

CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE ESSENTIAL LEITMOTIF OF GRIEF IN *THE TALE OF KIEU*

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Abstract

The Tale of Kieu by Nguyen Du is today proclaimed to be the national epic of Vietnam. The present article is a brief critical reading of this epic poem from the point of view of grief as a recurring theme in it. The notable instances of the expression of grief in the epic are commented upon. An attempt to explicate the profundity of this emotion in by Nguyen Du's poem has been made. The Tale of Kieu is finally seen as a text comprising of universality and also a significant part of the World Literature tradition.

Keywords: *Epic, World Literature, Grief, Suffering, Loss.*

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CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE ESSENTIAL LEITMOTIF OF GRIEF IN *THE TALE OF KIEU*

- Mahesh Madhukar Nivargi

The Tale of Kieu is regarded to be Vietnam's national epic and hold a prestigious position in the tradition of Vietnamese literature. Written by Nguyen Du (1765-1820), the plot has been taken from the 17th century Chinese novel titled *Jin Yun Qiao*. In Nguyen Du's hands, the poetic rendering of this tale has been transformed into a timeless classic in which the entire society could see its reflection. The narrative poem has been widely translated and is popular with the readers worldwide. It has become a landmark in the tradition of World Literature today. As a classic it gives the readers immutable examples which can be verified in the readers' own diverse experiences. The omniscient narration marked by a sentimental style, has the necessary objectivity expected from a national epic and it succeeds in offering the addressees the image of a positive truth. The foregoing discussion concentrates on the expression of grief as a major thematic element in Nguyen Du's epic tale.

The tale is set in 16th century China. The following synopsis is based on *The Tale of Kieu, A Bilingual Edition of Truyen Kieu*, translated and annotated by Huynh Sanh Thong (with a Historical Essay by Alexander B. Woodside, published in 1983- the quoted lines refer to this text). Kieu is the daughter of Vuong, a poor mandarin. Kieu's siblings are her sister Van and brother Vuong. Kieu possesses exquisite beauty, is a fine painter, singer and poet. Right in the opening section the reader is informed: "She had composed a song called Cruel Fate, To mourn all women in soul-rending strains" (Lines 33-34). Before the actual action of the narrative starts Kieu is described to have come across the grave of one lady named Dam Tien, a beautiful woman waiting to get married but who had died on the very same day before her husband -to-be arrived at her house. On hearing the pitiful tale, tears burst forth and she

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complains: “ We all partake of woe, our common fate. Creator, why are you so mean and cruel, blighting green days and fading rose-fresh cheeks?”(Lines 84-86). Her brother laughs at her for shedding tears on a long-dead stranger, but Kieu says that since the beginning, women have been cursed by a cruel fate and she saw her own tomb in Dam Tien’s tomb. She feels that she has found a mate in Dam Tien and wishes to meet her ghost. A tornado swirled up and shook the tree, tearing off its leaves, producing a strange perfume. On the same spot Kieu also meets her lover –to-be Trong Kim, a landowner’s son and her brother’s classmate. She wonders if the fate had dreamed up some plan for her and Quan. That night she has a vision of Dam Tien who was destined to die young. She somehow has a premonition that her own fate shall be cruel. She shudders at the prospects of the unknown future and spend the night in sadness-“ The tilting moonlight lay aslant the porch-she stayed alone, alone with her own grief”(Lines 241-241). Thus from the beginning of the narrative, the emotion of grief is predominant in the poem.

