



Journal of Sustainable Research and Development (JSRD)

Volume 1 Issue 1, (2025)

 <https://doi.org/10.69739/jsrd.v1i1.326>

 <https://journals.stecab.com/jsrd>

 Published by
Stecab Publishing

Research Article

Dehumanization in Modern Literary Criticism: *Under the Ylang-Ylang Tree* and *A Little Joke*

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About Article

Article History

Submission: March 02, 2025

Acceptance: July 10, 2025

Publication: August 02, 2025

Keywords

A Little Joke, Dehumanization, Ecocriticism, Feminism, Landscape Criticism, Under The Shadow of The Ylang-Ylang Tree

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ABSTRACT

This article applies the system of three methods, including literary comparison, structural analysis, and cultural history, to clarify the dehumanization towards sustainable development trend in modern literary criticism, specifically feminist criticism, ecological criticism, and landscape criticism. This trend is characterized by three qualities: the blurring of the central personal sensibility, the connection to the changing context and thinking, and the awareness of the inevitable binding correlation between human and nature. These arguments are experimentally verified through the short stories *Under the Shadow of the Ylang-ylang Tree* (Thach Lam) and *A Little Joke* (Anton Chekhov). The research results can be applied to the research and teaching of literary theory, and Vietnamese literature at the university level, and high school level, in line with the direction of the 2018 literature program renewal.

Citation Style:

Nguyen, T. T. (2025). Dehumanization in Modern Literary Criticism: Under the Ylang-Ylang Tree and A Little Joke. *Journal of Sustainable Research and Development*, 1(1), 31-38. <https://doi.org/10.69739/jsrd.v1i1.326>



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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Exploring dehumanization in modern literary criticism: Thach Lam, Chekhov, and sustainable rural development

Current literary criticism increasingly leans toward socialization, raising concerns about the instrumentalization of literature and art, particularly in the context of sustainable rural development. However, there is a lack of studies exploring how modern critical trends, specifically dehumanization, shape the interpretation of literature in rural educational and social contexts. This paper addresses this gap by examining the trend of dehumanization in modern literary criticism, focusing on its manifestations in *Under the Shadow of the Ylang-Ylang Tree* by Thach Lam and *A Little Joke* by Anton Chekhov. The objective is to analyze how these works reflect dehumanization and to propose ways literary criticism can guide sustainable rural development by fostering social awareness and cultural values. This issue is significant as it bridges literature with rural education, enhancing the understanding of modern critical trends and their application in Vietnam's high school curriculum. The study's findings offer educational value by providing materials for training gifted students and supporting research in literary theory, foreign literature, and Vietnamese literature at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the dehumanized nature of three modern critical movements, namely feminist criticism, ecocriticism, and landscape criticism. It also aims to provide a new perspective for approaching literary works from the Vietnamese and Russian cultures of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The surveyed object of the study is the texts *Under the Shadow of the Ylang-ylang Tree* and *A Little Joke* in the book *Linguistic and Literature 10* [Ngu van 10], which is aligned with the orientation of fundamental and comprehensive renovation of the modern Vietnamese education system. According to the Resolution of the 11th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, "fundamentally and comprehensively renovating education and training according to the needs of social development" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2011), including renovating the goals, contents, methods, mechanisms, policies, and management of education and training in the direction of standardization, modernization, socialization, democratization, and international integration. This is a comprehensive and far-sighted renovation orientation, reflecting the determination of the Vietnamese Communist Party and Government to develop education and training, meeting the requirements of national development in the new era, serving the development of the economy and social security.

The short story *Under the Shadow of the Ylang-ylang Tree* is included in the short story collection *The Strand of Hair*, published in 1941 by DoiNay Publishing House, Hanoi. It includes short stories published in the *Ngay Nay Newspaper* from 1939 to 1940 when Thach Lam was beginning to fall ill. As a result, his view of life and love is even more fragile and ambiguous, in keeping with his romantic style of writing; especially with its non-narrative nature, which challenges traditional critical writing. *A Little Joke* (Chekhov) was published in the March 1886 issue of a magazine, revised in 1899, and included in a collection. During this period of Chekhov's writing, he was

