

Khmer women and their feminist consciousness in Khmer folk songs in Vietnam

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Abstract

Khmer folk songs have occupied an important position in the Khmer folk lyrical genre. It is a literary type that has contributed to create the unique color and appearance for the treasure of Khmer folk literature. Through the specific genre characteristics, Khmer folk songs is not only the lyrics that reflect the life, thoughts, and feelings of Khmer people but also has markedly performed the features and acoustics of cultural conditions and the territory in which folk songs were born. In addition, the customs and habits are the valuable factors that have greatly determined the expressions, reflection contents, thinking inference, image choosing, etc., in Khmer folk songs. The article generalizes the roles and positions of Khmer women in the Khmer's conception and then describes the manifestations of feminist consciousness in folk songs basing on the conception along with the characteristics of Khmer folk songs. Thereby, the article affirms the values that have created the vitality and beauty of Khmer women in particular, and Vietnamese women in general.

Keywords: feminism, Khmer women, Khmer folk songs, Khmer folk literature, Khmer culture.

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1. Introduction

In Vietnam, the feminism issue had been interested and focused right from the beginning of the 20th century. The struggle for woman's rights had simultaneously been taken place in all aspects of social life, including literature and art. One of the ideological manifestations of feminist thought in literature is the affirmation of beauty, role and vocation of woman. In traditional literature, the sense of woman's condition has appeared for a long time, thereby establishing its own outlook and tone in expressing the feminist thought. The behaviors of Khmer women in folk songs not only show their intelligence and subtlety but also is a natural manner and imbue with ethnic cultural traditions in the context of Vietnam in terms of human-to-human relationships.

Among the Khmer folk literature genres, folk song is a style that has made significant contribution to reflecting the beauty of women's body and their souls in the most honest and vivid way of the folk artists' cherished sentiments. And, the environment of generation, performance, and the development of Khmer folk songs are very typical such as in the practice of customs and festivals, especially in daily life. Through these folk songs, people can not only express their innermost feelings but also display their concepts of life and the voice of struggle as well as affirm their own values and interests. And with these features, folk song is a great place to utter the secret heart voices and the strong sense of the desire for happiness of Khmer women. The article approaches Khmer folk songs from the perspective of feminism, feminist criticism and feminist literature. In particularly, the research describes the manifestations of feminist consciousness in a genre of folklore (i.e. folk songs) of the Khmer peoples, which is an ethnic minority in Vietnam.

2. Research subject and research methodology

In this research, the research subject is the manifestations of feminist consciousness in Khmer folk songs. In fact, the awareness of appearance, the circumstances, and the desire for happiness of Khmer women are performed by images, the art details of labour and living, and Khmer women's emotions in folk songs. With the above research objects, the research methodologies are utilized as followings:

2.1. *Methods of statistic and classification*

The authors, initially, gathered Khmer folk songs in scientific works, which are published in Vietnam, to be analytical data. The results of Khmer folk corpus are synthesized and used in this study, including:

- One hundreds Khmer folk songs in 100 melodies of Khmer folk songs (2004), which is collected and compiled by Nguyen Van Hoa.

- Twenty three Khmer folk songs in the collection of Soc Trang folklore (2002), which is edited by Chu Xuan Dien.

- Twenty five Khmer folk songs in the collection of Bac Lieu folklore (2004), which is edited by Chu Xuan Dien.

2.2. *Methods of analysis and synthesis*

The collected Khmer folk songs were analyzed to describe the manifestations of feminist consciousness in Khmer folk songs. Then, we will synthesize and combine the above factors to make a more comprehensive and in-depth view of the research problem.

2.3. *Method of interdisciplinary*

Besides the knowledge from the faculty of folklore study and feminist theory, the author also applies interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary knowledge such as culture, sociology, history, etc. in order to analyze and explain the basis of forming the expression manifestations of feminist consciousness, the Khmer cultural characteristics in Khmer folk songs. Thereby, these are able to ensure the holistic culture and literary aesthetic essence of Khmer folk songs.

3. Findings

3.1. *Feminism and the role of Khmer women in folk literature*

Feminism is a collection of feminist movements to protect women's rights and equality in politics, economy, society, culture, etc. and especially, giving priority for the issues of education and employment for woman. Some feminists such as Beauvoir, Woolf, Ellmann, Firestone, Flexner, Moers, O'Neill, etc. along with their theories had deeply influenced on literary criticism therein. After 1986, especially since the late 1990s, the researches on gender and women, in Vietnam, have made an important transition. Feminist theories are also flexibly and creatively applied in literary criticism research activities. When referring to the sense of feminism in traditional literature, it is essential to mention about the system of folk verses and folk songs. Thereby, they are very diverse and rich in the images of women, especially the folk songs of the Khmer people, who are an ethnic minority in Vietnam.

