

## Lan Khai – Who opened the way to the world of the forest in modern Vietnamese literature

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### Abstract

In medieval literature of Vietnam, the nature and people in the mountainous areas were isolated. But thanks to the new literary movement during the period of 1930-1945, forest story was born with the names of many famous writers such as Lan Khai, The Lu, Luu Trong Lu, TChya, Thanh Tinh, Nguyen Tuan, Ly Van Sam... Among these writers, Lan Khai was dubbed as the Greatest Forest Writer. His writings about the nature, customs and mountain people are very attractive. He did not only praise the beauty and goodness but also condemned the forest destroyers, wildlife killers, robbers who ruined human happiness. All the stories are in bright and poetic language.

**Keywords:** Lan Khai, Forest, story, nature, customs, ethnic, love, language, death, life.

### Introduction

For a long time in medieval literature of Vietnam, the images of life and people in mountainous areas was blurred, but thank to the new literary movement during the period of 1930 -1945 *Forest story* was born, marking a new leap of modern Vietnamese literature. The story of the forest is associated with names such as Lan Khai, The Lu, Luu Trong Lu, TChya, Thanh Tinh, Nguyen Tuan, Ly Van Sam, etc. They have explored the natural world and the life of ethnic minorities, because the delta people have long believed that the mountains are dark and dangerous places. These writers have brought many new paintings of the world of the forest, which were welcomed by many readers. In the journey into the world of the "sacred forest", Lan Khai (1906-1945) was dubbed "the *Forest Writer* of New Literature" (Nguyen Vi, H.1994, p.88). Despite his short life, he has left a great literary and artistic legacy, including: novels, short stories, poetry; literary theory and criticism, research and translation; literature collection; as well as pictures but the most typical works are the forest stories of Lan Khai. All of his legacy, proves that he was very talented because he was not only a writer, a poet, a painter, a translator, a researcher, but also a folklore collector.

### 2. Forest stories of Lan Khai

In the article published in Tao Dan Magazine No. 6 of 1939 named "*To a young man who wanted to pursue a career in writing*", he wrote: "I grew up in the mountains so I often stand alone in front of nature with thousands of colors and shapes." It is a flashback of the "literary karma" of a writer, showing the sensitivity of an artist's soul to the environment at an early age. At the same time, his fluency in French and languages of many ethnic minorities, together with a deep cultural background, has

formed the special *Forest Stories* of Lan Khai. Living close to the nature, sticking to the customs and language of ethnic minorities, Lan Khai's *familiarities* become so strange to other writers. The "sacred forest" in his writings appears to have plenty of colors and shapes, and is the place where all the flora and fauna grow vigorously. They just leaned on each other while competing with each other in order to survive. Lan Khai discovered the vivacious features of that colorful world through the aesthetic lens of a writer who brought the natural world closer to the human. All the works such as *Lo Hno*, *Late night forest*, *The call of the deep forest*, *Suoi Dan*, *The footprint of the horse on frost*, *Nung Ti Ao*, *Hong Thau*, *Money loses power*, *The poisonous crossbow*, *The top of the God mountain*, *The white flag in the fog* etc... show that Lan Khai has created the second natural world in art. It is the world of fresh flowers: "Croong flowers blossoming red", "The peach blossom from a hundred buds" (Lan Khai, H.1941, p. 19)... That world is also filled with beautiful emotions, when dawn is up with the "blue sky, sunshine over the things like silkworm silk", and with the image: of the morning stars like shining tears". The natural vitality lies in the world of sounds with the "screams of cicada", the "song of thousands of birds", the whisper of the wind through the leaves, on the tree", and "the creep of the wind into the night forest"... For the sounds of the stream, sometimes it "hails around the big stone as a fresh and happy music", but sometimes "runs smoothly through the gap of reed leaves while mingling, murmuring to the reeds the stories it brought from strange places"(Lan Khai, H.1941, p. 24)... Each of the natural paintings in the story of the forest contains the human soul. In the "sacred forest world" there are floods, wild animals, robbers and corpses, destroying the peaceful life of the people. The dark, the dull, the hungry, the cold, the fake are enemies of the beauty and goodness. But, above all there are images of the boys, the girls, the gentle workers, the brave, loyal, altruistic, talented and beautiful, living in harmony with nature, connecting with the community and desiring for freedom in opposition to the dark forces through the stories such as *Nung Ti Ao*, *Late night forest*, *The call of the deep forest*, *Money loses power*, *The poisonous croobow*, *Suoi Dan*, *The footprint of the horse on frost*, *The top of God mountain* etc... Lan Khai's forest stories also show that there are many obstacles and mysteries in the natural world where people do not understand all and they need to continue their discovery journey.