still involved in medical work, and his meticulous analysis of character psychology can be seen as a result of his professional career. However, during this period, the author began to transition to writing longer works, so the plot structure of *A Little Joke* is clearer than that of *Under the Shadow of the Ylang-ylang Tree*. However, the two short stories meet in the state of ambiguity and uncertainty at the beginning of life that anyone can experience. This is a fragile emotion that goes beyond the control of the individual, which we have identified as a non-ego, ambiguous, subtle, and difficult-to-describe tendency that literature can connect to the hearts of readers. Currently, in Vietnam, in line with the direction of educational reform, there are three sets of textbooks, including *Canh dieu*, *Chan troi sang tao*, and *Ket noi tri thuc voi cuoc song*. Each set of textbooks is compiled by a different group of researchers; each school is free to choose a suitable set of textbooks. Therefore, the author of the book *Connecting Knowledge with Life* [*Ket noi tri thuc voi cuoc song*] placed these two short stories in the group *The Power of the Storyteller*; the book *The Creative Horizon* [*Chan troi sang tao*] placed *Under the Shadow of the Ylang-ylang Tree* in the group *Cherishing Memories*.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Dehumanization and critical trends: reviewing Thach Lam and Chekhov's short stories

To date, modern critical trends such as feminism, ecology, and landscape have been introduced and applied in a variety of ways. Ecocriticism, since its proposal by William Rueckert in 1987, has become a trendy trend, gradually developing from biocentrism to eco-social with the outstanding research of Lawrence Buell and Cheryll Glotfelty. In Vietnam, many researchers such as Do Van Hieu (*Ecological Criticism - A Radical Trend in Literary Studies*, 2012), and Nguyen Thi Tinh Thy (*Dry Forests, Parched Streams, Red Seas... and Literature*, 2017) have also had successful application works. Feminist criticism has been and is being discussed and practiced as a literary criticism movement with famous names such as Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Sigmund Freud, and Lacan. In *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* (1981), Elaine Showalter divided feminist criticism into three stages: femininity (influenced by patriarchy), feminism (fighting for equality), and women's literature (seeking characteristics). In Vietnam, the works of Nguyen Dang Diep (*Gender Issues and Feminist Undertones in Contemporary Vietnamese Literature*, 2006), and Bui Thi Tinh (*Women and Gender*, 2010) also provide an introduction to the theory and practice of this critical trend. Landscape criticism lies at the intersection of geography and the humanities, environmental science and architecture, social history and aesthetics, and is closely linked to the study of space as a component of artistic poetics. Representative authors of this critical trend include Bender and Winner (*Contested Landscapes*, 2001) Charmichael (*Sacred Sites, Sacred Places*, 1994), Malpas (*The Place of Landscape*, 2011), Mitchell (*Landscapes of Power*, 1994) và Salim Kemal, Gaskell (*Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, 1996). In Vietnam, The scholars Ngo Viet Hoan (*From the Concept of Space to Landscape Criticism: a Landscape Study of "Xiangxi World" written by "Countryman" Shen Congwen*, 2022), Hoang Cam Giang (*Landscape, Body, Poetry*:



From Ecological Aesthetics to Green Therapy in Korean and Vietnamese Art Cinema [through Shi and Moon At The Bottom Of The Well], 2022) have begun to introduce this trend through specific practical articles on literature and film. Generally, studies on these three trends often exist in isolation, emphasizing individual applications to clarify specific cases, hence leaving many gaps in terms of comparative analysis and interconnections. Research that combines these three trends holds scientific significance by aiding in the introspection of each trend individually. Simultaneously, such combined research is practically meaningful as ecological criticism and feminism have gradually integrated across interdisciplinary trends. Specifically, we identify the overarching nature of this combined critical approach as decentering – where researchers no longer solely determine meaning, granting equal rights to both authors and readers, highlighting the influence of various power structures. Critical thinking shifts from Existentialism and psychoanalysis, etc. to Marxism, Structuralism, etc., and now, Feminism, Ecology, and Environment. From this perspective, literature is not solely an artistic pursuit but a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon, reflecting human life issues. This aspect becomes increasingly evident as achievements in sociology, anthropology, archaeology, and environmental studies continuously open up multiple interesting perspectives, correlations, and connections. Therefore, we propose Hypothesis H1 – Modern thinking decisively influences both the context of criticism and literature, specifically within two short stories – Thach Lam's *Under the Shadow of the Ylang-ylang Tree* and Chekhov's *A Little Joke*.