In the episode of her romance with Kim, she tells him that a seer had observed her face and had predicted, “All charms and splendors from within burst forth: she’ll live an artist’s life, a life of woe”(Lines 415-416). The prediction is proved to be true; Kim has to leave on a journey urgently; Kieu has to sell herself in marriage to a stranger in order to pay her father’s debts. Having unable to unite with Kim, she decides that, “ No matter what fate deals me, I will grieve for him who’s steadfast kept the vow he swore”(Lines 697-698). The first misfortune leads to the second- Ma is a pimp who sells her to a brothel. Forced into prostitution, Kieu tries to kill herself. Dame Tu, the brothel keeper saves her, lets her live freely for some days. Then secretly employs a rogue who pretends to be a man named So Khanh; he tells her that he had fallen in love with Kieu’s silhouette when he saw it framed against the curtain. He praises her beauty and tells people that he wanted to rescue Kieu. They secretly escape on horsebacks but at dawn, they are ambushed and surrounded. Dame Tu drags her back to the brothel. She thrashes her mercilessly with a cane saying that Kieu has broken her promise. Kieu begs for mercy and says that she has nothing left to wish for. Kieu accepts her fate as a prostitute ‘resigning to fate: “I am the toy of winds and storms....

If I must give my body, so be it” (Lines 1203-1204). Kieu has started her life of sorrow. She cannot find joy in anything now: “But her own gloom would tinge each sight or scene: when you feel grief, can what you see give you joy?”(Lines 1243-1244). Remembering her family and her lover she starts living in misery.

Kieu’s fortune changes when a new customer Mr. Thuc, falls in love with her, pays for her freedom and marries her. Kieu marries her on the condition that he will reveal this fact to the wife he already has. He has come from another province and she sends him back to his wife after living together for a year in happiness. But Kieu’s happiness does not last long. Thuc’s wife has already come to know about the marriage and abducts Kieu while Thuc has visited and left her (he doesn’t have the courage to reveal the truth to his wife. Thuc’s wife Hoan is the daughter of the Prime Minister of the province. Bent upon revenge, she enslaves Kieu and subjects her to torture and insults. When Thuc goes to Kieu’s house, it has been burnt and he is led to believe that she is dead. As he comes back to his wife, Hoan presents her new slave in his service; thus putting Thuc in a difficult position. He cannot speak the truth; neither can he do anything for Kieu. She further asks him to speak to Kieu and inquire about her condition. Unable to reveal truth, Thuc somehow manages to place Kieu in a Buddhist temple’s service. She has some solace there, but by now she has become accustomed to the uncertainties of life, she expresses this when Thuc comes to meet at the temple secretly : “It is my part to play a drop of rain that falls at random as spectators watch” (Lines 1961- 1962). Hoan has been observing the meeting secretly and Kieu comes to know about this. Kieu decides to act; escapes the temple carrying some valuables from the altar, and takes refuge at another temple.

Giac Duyen, the Superior nun of the temple gives shelter to Kieu. Initially she is unable to tell her true story but later, a pilgrim recognizes two pieces on the altar and tells Giac Duyen that they resemble the pieces stolen from the temple at Lady Hoan’s estate. Giac Duyen asks Kieu to explain her story once again. This time Kieu tells the truth. Giac Duyen then sends for a local family named Bac and asks them to give shelter to this unfortunate girl.

They agreed and Kieu started living at their house. Mrs. Bac proves to be similar to Mrs. Tu. Kieu is sold again into a brothel. She resigns herself to fate and starts spending her days in grief once again. But fortune turns again and she is rescued by Tu Hai, a rebel leader from Guangdong. He marries her and there is happiness once again. Kieu, with the power and position as Tu's wife, brings all her culprits to justice and rewards her friends. Hoan, Dame Tu, the Bacs, Ma are punished; Thuc and Giac Duyen are rewarded.