In many pages of Lan Khai's writings, he seems to metaphorize himself into the grass, flowers and birds, harmonize himself into the people's custom, as well as put himself in other people's portraits and fate. He was called *Forest Writer* because of his ability to observe nature as a biologist; his knowledge of place of residence, language, costume, furniture, labor, psychology, life, fun, beliefs, festivals, funerals, weddings, time, etc... of each ethnic community from the North to the Central Highlands as an ethnographer. For example, in terms of place of residence, the Hmong people prefer to live on the top of a mountain; the Tay people prefer the valleys; while the Dao people like to live on the hillside... He turned these rich realities into lively custom paintings. At that time, all writers such as The Lu with the story *Gold and Blood*, Luu Trong Lu with the story *Foresters*, TChya with the story *Tiger god*, Vu Trong Phung with the story *Hunting monkey*, Nhat Linh with the story *Forest orchids*, Nguyen Tuan with the story *On the top of Non Tan*, Thanh Tinh with the story *Finding Tram trees*, Ly Van Sam with the story *Kon tro* etc... wrote about mountains, but none of them had such

strength and knowledge of mountainous areas such as Lan Khai, so their writings are far from the nature and habits of mountain people. In memoirs of Ms. Ha Minh Kim - wife of Lan Khai, there is one passage that states: "In his youth, wherever there are forests and ethnic minorities, there are Lan Khai. He knows many languages and ethnic groups. He translated many of their folk literature into Vietnamese..." At that time, many writers had a high opinion of Lan Khai's *forest stories*. In the newspaper LOA (1935), Truong Tuu wrote: "Lan Khai - the artist of the mountain" is the "eldest" in the world of the forest, like a banyan tree in the middle of a large field" (Truong Tuu, H.1935, p.4). In the book "The modern writers" (1942), Vu Ngoc Phan considers Lan Khai's *forest stories* as a new literary genre: "Reading Lan Khai, people see how novelists bring people into the deep forest, take people intimately into the families of the ethnic minorities and show us different identities..." (Vu Ngoc Phan, H. 1963, p.966). After 1945, those writers who were interested in the mountain life had to enter the mountainous world and the habits of ethnic minorities to create new works such as: *Northwest story* (To Hoai), *The country stands up* (Nguyen Ngoc), *Forests moving* (Mac Phi), *Silver coin* (Ma Van Khang), *Salt of the forest* (Nguyen Huy Thiep), *The old house by the stream* (Cao Duy Son), etc...

### 2.1. *The forest stories of Lan Khai showed deep humanistic thoughts*

Lan Khai's *Forest Stories* show the humanistic view of the nature, the country and its people. At that time, the theory of ecological critique has not appeared in Vietnam and the world, but the problems of ecological environment in the early twentieth century have deeply described it in his works, contributing to the erosion of the complexity of many people, who once viewed the mountain as "the sacred forest with water", the world of devils, tigers and snakes in opposition to humans. On the contrary, in the view of Lan Khai, the nature is a beautiful world in harmony with people when people understood nature. In the stories: *Suoi Dan*, *The call of the deep forest*, *The footprint of the horse on frost*, *The top of the god Mountain*, *Hill of God*, *Under the Tiger's mouth*, he criticized people's activities of burning forests and killing animals. Those deforesters have become poor because of the loss of life in nature. *The Call of the Deep Forest*, depict a young man's repentance: "Hunting is a cruel way of expressing evil, for it is a game of sowing grief" (Lan Khai, H.1939, p.7). The deep idea of Lan Khai is not to trample on the life and beauty of the nature.

In *Forest Stories*, bright paintings of the nature are always close to honest people and opposed to the bad ones. From the view point of Lan Khai, the nature makes people beautiful and people can beautify the nature. Besides the poor and the backward, mountain people still have the potential of beauty and cultural quintessence which need preserving. Folk literature collections such as *Mountain Wind and Moon* (1933), *Blue Songs* (1937), *Folk Stories (1932-1940)* of ethnic minorities such as Tay, Nung, Hmong, Dao, Ba - na, Gia - rai of Lan Khai in the early twentieth century shows that he is the early writer who early recognized the "folk treasure" of the ethnic communities in Vietnam. In addition, Lan Khai's works of mountainous cultural studies show us a writer's insight into the cultural potential of the nation, contributing to the creation of national new spiritual values.