Traditional values, which are crystallized from customs, practices and religions, have dominated, blended and expressed through each eating style and way of thinking of Khmer people in general, and Khmer women in particular. Actually, the family culture and colorful community of the Khmer people have built a beautiful image of Khmer women through generations.

In Vietnam, beside the transitional and remnant forms, the culture of organizing community life, in terms of the relationship between men and women, has been existing three family systems: patriarchal, bi-parental and matriarchal. In fact, the Khmer family system in the South of Vietnam is a bi-parental system. Thereby, the expressions of behaviors in the equal relationship between husband and wife in Khmer family clearly reflect the imprint of this family system type. Although the husband or father plays the head role of the family, their parts are mainly in agricultural production, transactions, and reception of guests.

As for other jobs, Khmer husband and wife have equally rights and obligations: *"The housework, taking care of and educating children, and managing the household expenses belong to the women (the wife). In addition, the important affairs in the family such as business, buying costly things, children's marriage, doing meritorious services to the pagodas, etc., are discussed and agreed upon by husband and wife. Moreover, the wife is rarely absent and even participates with a higher degree than the husband in children education, family happiness protection, and farming. They do most of the farming works such as planting, weeding, harvesting, gardening, water carrying, cultivating, pulling seedlings up, threshing, bailing, chopping wood, and fertilizing. Furthermore, they are also responsible for raising pigs or chickens and the housework. In general, the wife is the main cashier of the family. The relationship between Khmer husband and wife is quite equal; the family atmosphere is harmonious; and there are rarely conflicts"* (Nguyen Khac Canh 1998, p.86).

Additionally, this equality is also reflected in the property ownership regime. In a family, both husband and wife have the right to own separate property besides common property produced by the husband and wife during their marriage. Also, the role of Khmer women in the family is also confirmed in their contribution to family income; in production, family activities and social work; in their decision for production and family activities. In a study, the authors claimed that: *"Women, in general, have a very important contribution to the development of the household economy, which generate up to 37% of rice production income and about 70% of Animal husbandry income. These mean that their participation in livestock production is very important as well as participates in*

and makes decisions in almost all stages of this field. Nevertheless, women, in rice production process, only participate in some stages such as transplanting and weeding. In terms of the gender roles, women play a very significant contribution role in taking care of the family and production activities, yet less than men. Generally, women's all three roles have a total time of participating or working still have more 1.5 hours than men's." (Nguyen Thuy Trang, Vo Hong Tu, Nguyen Phu Son, 2013, p.21).

From a religious perspective, there is traditionally no Khmer Theravada Buddhism' nuns. However, Khmer women are also well-educated and greatly influenced by Buddhist thought and ethics through the lifestyle of the men in the family (grandfathers, fathers, husbands), festivals, monks' sermons about Buddha's teachings and Khmer traditional rituals. Traditionally, Khmer girls aged between 16 and 20 have to perform the "going into the shade" ritual from 3 months to 1 year. During this period, Khmer girls learned to embroider, sew, cook, learned to be a good human being and behave appropriately after getting married. Following the Buddha's teachings, the girl must tolerate, love, and sacrifice to create a harmonious family. Once she is equipped with knowledge of appropriate behavior in a family and the community, she is considered as an adult girl and can get married. Her marriage then is accepted by the community. This marks the Khmer girls maturity and is also the community's recognition of their dignity. However, the custom of "going into the shade" of Khmer girls no longer exists due to the requirements of modern society such as learning, health, communication needs, etc.

Nowadays, Khmer women improve their characters by going to pagodas to learn Khmer language, listen to Buddhist monks preaching about Buddhism, and learn how to deal with people from family, schools, and social organization,...

Thus, Khmer women in any era still hold a particular important position in both community and religious life. In folk literature, the image of a woman is always honored by her aspirations, dignity, and morality. According to legend, the Khmer belong to the Naga lineage, with the combination of Preah Thong-Neang Neak. In the legend, Neang Neak, who was the daughter of King Thuy Te and also the ancestor of the Khmer people, originated from the world of water tribes (Thal-pha-chong-neak) in the land of Battadal. Neang Neak, half human, half a seven-headed snake, married Preak Thong on Kok-thlok island and co-founded the first Khmer dynasty. They have brought to the Khmer people the knowledge and values that make up the Khmer culture. When it comes to Khmer myths and fairy tales, in addition to the pristine beauty, we also see the significant role of women in the formation of festivals, customs and habits of the Khmer: *The Legend of the Lady Visakha, the Legend of Ba Om Pond, the Legend of Bai Xau, the Rain and Wind, the Sun, the Moon,...*

3.2. Awareness of the role and status of Khmer women in folk songs

Folk song is a genre which is capable of expressing all the beauty of lyrical form of folk literature. As an introspective art, folk songs have reflected and subtly expressed the world of the human soul, especially the emotional soul of women.