The short stories *Under the Shadow of the Ylang-ylang Tree*, and *A Little Joke* have been subject to various levels of scrutiny and introduction in scholarly discourse. However, there remains potential for further discussion, particularly from a comparative standpoint. *Under the Shadow of the Ylang-ylang Tree* has received considerable scholarly attention, primarily focusing on Thach Lam's non-plot elements and romantic sentiments. Nguyen Thi Xuan Quynh, in Thach Lam's prose from a cultural perspective (2016), analyzed the cultural perceptions of nature, highlighting "scenes of captivating beauty... constructing a serene and pristine fairytale world" (Nguyen, 2016). Nguyen Thi Do, in Autobiographical elements in the short stories Thach Lam and Thanh Tinh (2016), discussed the structural aspects of emotions and artistic language within this short story. Ho Thi Xuan Quynh, in The Vietnamese Characteristics in Thach Lam's Short Stories (2019), analyzed the character traits and qualities such as patriotism, and benevolence, which hold significance akin to elements found in lyrical poetry within Thach Lam's short stories. Notably, Do Thi Huong, in Imagining the Countryside in Literatures of the Eastern Lands: Juxtaposing "Dưới bóng hoàng lan" ("In the Ylang-Ylang Shade," 1942) by Thach Lam (Thach Lam, Vietnam) and "Антоновские яблоки" ("Antonov Apples", 1900) by Иван Бунин (Ivan Bunin, Russia) (2022) discussed the rural values and character emotions, a distinctively Eastern perspective between Vietnam and Eastern Europe. This study opens pathways for comparative analysis between Vietnamese and Eastern European works within this article. Regarding Chekhov's *A Little Joke*, Tran Thi Phuong Phuong in Reading Chekhov – A Multifaceted Reception (2009),

analyzed the inclinations towards empathizing with the male protagonist's feelings and questioned whether the girl simply ignored him, leaving his emotions unreciprocated. Do Hai Phong, in Textual Undercurrents in Short Stories and Medium Stories by Chekhov (2020), elucidated the undercurrents of romanticism, from distance to intimacy, from nostalgia to reality, connecting contrasting currents that produce a lingering, subtle essence. Apart from these studies, both short stories have been the subject of numerous brief articles, news snippets, and analytical pieces on themes such as characters, emotions, moods, and settings, serving the educational process for high school students through publications in widely circulated newspapers and forums in Vietnam. From these analyses, it is apparent that the emotions of involved parties—authors, characters, readers, critics—need to be differentiated and viewed in a spirit of equality. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is posited – the non-reciprocity of emotions requires attention in studying, critiquing, and teaching these two short stories.

In general, research on these works and trends to date has not paid attention to the comparative perspective, so the research results have not been able to generalize the synthesis, that is, the transformation between critical trends as well as the comparison of two works. Therefore, developing the idea of Cheryll Glotfelty, who adopted the three-stage development model of feminist criticism (femininity, feminism, women's literature) from Elaine Showalter and drew out three similar stages in ecological criticism, we both proposed hypothesis H3 - Awareness of the inevitable correlation between critical trends as well as between characters and context, ecology.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Qualitative analysis of Thach Lam and Chekhov: a methodological approach

With the nature of the research object, in this paper, the Cultural and Historical method is applied to provide a necessary external perspective. Emerging in the late 19th century, the cultural and historical method places literature in close relationship with the context through the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Lukács, Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, Terry Eagleton, etc. Under this perspective, literature is not only a product of individual creativity, but also a reflection of social life, the concepts, thoughts, and values of the time. From this, researchers can find the characteristics and trends of literary development in each period because the cultural and historical context plays an important role in the birth and development of literature, providing literature with materials, sources of inspiration, as well as ideological and value orientations. In this paper, the group of feminist, ecological, and landscape criticism methods and the group of two works observe the transformation of the cultural context and the thinking of the era.