From ancient time, the dark forces have always sought to separate the people of the

lowlands with the people of the mountain, in order to break the community solidarity. Therefore they have made ethnic ambiguous sentences, for examples: Kinh people say: *good Kinh people*; while the Tay people say: *beautiful Tay*, or in the story of marriage, there is a sentence: "Get married to the Tay to give birth to a son, get married to the Kinh to give birth to a monkey..." (Tran Manh Tien, H.2004, p.501). However, Lan Khai had a deep vision of the factors that connect the community of the Vietnamese people who share a common source of history. Ethnic groups are different in terms of language and customs, but they are united with the same desire for freedom and happiness.

In *Forest Stories*, the readers always catch the couple's affair; they differ in ethnicity but are very poetic. In the *Late night forest*, a Tay girl called Dua Phan, who loves an innocent Dao boy whose name is Mai Kham. Their love experienced many difficulties, but they reached the highest peak of love before the end of their life. In addition, *Suoi Dan* story tells us the intense love between an urban Kinh boy with a Tay girl in the village which creates a very poignant love affair. In *The top of God mountain*, Nhan, a beautiful Tay girl, loves a boy, whose name is Tuyet Han, a virtuous and talented Dao boy and their love is the most poetic love story. In *The poisonous crossbow*, the affair between Mai Kham boy of the Ba-na tribe with the Pengai Lang girl of Gia-rai tribe is the most beautiful love history between the mountains of the Central Highlands. Their love has overcome family and ethnic hatred, counteracted greed and crime and heads towards peace and goodness. With many vivid literary images, Lan Khai has helped readers remove the barriers between mountain people and delta people and between other ethnic groups in Vietnam.

Lan Khai's *forest stories* show that, no matter where we are, every nation is the same, every human being has a desire for free love and a happy life. Poverty, injustice exists everywhere, but people can make their life better when they realize themselves. People want happiness not only to protect them but also to protect the nature, because humans are a part of the world. If we behave well with the nature, it will offer us many sources of happiness. Through lively literary images, Lan Khai's perception of man and the nature has given readers wisdom and belief in life.

## 2.2. Lan Khai's forest stories reflect the tragedies of love

In general, Lan Khai's stories about mountainous areas such as *Lo HNo*, *Nung Ti Ao*, *Late night forest*, *Suoi Dan*, *Money loses power*, *The poisonous crossbow*, *The top of the God Mountain*, are often associated with beautiful and romantic love affairs, but they have suffered many ups and downs in different circumstances. In *Late night forest*, the couple fell in love with each other, but the village ranger has sought to undermine their love. In order to preserve the dignity of love, "the couples have committed suicide together with a sharp knife" (Lan Khai, H.1935, No.111, p.3). In *Money loses power*, the couple fell in love, the girl's father died unluckily, but the poor guy had no money for the funeral of his lover's father. So the village ruler used his money to do it, and in accordance with custom, then the girl would be his wife. The young couple had to hide together in the jungle like animals, when they were found they committed suicide with a shotgun. The tragedy of love often arises from the darkness of backward customs with the power and crime of the deep forests. In *Suoi Dan*, the writer described the passionate affection of a handsome Kinh man with a

beautiful Tay woman, but she could not overcome her own tragedy: "She does not want to betray her old lover and she does not dare to be treacherous with her new one. Desperate for the future, this woman used poisonous leaves to finish her life" (Lan Khai, H.1935, p.145).

### 2.3. *The Forest stories of Lan Khai are very diverse in genre*

The Forest stories of Lan Khai have different lengths, they can be as novels, short stories as well as medium stories. Among these works, some focuses on customs of people, some on history while other focuses fantasy. Those contemporary fantasy short stories called *Strange stories in the forest* (Ghost stories, myths, horror stories) such as: *Stranger*, *Ghost of the water monster*, *The water monster of the Ma family*, *A couple of ducklings*, *The Cow under the sea*, *Old woman Tiger*, *God hill...* carry traces of fairy tales formed from three main sources: "Lan Khai's childhood absorbed from his mother; literary epitomes from his father; and the strange stories of ethnic minorities which, he collected from the journeys in the world of the forest" (Tran Manh Tien, H.2004, p.528)... These are very mysterious stories, such as the image of the woman in a short story called *Stranger* is described like this: "her eyes are are red like white rabbit's eyes", "her mouth laughing can burn people's heart", "she has sharp teeth like cat's teeth", "she can go into the air"... The stories *Ghost of the water monster*, *The water monster of the Ma family*, "Old woman Tiger" evokes the chaotic life of humans and animals in the mythical era. *The Cow under the sea* tells about the story that when the monsters of the Dragon King was killed after going in the land, the Dragon King immediately raised water to revenge the villagers. The story of "A couple of ducklings" describes the marriage of a Kinh man to a Tay girl, but he was unfaithful and left to the lowland without returning to the village, so his wife used magic to destroy his health until death (Tran Manh Tien, H.2004, p. 521)...