Lyrics and melodies of Khmer folk songs are so vibrant, joyful as well as mellow and deep. Thanks to the short and long verses with passionate rhythms, we have a deeper insight into the life and thought of Khmer people in general, and Khmer women in particular. From lulling children and grandchildren, to hunting, stabbing crocodiles, riding elephants, pounding rice, drying rice, chasing birds, rowing boats, getting married, etc. are praised by the Khmer through songs. This look is rustic and simple but also profound and humane, creating the quintessence and soul of Khmer culture.

Among the cultural values that Khmer folk songs keep, the family culture value is always the most emotional part. The role and beauty of the women is expressed most clearly and fully in lullaby - a type of singing that is almost exclusively female. This is the family singing style, sung by women when they put their children to sleep. In *Marriage and Family of Khmer people in the South* (2012), Nguyen Hung Khu said: "Up to now, Khmer people in the Mekong Delta still keep a huge collection of lullabies with lyrical and poetic songs about the couple's relationship blending into the immense natural scene, making the color of love more intense and romantic. The lullaby is always opened by the phrase: "My son...", "my youngest son". The melody of the Khmer lullaby is usually slow, short and smooth with sweet and cordial sentimental lyrics" (Nguyen Hung Khu 2012, p.41). Mothers and grandmothers not only play the role of performers, creating the practical value of lullabies, but also contribute to building the family cultural identity of the Khmer.

In the sweet lullabies of mothers and grandmothers, in the sweet sleep of children, a life of hardship with the burden of earning a living of parents, we see the virtue of self-sacrifice for husbands and children of Khmer women:

Baby, let's go to sleep!

Mom must work to carry the burden of life.

Despite many sleepless nights, mothers always desire her child to have a peaceful sleep.

And in the mother's lullaby, besides worrying about her children, the woman in the family also gives her husband warm concerns:

*Let's go to sleep, my baby
Mom must wake up early tomorrow to work
My dear, Mom coaxes, Mom carries,
Let Dad sleep tight, to plow at dawn!*

Besides singing lullabies, through performing folk songs Khmer women have boldly talked more about themselves and expressed their feelings more deeply.

Khmer women are very rustic and sincere in life and in love. They love and express it naturally as inherent emotions:

*My boat was right here
Why didn't your boat come?*

The lyrics have a bit of blame mixed with the sad feelings of a girl when love is hopeless. However, more importantly, it can be seen through the song that the Khmer woman was very active and strong in finding happiness for herself.

Almost all women in all ages share the same feelings when they are in love such as nostalgia, anger, doubt, infatuation, etc. All of which create beauty and the attraction of love as well as charm, which is the very unique beauty of a woman in love. Through folk songs, the Khmer woman skillfully conveyed the sentiments and nostalgia of a distant love:

*Charming scenery, high mountains
I would like to say that I miss you very much.*

The emotions of anxiety, restlessness, insecurities about bad omens, separation in love always make the women worried:

*Oh, darling! don't be in a hurry, please give me time to think and plan
Bathing in Pêây lagoon with coconut shells, we will be in miserable,
God forces us to be apart
and live in seperation!*

*I look for starling birds everywhere
Suffer from loneliness by myself
Wait in tiredness by myself
Can't believe you changed your mind
Has you forgotten me?
Or has you been in love with another girl!?*

Even if that love came to a broken, the Khmer woman would also raise her selfless voice and keep the loss for herself:

*The fire of love in the heart is smoldering
Which seemes impossible to perish
Sudden collapses
He has got a new lover
Well then, I would like to keep forever
Nostalgia for first love
Give back to you your sweet words*

Leave me the wild part...
Nostalgic about first love
Give back your sweet words
I'll take the guilt of love

In other words, Khmer women surely think that even if the outside world changes, they give love with no thought of expecting any return for it:

Many are in the pursuit of love
I ask nothing in return

This is not considered suffering but loyal, wholehearted love of Khmer women. Moreover, this shows that Khmer women are refined and noble in love as well.

It can be said that whether Khmer women's role as a partner, a wife, or a mother, they are always faithful and love to the uttermost.

Additionally, the lament that Khmer women described a belated love is powerful indeed.