Kieu tale of sorrow takes another turn when she listens to the new governor named Hu Zongxian and convinces Tu to surrender to the emperor's forces. She hopes that Tu Hai would be made a prince at the court and then she would be able to lead a peaceful life. But it turns out to be a trap and Tu is slayed. This is perhaps the most tragic scenes of the poem where Kieu, on seeing Tu's death, feels like giving up her life: "How can I bear to look you in the face? I'd rather die with you on this same day" (Lines 2531-2532). Now in Hu Zongxian's custody, she is a slave again. He marries her off to a tribal chief." Willow all withered, peach blossom all seared, her freshness was all gone, not one spark left" (Lines 2603-2604). Kieu throws herself in the river- "Pity a life, an all too human life, yet somehow cursed, alas with charms and gifts. She wandered from one sorrow to the next-what would be left of her, at journey's end?" (Lines 2640-2644). The question posed by the narrator is answered when she is again saved by the kind nun and finally reunited with her family. Her lover Kim has become a high ranking government official now and has not given up the quest for her. Though Kieu's sister has been married to her as was her wish when she had parted from them, he has not given up hope. When the family is reunited, Kieu has to marry Kim to honour her father's wish. But now she considers herself unfit to lead a married life with Kim. She has suffered torments fit for hell. She loathes physical union now and tells Kim that they should not share the same bed, "When you make love and I feel only shame, then rank betray's better than such love" (Lines3158-3159). The narration, in the final section says that, "Our karma we must carry as our lot-let's stop decrying Heaven's whims and quirks. Inside ourselves there lies the root of good: the heart outweighs all talents on this earth"(Lines 3249-3252).

As it can be seen from the brief paraphrase and the selected lines, the epic portrays the turbulence in the life of its protagonist. It is an individual text about concerns in personal life and also a universal statement about the all-pervading human sorrow. The epic poem reflects deep personal anguish and distress in statements like: “What hope is left to cherish after this? A life that’s come to this is life no more” (Lines 855-856). Kieu’s speeches can also be seen as intense statements about the nature of human suffering. On the surface the poem appears to be rendering the tale of a person’s life willed by Fate. Beneath this objective level represented by Fate, we can see the action of the protagonist Kieu moving subjectively in opposition to Fate. The epic narrative of Kieu’s life story gives the reader an experience of participation in her suffering. The language of this epic is able to unite the objectivity of beholding the events from vantage point of great providential cycle of human fate with the tragic subjectivity of the protagonist’s position. Finally, the protagonist has to absorb the trauma of what she has undergone, in order to attain eventual freedom. Kieu’s sorrowful song succeeds in conveying the diverse tinges of grief emanating from her unrequited love, unfulfilled desires; subjection to cruelty, slavery and shame. However, her triumph lies in non-compromise of her ideals as a human being; she readily pays the grievous cost of her self-affirmation. Kieu’s utterances expressing deep sorrow at different junctures of her life actually provide a space to her in which both grief and the recovery from it are made possible. For the poem, these utterances offer a textual space where the grief is voiced; a form is given to the feeling of deep sorrow. By virtue of his aesthetic and linguistic distance, the poet is able to contend with his protagonist’s grief in an artistic manner.

The epic poem, however, does not present a negative interpretation of human sorrow; finally negates the feeling of futility. With the essentially Buddhist way of looking at grief as a temporary phenomenon, it shows the protagonist emerging from grief to wisdom and growing to a sense of non-attachment. Alexander B. Woodside, in his historical essay included with Huynh Sanh Thong’s translation, comments, “Perhaps the real meaning of Nguyen Du (at least on one level) is that passion does not, by itself, bring punishment in the next world but must, to be moral, carry important redemptive, self-denying obligations with

it in this world” (xvii). The translator Huynh Sanh Thong sees this epic as a representation of Vietnam itself and says that the story “...conveys a message of hope for both the individual and the country: if, like Kieu, the Vietnamese accept and endure with fortitude whatever happens to them, someday they will have paid the cost of their evil karma and will achieve both personal and national salvation”(xl). Another recent translator Vladislav Zhukov, in the preface to his 2004 text, points out that “...beyond the philosophic mullings on the exhilarations and – unfortunately more so – the sorrows of the temporal experience that it represents to its own country, *Kim Van Kieu* deals with identifiable and acceptable universalities”(viii).

The works accepted in the canon of World Literature are those that transcend the national barriers. *The Tale of Kieu* is attracting academic interest in the contemporary times due to its universality and essential modernity. It has become a text to represent human trauma, loss and the ensuing grief. It also gives an indication of the possibility for journeying towards meaning through grief. In an age where uncertainties pervade the human life; unseen and unexpected loss brings profound grief to individuals and culture groups, texts like *The Tale of Kieu* induce deep meaning by their addition to the literary tradition.

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