Lan Khai's fanciful stories have the same magical elements in the middle literature such as "Liaozhai zhiyi" by Pu Song Linh (China) and *Collection of Strange Tales* by Nguyen Du (Vietnam) as well as legendary elements in Vietnamese folk tales. These are the myths and horror that are both real and virtual in order to meet the entertainment needs and arise the curiosity of readers, but they are outside the realistic viewpoint of Lan Khai. In addition, Lan Khai also has some historical short stories such as "Water Wave of Lo River" (1935), *Mr. Doi's Conspiracy* (1941), describing about miserable circumstances when the country is lost and dispersed.

*Forest novels* are works that combine romance and reality, sometimes alternating with the magical elements in order to add more "flavors of the forest" to the story. All the writings *Lo Hno*, *Late night forest*, *The footprint of the horse on frost*, *The Call of the Deep Forest*, *Suoi Dan*, *Money loses power*, *The white flag in the fog*, *Hong Thau*, *Nung Ti Ao*, *The poisonous crossbow* etc... have shown that Lan Khai is a writer who has found a unique way for his novels in complex polyphony. Although his stories have simple plots and not many characters, they have a very rich realistic material.

### 2.4. *Deep impressions in Lan Khai's forest stories*

The attraction of the forest stories is expressed through the harmony of the nature and humans. Lan Khai was the first writer to successfully create the world of the nature,

customs and people of the mountains with fresh paintings in modern Vietnamese literature. He brought the essence of poetry and music to his writings. In *Lo Hno*, the paragraph depicting the body of the young woman called TSi Doa when immersing herself in a fountain in the midst of a green forest, is a picture full of a feeling that expresses the harmony between the wonderful feats of humanity with the magic of the nature (Lan Khai, H.1933, No 1857). The name "*Suoi Dan*" is not only the name of the village but also the endless love song that the nature has given to everyone. In *The poisonous crossbow*, the love between Pengai Lang girl (Giarai Ethnic) and Mai Kham boy (Bana Ethnic) became more alive with Gia - rai folk melodies being sung by the girl, making the mountains of Tay Nguyen more romantic.

It can be said that Lan Khai's writings touched from every corner of the stream, to every blade of grass, leaf, stamens, to every song of birds, among which the deepest is the human mood when standing in front of wildlife nature and multi – level human love. All of them are constantly growing and flourishing. The combination of realistic and romantic tendencies with magical elements has made his pages more attractive. Western scientific knowledge's, such as Darwin's theory of evolution, Hyppolyte Ten's theory of humanity influenced Lan Khai's artistic vision in describing the natural world and exploring the life of ethnic minorities. In addition to talent and rich living skills, the success of Lan Khai's works came from his acquiring of the influence of world literature to create new art paintings of the world of the forest.

The success of Lan Khai in the Forest Stories also includes the process of accumulating materials for writing. He was the first writer in Vietnam to collect, translate and present many folk-literary works of ethnic minorities such as Tay, Nung, Hmong, Dao, Ba- na, Gia rai... in remote mountainous areas into Vietnamese. He has documented the nature, customs and practices of the indigenous people everywhere through his journeys in the world of the forest. These works were published in articles between 1930-1945 and attracted many readers. Lan Khai's artistic conception is close to that of Buddhism and indigenous beliefs, and is also accessible to many schools of modern Western literature. Forest stories of Lan Khai were born in the early twentieth century, but his awareness was close to that of the current ecological criticism.

*The forest stories* has long attracted readers not only in abundant content, but also in the ability to use the artistic language of the Lan Khai in sketching the lively picture of the world of the forest. The folk songs of the compatriots of ethnic minorities in Northern Vietnam and the Central Highlands are intermingled. His writings have many words which are rich in formality and expressiveness, as well as many sentences that contain a lot of light, color, sound, smell and taste, suggesting new sensory fields, together with imaginable comparison which creates poetic beauty in fiction and short stories.

## Conclusions

From the journey in the world of the forest to becoming a famous writer in the national literature, Lan Khai has spent nearly 30 years of attaching to life and people in the mountainous areas. Lan Khai's forest stories are the combination of his extensive culture, which includes the quintessence of national traditions and the quintessence

of Western culture with Chinese culture, from which he created a second world - the forest world in the art of deep human values.

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