Second, the structural method was born in the 1930s, initiated by researchers such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, etc., focusing on the analysis of linguistic and textual structures, viewing literary works as a language system with its own rules and operating principles. Structuralists have shown that a literary work is not a synthesis of discrete elements, but a unified structure in which the elements interact with each other according to certain



laws. Applying the structural method, the character system and space in *Under the Shadow of the Ylang-ylang Tree* and *A Little Joke* are approached in their totality and interaction to clarify the dehumanization towards sustainable development nature in modern critical research. In terms of its connection to the blurring of subjective subjectivity in modern research and literary creation, the structural method can be seen as a reaction to the previous trend of literary research with a heavy emphasis on subjective subjectivity. The structural method focuses on the objective analysis of literary works based on the general laws of language and text.

Third, the comparative method is a common scientific research method applied in many fields, including literary research

to explore the relationships between literary works, from which to find general laws of literature; highlight the unique features of each literary work in the comparison process; evaluate the value of a literary work in the context of other works. The above effects distinguish the comparative method and the comparison operation. In this paper, the comparative method helps to clarify the blurring of the individual in modern critical research, helping researchers to place literary works in a broader context, and to view the works in a more multi-dimensional and comprehensive way.

Based on the scientific hypothesis, professional methods, and research objectives presented above, the research model of this paper is proposed as follows:

Table 1. Research model

Hypothesis	Method	Content	Meaning
H1 Context	Culture history	Linked to contextual shifts and mindset	External aspect
H2 Emotions	Structure	Blurring the centrality of personal sensory perception	Internal aspect
H3 Transformation	Comparison	Awareness of essential interrelations	Relationship

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Feminist, ecological, and landscape criticism: transformations and interconnections

4.1.1. Feminism, ecology, and landscape are closely linked to the transformations of both context and modern thinking.

The new context demands and is transformed by fresh perspectives. Traditionally, there has been a prevalent criticism towards the two male protagonists in Thach Lam's *Under the Shadow of the Ylang-ylang Tree* and Chekhov's *A Little Joke* while praising the delicacy and courage of the two female characters. However, from a feminist standpoint within the context of cultural evolution and modern thinking, it can be observed that the romantic tragedy also originates from the perspectives of the two women. This is evident in the attitude of "with a searching look... To be or not to be. That is a question of self-respect, of honor, of life, and happiness" (Hung, 2022) – implying the expectation that women should be modest and passive in romantic affairs is a clear masculine pressure. Women are fully capable and nuanced enough to decide their romantic matters. This perspective is significant in seeking the forgotten traces of feminism in literary works. Indeed, the aspect of self-determination is somewhat more pronounced in Nadia (the Russian girl) compared to Nga (the Vietnamese girl). This self-determination creates a rather serene atmosphere in *Under the Shadow of the Ylang-ylang Tree*, while the space in *A Little Joke* is notably more dynamic. Unlike the tranquil garden and silent empty house in Thach Lam's short story, the space in Chekhov's short story swiftly and vigorously changes as the two characters slide on snow, "Everything around merged into a long streak rushing backward... In just another second, perhaps we would have died!" (Hung, 2022).

From a structural perspective, these two short stories are developed based on a similar framework, involving a simple storyline of meeting and parting ways. Notably, this fundamental plotline is executed through a contrast in settings

leading to changes in the characters' psychological states. The characters meet in familiar settings, such as a snowy hillside or a beloved house, and then separate amid scenes of changing settings, specifically transitioning to a city or a different province, symbolizing a significant, uncertain, and promising shift – "I'm preparing to leave for Petersburg - for a long time, perhaps for a lifetime" (Hung, 2022). "The next morning, Thanh had to go to the province" (Hung, 2022). This fundamental contrast reflects the process of societal modernization in late 19th to early 20th-century Russia and Vietnam. There seems to be a rupture in perception concerning the contextual transformation, forcing the characters to accept irreversible changes – "our snowy hill began to darken, gradually losing its sparkle" (Hung, 2022). This rupture, though subtle, significantly impacts the characters' souls, intertwining with their love and dreams of happiness. In the final passage of *A Little Joke*, the image of the male character peering through a gap in a "high fence with sharp spikes" (Hung, 2022) vividly portrays life's transformations. This transformation carries a poignant, melancholic tone as both writers depict scenes of parting at dawn (Thach Lam) and during springtime (Chekhov).