Such exceptionally pretty flowers
Sorry for remaining unmarried
Sorry for being women
Yet haven't found love

In addition to their full of love and sacrifice, Khmer women are also praised for their industriousness and diligence:

She is very good at
Rice hulling, rice pounding, diligently

On the other hand, dignity and traits of a high-value Khmer woman are also demonstrated:

If it's about money, I have enough of
It can't buy you love, as mine is not for sale
.....
If it is true love,
Love me with all your heat, darling

It can be concluded that Khmer women, in any situation, show their virtue of diligence, sacrifice, fulfilling duties, and roles of a wife and mother. Moreover, their faithful heart to their husband and children, wholeheartedly taking responsibility for work, raising children, etc. are the foundation for their affirmation and development in society. In addition, with a heart full of love, Khmer women also show their good behaviors in love and daily life.

3.3. Khmer women's consciousness about appearance in folk songs

In the synthesis of components that make up the beauty of Khmer women, it is crucial to mention the physical appearance. Hair, face, smile, clothes, jewellery, etc. are important factors that attract the attention of women and ethnicity of any era, contributing to the beauty of a woman. Furthermore, it is believed that physical appearance is a significant criterion showing how people and society evaluate a woman.

In Khmer folk songs, many writers have expressed their admiration for the physical beauty of the Khmer women:

Such beautiful girls
Singing with birds
Known from South to North
Our girls are the superb

In a love relationship, the physical beauty of a woman is described the most. This can be explained based on the psychological rules, men might get more attracted by the lover's appearance. It is obvious that in folk aesthetics, beauty is not abstract and metaphysical but illustrated explicitly and emotionally, representing the shape of a woman. Besides, it is said that when a woman is in a happy relationship, it is love spells that make her more charming. Especially, smile and hair are the most outstanding features depicted in Khmer folk songs.

Specifically, the smile is considered a charming and attractive part of a woman forever. The smile of a Khmer girl is like the mysterious, alluring beauty of the moon:

The moon is mesmerizing

Like a girl smiling

From ancient times, it is claimed that men have their own obsession with women's smiles. This could be interpreted as a smile is always one of the most glamorous physical traits of a woman, and Khmer girls are the most beautiful when they smile:

Hey, Sarika

Please smile

For me to behold

Your white teeth

And your sleek hair

Furthermore, white teeth and black hair are perceived as the beauty standards of Khmer women. In addition, long hair represents not only the feminine beauty, the hidden charm of a girl but also a standard model for the tenderness and love of a woman. Therefore, Khmer folk songs have regularly introduced the jet-black hair of Khmer women:

A sarika

In the midst of its flock

Look beautiful

With sleek feather

Sarika

It can be said that in this folk song, the comparative image is not only about visual nature but also offers an expressive meaning. Sarika birds are closely connected to the community, working life and the rich art background of the Khmer people. As a result, when a Khmer girl's hair is compared to Sarika's feathers, it can be seen how meaningful a girl's hair is to the perception and feelings of the Khmer.

Additionally, a lock of Khmer girl's hair is also considered a token of love, a sign of recognition for couples:

Your touch lies on

My silky hair

And the flower pillow

Where you lay my soft hands on

It is clearly described in the above song that hair and soft hands are unforgettable beauty of a Khmer girl.

Apart from that, the physical attractiveness of Khmer women is also characterized in the working context, which can be the fields, gardens; with familiar working life, the beauty of Khmer women is fully realized and appreciated the most:

I see your footprints

Knowing that you're beautiful

But why you don't know

That you work in the field, or in the garden?

Consequently, the physical beauty of Khmer women lies not only in the body parts such as eyes, mouth, hair, hands, feet, etc. but also recognized in their daily work.

Accordingly, Khmer folk songs have praised the physical beauty of women, thereby respecting them and letting their beauty and virtue shine bright. Through love, through the lens of the souls of Khmer men, it seems that Khmer women are more beautiful with unique and novel comparisons.

4. Conclusion

Aesthetically, Khmer folk songs have demonstrated the beauty of Khmer women in terms of appearance and

spirit. Physical beauty is a natural beauty, which nature bestowed upon Khmer women. This absolute beauty has been strongly reinforced by their community. Hair, smile, hands, footprints, etc. represent both physical attractiveness and the soul of Khmer women.

Khmer women in particular, in any situation, whether happy or sad, they always show the beauty of kindness, sacrifice, industriousness, etc. Besides, sincere expressions in folk songs are a unique and artistic way used by Khmer people to express their thoughts directly. For Khmer people, this artistic method is considered more vivid because of the good-natured, broad-minded and straightforward traits of the Khmer people. These expressions reflect the awareness and roles of Khmer women in traditional society and the feminist consciousness in the folklore of this ethnic group.

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