons”, “gain - lose” in a very clear way. Rationally, the analysis and evaluation of the character are always accompanied by general assessments, philosophies and philosophical discussion in association with each individual's experience and education. A 10-year-old child who know to worry, calculate, consider in situations of facing with adults and draws his own experience with firm and mature “philosophies”: “I believe no-one is good”, “If they were evil, they would still be evil until death”(Đứa con nuôi- *An adoptive child*) [2, pp.277]. The vice head of an agricultural cooperative is always proud of his wisdom. All his calculations and tips show that he is tricky, pragmatic and shortsighted. However, he has his philosophy and he is always proud of it: “You have to manage; idle talk makes money, huh”; “Food must be kept for co-operative members; If we sell as much we have produced, then the cooperative members shall claim us; We do not know what we shall take to encourage them to actively produce?” (*Tầm nhìn xa - Far vision*) etc.; And here is the calculation and philosophy of a character who knows to “go with the times”, knows to adapt the times: “...Trust is a sacred thing that comes freely and cannot be forced. If anyone wants to hear, you should tell them. We are liberated, therefore, we should think about liberating others. ...At this time, a party, a religion as well as an individual who have showed anti-communist signs are considered digging their own grave” [5, pp.262]. For each summarized experience, the character turns it into philosophy and philosophical discussion about people and life: A fisherman not only “clearly understands” about fish but also borrows them to give the human philosophy: “There are many types of sharks. Some of them have teeth lined in rows like barbed wire, move around but they are gentle, very gentle. Some have only a set of gapped teeth, however, they are very cruel, even they can cut your leg when snapping it! The inside personlity of animals can not be determined through their appearance, let alone the human, etc. (*Điều tra về một cái chết - Investigation of a death*) [5, pp.215]. The women in Nguyen Khai's work are also very “shrewish”. The character Ms. Dao, who appeared in the 1960s of the previous century, realized the philosophy of life: “Do not be self-pity, so modest, everyone has good quality”(Mùa lạc - *Peanut season*) [2, pp.252]. Some decades later, the woman in Dong Thap were proud to affirm that: “Our sisters, regardless of standing in the dark, doing unnamed and trivial things, however, you see, our bravery and wisdom are not inferior to the men standing in the light (*Vòng sóng đến vô cùng - Endless wave*) [5, pp.394]. The town woman, through many decades of ups and downs, hardship, still maintained the family

order in a civilized and elegant lifestyle, with a thought full of pride: “Every society needs a upper class as a benchmark for all values” [3, pp.307].

The type of shrewd, smart, dynamic, energetic and brave character is a personality motif loved by Nguyen Khai. His writing style is flexible and sharp when expressing such personalities.

*Story language rich in criticism and philosophy:* Characters in Nguyen Khai's works often communicates with critical thinking, language and dialogues. This is also an indispensable logic when they are intelligent, shrewd and good at analyzing and generalizing. Conversations between characters often have “open” ending instead of “close” ending, which means that the characters often use the language of question, hypothesis, skepticism, suggestion, etc in dialogue: “How are your legs tired? Just a few steps away but you was afraid my legs would be tired... You must be tired (...); Do you feel cold - I never feel cold, uncle. I have a jacket but I rarely wear it - It is colder in Dien Bien than in the lowland, therefore, it is easy for you to be sick if you dress lightly; No need to say much about Dien Bien sugar-cane... Do you eat sugarcane or fear of tooth decay ?? Oh! Are you an adult? etc... (*Đứa con nuôi - An adoptive child*) [2, pp.285-287] etc.

When the character has monologues, he argues with himself or someone else in his imagination: “I ate some cups of rice but I work for her all afternoon, I do not beg” (*Đứa con nuôi - An adoptive child*); “Even if I am ragged like a beggar, I am still the vice head of the cooperative, and I am still your father when I go home”. (*Tầm nhìn xa - Far vision*); “... No one will follow your instructions, it is a sure thing because the wisdom of each person can be achieved only by his own experience”. (*Vòng sóng đến vô cùng - Endless waves*) [3, pp.36] etc.

The language of the narrator is also very remarkable in Nguyen Khai's works. The Narrator is presented in the story as an invisible character who comments, evaluates, “thinks” together with the character and argues with the character in the story. Therefore, as being caught in the thinking line of the storyline, the narrative language is also very philosophical, specifically, it not only tells and describes objectively but also tells/describes comments, evaluations, generalization, which means that the language is sharp and subtle.

“She is too tired, however, her cheeks full of freckles are sharp and stubborn, and her small eyes are still alight with the challenge...” [2, pp.251]; “Over six or seven years, that person hasn't changed much. It is a beard that is not often clean-shaven, a vivacious laugh and eyes which are sharp but full of love” [5, pp.286]; “I saw that Ms. Bo had her stiff wrists to hold her husband's chopsticks and use a piece of paper to clean them, and clean bowl (...) .The husband was so fussy, just waiting for his wife to pick up the food, just eating what his wife give him while not touching his chopsticks into any dish.” [3, pp.491]; “At the end of the meal, the owner gave a warm towel to each person, Mr. Phuc used it to clean his face and then gave it to his wife. The wife took her husband's used towel to wipe her face. I dropped my face, felt sting in my nose and just wanted to drop some tears of love” [3, pp.492]. Descriptive verbs cum adjectives showing the status and nature, such as: “sharp”, “small”, “stiff”, etc., the adjunct “and, to, then, so” contribute to emphasizing in order to express things and phenomena in a sharper, more suggestive, more meaningful way.

#### 4. Conclusion

Philosophical discussion seems to have become Nguyen Khai's personal style from the first pages to the last pages in his literary career. The philosophical discussion is expressed in all aspects of the work: the subject - the topic, the plot, character type and the language. Reading Nguyen Khai's works, the reader has received the information of the times while thinking of profound ideas from the issues posed by him. He was good not only at “posing the issue” but also at discussing, and good at predicting the changes of the times. Many issues posed by Nguyen Kha decades ago are currently emerging in social life.

Researcher Phan Cu De ever assessed that: “Nguyen Khai is an intellectual writer who always thinks deeply about the issues arising in the life and tries to seek a convincing answer in his own way. Accordingly, in the writer's works, through the topical political and social events, there are always emerging issues of philosophical significance and human ethics.” That's why during 40 years of writing, “he is always one of the leading writers in literary life” [2, pp.27].

#### References

- [1] Nguyen Khai (1957), A few comments about highlighting and the attitude of the writer, *Military Arts and Literature Magazine*, 5, 27.
- [2] Nguyen Khai (1996), *Nguyen Khai' collection*, Literature Publishing House, Ha Noi, vol.1.
- [3] Nguyen Khai (1996), *Nguyen Khai' collection*, Literature Publishing House, Ha Noi, vol.3.
- [4] Nguyen Khai (1997), *Short stories and miscellanea*, Youth Publishing House.
- [5] Nguyen Khai (1999), *A collection of Nguyen Khai's novels*, Writers Association Publishing House, Ha Noi.
- [6] Ha Cong Tai, Phan Diem Huong (Selection, introduction) (2002), *Nguyen Khai - Introduction about author and work*, Education Publishing House, Ha Noi.