From a landscape perspective, both short stories place the characters' memories within a rural setting, contrasting it with an urban landscape. The sense of nostalgia is achieved through an apprehension of life's blend, where the future seems more ambiguous than an emphasis on environmental ecological ideas. It's important to note that "the conception of represented nature as an ideological screen becomes unfruitful if it is used to portray the green world as nothing more than the projective fantasy or social allegory" (Buell, 1995). This distinction delineates ecological criticism and landscape where romantic sentiments within rural scenes become multidimensional and multifaceted. The rural setting in the stories, much like pastoral poetry, evidently leans toward nature and the environment. However, when intertwined with lofty concepts of Eastern Confucianism or Romanticism indulging in nature for solitary self-perception,



it ceases to be ecological criticism but rather shifts to landscape criticism by infusing human perception into the environment. Consequently, it becomes a landscape criticism rather than an ecological one. Viewing from the landscape perspective, the artistic space in short stories requires special attention because "space is never empty, it always contains some sort of meaning" (Lefebvre, 2003). Therefore, within the space of childhood memories, of tranquil reminiscences, the character "Thanh gently closes the wooden door and steps inside" (Hung, 2022). The character's actions, states, and qualities are adjusted by the landscape; as the character crosses the threshold of the door, they enter into a kind of non-space – a time suspends, where an elderly woman and an old cat silently, gently wait for him after days spent away. However, this very quietness makes this familiar landscape value more unstable, uncertain, and transient. It is too beautiful and fragile to endure indefinitely. There, a gentle, simple yet straightforward young girl expresses her feelings: "These days when I came here to pick flowers, I missed you so much" (Hung, 2022). The nature of East Asian culture doesn't permit the characters to play with romantic affairs as in Chekhov's *A Little Joke*, yet constrained by non-personal sensation, Thanh "didn't know what to say; he just handed a branch of orchids to Nga to look for flowers" (Hung, 2022).

4.1.2. Feminism, ecology, and landscape diminish central personal sensibilities

The dimming of central personal sensibilities serves as a starting point for approaching the issues of Feminism, Ecology, and Landscape. Only when the central self diminishes pressure do the voices of feminism, ecology, and landscape stand a chance to be heard. From this perspective, Chekhov and Thach Lam bring forth contemplation on the tragedy of characters closely attached to an exaggerated sense of self. The larger the sense of self, the greater the loss; characters like I and Nadia (*A Little Joke*), Thanh and Nga (*Under the Shadow of the Ylang-ylang Tree*) thus find themselves without happiness. However, it's imperative to recognize that feminist criticism doesn't aim to assign blame to any gender but rather seeks equality. In this spirit, readers realize the irony that the higher the sense of self/gender, the higher the risk of losing happiness – the ultimate purpose of humanity. Consequently, one loses their way, direction, and sense of values. The male character in *A Little Joke* is not merely lacking in courage; he is uncertain about his feelings. This uncertainty leads this character, under psychological pressure and circumstances, to entangle himself in the painful game of unrequited love, ultimately leading to torment. Biographical criticism may seek psychological traces of the writer's youth to interpret, but ecological and landscape criticism might suggest to readers the scenario of losing oneself within landscapes and ecological settings. The tragic circumstances of these characters closely align with Aristotle's concept of Hamartia (a tragic flaw). When the original goal or intention is no longer present, the character is drawn into a tragic change, not through a decline in character but from an innocuous trait of the character. Both young men fail to reveal their feelings, despite caring for and loving the girl; however, their lack of resolution leads them to a lifelong tragic ending. Besides the prevalent portrayal of weak male archetypes within

East Asian cultures (Japan, South Korea, Vietnam), examining characters from the perspective of a lack of strong personal sensibility can readily transform the two short stories into a critique of female empowerment when placing them in the spectrum of character actions. The two young men undertake the primary functions of the storyline, involving returning, meeting, conversing, experiencing, and departing. Conversely, the two women are relegated to a passive position of waiting, yearning, disappointment, and allowing things to flow away. Not only is the image of women waiting for their spouses prevalent in East Asian cultures, but it is also a feature found in nearly all cultures' archetypal representations of women. It can be said that this is a universal human trait. From an artistic standpoint, male authors writing stories where the central characters are male and play the role of active protagonists is natural and widespread. Therefore, Feminism or Ecology, Landscape is not a fierce struggle for any particular side but rather a quest for harmony through diminishing the extremity of the central personal beliefs. Hence, when analyzing a notably male-dominated statement by Chekhov such as "The memory of sliding together on the snow, when the wind brought to her four words 'Nadia, I love you!' cannot be forgotten. For her, that became the happiest, most touching, and beautiful memory of her life..." (Bui Manh Hung, 2022), what concerns us is not the criticism of the male character or the author, but rather to acknowledgment of the masculine dominance, focusing more on the line of action and emotions of women.

Diminishing the central personal sensibility is the initial step for researchers to conditionally scrutinize the representation of the environment, landscape, and feminism towards sustainable development. In terms of historical development, this perspective plays a role similar to the initial phase of feminist, ecological, and landscape criticism when examining how these corresponding elements are depicted in literary works. However, surpassing mere description, modern critics seek to explore the governing principles of artistic thought, and the structure of the literary world, from a fresh perspective of the era. Consequently, the elements of ecology, landscape, and feminism discreetly reveal the tragedies of life, elucidating the distinct plot points between the two works. While *Under the Shadow of the Ylang-ylang Tree* constructs a rather subtly veiled tragedy with a vague storyline, *A Little Joke* displays a clear plot, rich in action, and more focused on characters. Yet, these are characters who have lost themselves – Chekhov's introspective character serves a similar function to Thach Lam's inward-facing character. They exist as shadows, obscured by the surrounding landscape. They are beautiful in their fragile, romantic, and brittle positions. This sense of fragmentation within individuals has an intimate connection with the perception of the times. It represents the first step towards the disintegration of contemporary values, landscapes, and environments. Due to the blurred central sensibility, Nadia must rely on nature to affirm love, while Thanh must place hope in the peacefulness of the homeland to construct dreams of happiness.

4.1.3. Feminist, ecology, and landscape criticism elicit awareness of inevitable interconnections

Essentially, the close interrelationship between humans



and their environment underlies the need for sustainable development. In the tranquil space of Thanh's homeland, the rural setting in *Under the Shadow of the Ylang-ylang Tree*, readers perceive an underlying sense of apprehension about the future, the inevitability that everything will eventually collapse—the grandmother will pass away, the young girl will marry, for sure. Nothing can remain constant indefinitely. This lies beyond the control of the characters; Thanh must go to the town; the protagonist in *A Little Joke* must head to Petersburg, leaving the countryside as the reality of melting snow prevails. Both rural spaces are in decline, emerging from the romanticized veil into harsh reality. Lawrence Buell, in *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, has highlighted the conceptualization of space, place, indigenous imaginaries, and globalization. This implies that ecological criticism concerns itself with the model of spatial transition from rural to urban, leading to the degradation of the rural ecological base – a novel phenomenon distinct from traditional ways of life. Thus, ecological criticism not only advocates for the environment but also governs and shapes diverse ecological perceptions within the broader interconnection.

The intertwining of feminist criticism with landscape analysis implies sustainable development of both society and nature. In scenarios where men assume the roles of traversing between urban and rural spaces, women do not partake. They are linked to specific spaces like the homestead, their old rural home. This space encapsulates emotions and a holistic sense rather than a rational analysis of the urban environment. Therefore, while the reader might reproach Chekhov's male character for engaging in a potentially hurtful prank, Thanh's action of holding hands and remaining silent also inflicts emotional harm on the young girl. Conversely, Nadia's association with the rural landscape reflects an intimate connection with nature. However, this doesn't discount the possibility of her deliberately testing herself multiple times to find answers within nature. Thus, ecological criticism aids the critic in understanding the correlation when individuals seek themselves within nature. In this correlation, it's crucial to note that the environment and landscape inherently possess feminine qualities of tranquility, vitality, and nurturing. These elements do not oppose but rather create an expansive environment for human existence, development, and self-awareness amidst inherent imperfections, leading to opportunities for improvement upon recognizing the tightly bound interconnections. Associating femininity with nature does not encompass a negative or passive evaluation. On the contrary, it emphasizes being "confined to secondary roles" (Bourdieu, 1998)... "Rather than being confined within family life, the issue for women is to transform that prison into a kingdom. Their approach to family serves as an argumentative proof that inherently defines their identity: they seize themselves while transforming into prey; they liberate themselves while abdicating; they aim to conquer the world while rejecting it." (Beauvoir, 1949). The correlation between these two trends has deepened the essence of femininity, creating a legendary feminine aura that men have perpetually failed to articulate.

The correlation between landscape and character in Thach

Lam's *Under the Shadow of the Ylang-ylang Tree* and Chekhov's *A Little Joke* reveals a dominant white hue within the landscapes. It is reminiscent and mournful. "The pretty girl in the white dress, dark hair falling over her small neck, next to the white-silver hair of the boy's grandma" (Hung, 2022); the snow-white color of slipping snow in the boy's and girl's memories. White is fragile, snow is ephemeral; memories can never be replicated. This landscape embodies a sense of conceptualization, akin to Deleuze's perspective: "territorializing (...) the effort to construct positions of social meaning and tradition..." (Russell, 2009). Expanding the correlation between these landscapes, Thach Lam's portrayal of the Vietnamese landscape in the short story is vividly depicted through the house structure, garden plot, and gate. These elements form a closed space that separates the scorching sun outside from the cool greenery within, with "the scent of fresh leaves wafting through the air" (Hung, 2022). This dreamlike space, entwined with familiar memories, is associated with trees, a symbol of ecology – "the tall body of the tree", and "the faint fragrance" (Hung, 2022). Thach Lam also incorporates the family meal into this landscape as a cultural symbol to showcase the inward and tranquil nature of Eastern spaces. In contrast, Chekhov's Western cultural space expands widely with snow-capped hills associated with the love of a couple – "One bright winter noon... The sky was cold, the cold was intense. Nadia wrapped her arms around me." (Hung, 2022). However, unlike the tranquil space in Thach Lam's work, Chekhov's space is uncertain and fleeting; it arrives forcefully in moments and dissipates, unable to be sustained. Within this context, individuals seek to do something special, like confessing love. Conversely, Thanh cannot do or say anything because he lives in a tranquil space – "Is there something sweet here that makes him ache?" (Hung, 2022).

4.2. Apply and discuss: reflections on critical interconnections in thach lam and chekhov's stories

The correlation and interconnection between critical trends, in reality, are not brand new. As discussed, Cheryl in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* interconnected three phases of feminism with ecology, here, we broaden it to landscape criticism; a generalization stemming from seeking expression, novel perspectives, and related symbolic contemplation. This also underscores the fact that from the development of social trends in literary criticism, as Glotfelty raises in ecological criticism – "you'll quickly recognize that race, class, and gender were hot topics at the end of the 20th century, but you probably won't wonder whether the earth's life-support system is in serious trouble or not" (Glotfelty, 1995). However, this correlation cannot be as definitively dictated as how masculine norms were once imposed upon feminism. The correlation and interconnection between critical movements, essentially, offer possibilities to be applied according to situations and objectives. This also serves as a reminder of limitations when this article discusses the relationship and correlation between two short stories. In the book *Linguistic and Literature 10* [Ngu van 10]. Vol 2 (Ket noi tri thuc voi cuoc song Textbook), two short stories are grouped under the category of The Narrator's Power including excerpts from *The Ruler Restores Authority* (from *Les Misérables* by



Victor Hugo), *Under the Shadow of the Ylang-ylang Tree* by Thach Lam, and *A Little Joke* by Anton Chekhov. Following this content, students are guided in the practice of intermingling and listing, writing literary evaluation essays focusing on themes and characters. This implies that the authors are concerned about the art of storytelling and use this as a link between the two short stories. However, the book *Linguistic and Literature 10* [Ngu van 10], Vol 2 (Creative Horizon Textbook) organizes a content group titled Nurturing Memories (poetry) – The First Leaf (Hoang Nhuan Cam), Westward (Quang Dung), *Under the Shadow of the Ylang-ylang Tree* (Thach Lam), New Sun (Luu Trong Lu). This signifies that the editorial team placed these short stories in the poetry group, emphasizing an interest in sentimentalism. Therefore, subsequently, students are guided to practice writing a discourse analysis to evaluate a sentimental work. In summary, the correlation and interconnection between trends and works are always propositions, not definite value systems.

The developmental process of critical thinking should be seen as a continuum, inheriting and building upon previous ideas rather than negating them, as is often applied in Western critical trends. Hence, the product of criticism is a part of the process; the resulting outcome may be extreme but will be revised, developed, and naturally held a certain significance. Reflecting on the approaches to male characters in *A Little Joke*, some criticize the young man for not expressing his feelings, or view him as excessively turning love into a joke; others more charitably blame his lack of courage and responsibility in love, etc. Examining the shifts in circumstances and ideas, it is important to note that this is a period when unrest permeates life and thought; a time of emergence of Existentialism, the Future, the Multifaceted, etc. All are meaningless and uncertain. This situation becomes increasingly dire, and people lack the authority to affirm anything, unable to guarantee their happiness. It's a loss, a rule that erases the central individual. The characters can't assure anything, so the best approach is to remain silent like Thanh in *Under the Shadow of the Ylang-ylang Tree* or turn it into a joke like the narrator in *A Little Joke*. Whether in critique or empathy, one must affirm that both short stories bring a nostalgic flavor of youth, sweet, innocent emotions, as fresh as a spring breeze, akin to a beautiful memory everyone wishes to cherish.

In seeking models and symbols, i.e., philosophical reflections on women's rights, ecology, and landscape, critics aim not to engage in theory but to contextualize criticism with real situations, intending to utilize criticism for social transformation. This has been extensively discussed. However, justifying extreme methods with good intentions is untenable when considering all natural images as ecological criticism, turning all spaces into landscape criticism, and assigning feminist significance to all female characters. It can be observed that during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the two short stories were examined with a clear inclination toward feminism, relatively conducive to analysis from a landscape perspective but only bearing the attitude of ecological criticism. This means there was no corresponding context for ecological criticism. Nonetheless, merely ecological sensibility is sufficient for us to perceive the open nature of

critical thinking; it serves as a tool to analyze the impersonal, delicate emotions, and the tragedies when individualism becomes extreme. However, this doesn't mean abandoning humanity. Ecological criticism is a way for humans to impose their perspective on nature objectively from the outside and to emphasize symbolic filters – "But ideology is 'after all only one of several filters through which literature shifts the environments it purports to represent'" (Buell, 1995). Not only in ecological criticism but in any critical trend, absolute objectivity cannot be demanded; it must be symbiotic. Human emotions remain important as long as they harmonize gently, avoiding extremity and exaggeration. Thus, only in this way do social literary criticism trends like feminism, ecology, and landscape retain the essence of artistic literature.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study has elucidated the impersonal nature of modern literary criticism through feminist, ecological, and landscape criticism, analyzed via *Under the Shadow of the Ylang-Ylang Tree* by Thach Lam and *A Little Joke* by Anton Chekhov. Three characteristics emerged: association with contextual and mental transitions (Hypothesis 1), blurring of central personal perception (Hypothesis 2), and awareness of essential interconnections (Hypothesis 3). Hypothesis 1 underscores how modern thinking shapes critical contexts, offering methods to enrich life experiences. Hypothesis 2 highlights the regression of personal emotions, prompting introspection, while Hypothesis 3 emphasizes that critical trends are perspectives requiring dynamic integration rather than mechanical amalgamation.

The findings advocate for integrating literary criticism into Vietnam's educational reforms, particularly the 2018 curriculum, to foster cultural awareness and sustainable rural development. Policymakers should promote interdisciplinary approaches in literature education, linking feminist, ecological, and landscape perspectives to cultivate social and environmental consciousness among students.

Educators should incorporate these critical trends into teaching materials for *Linguistic and Literature 10* to enhance students' understanding of dehumanization and its societal implications. For example, thematic analyses of Thach Lam and Chekhov's works can be used to develop discourse analysis skills, encouraging students to explore nostalgia and human-nature relationships. Researchers are encouraged to apply these frameworks to other Eastern literary works, drawing parallels with Buddhist philosophy to enrich cultural studies.

This research is limited to feminist, ecological, and landscape criticism, omitting other trends like post-colonialism or post-structuralism. The focus on two short stories restricts generalizability, and the qualitative approach lacks quantitative validation. Future studies could expand to include diverse texts and methodologies to address these gaps.

In conclusion, while dehumanization in modern criticism reflects a shift toward broader perspectives, its application in education and research should remain flexible, avoiding rigid patterns. The trend's prevalence in Eastern philosophies, such as Buddhism, suggests a promising direction for future exploration, enhancing the role of literature in sustainable cultural and social development.



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