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## **Buddhist Criticism as a New Literary Criticism Theory and Its Applicability in Contemporary Literary Studies: The Case Study of Short Story Tram Ngan in Comparison with the Ullambaṇa Sūtra**

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Original Research Articles

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# **Buddhist Criticism as a New Literary Criticism Theory and Its Applicability in Contemporary Literary Studies – The Case Study of Short Story Tram Ngan in Comparison with the Ullambaṇa Sūtra**

**Nguyen Thanh Trung<sup>1\*</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This research addresses the limited scope of contemporary Vietnamese literary studies conducted through the framework of Buddhist criticism. The study aims to comparatively analyze the short story Tram Ngan by Ngo Tu Ngan winner of the runner-up prize in the 2022–2024 Literary Newspaper Short Story Competition and the Ullambana Sūtra (Vu Lan Sūtra), in order to demonstrate the interpretive potential of Buddhist critical approaches when applied to both modern literary texts and classical Buddhist scriptures. Employing qualitative research methodology, the study is based on textual analysis and comparative interpretation. The research population consists of literary and religious texts, with the selected sample comprising Tram Ngan as a representative of contemporary Vietnamese short fiction and the Ullambana Sūtra as a foundational Mahayana Buddhist scripture. The primary research tools include close reading, thematic analysis, and Buddhist critical theory, particularly concepts related to suffering (*dukkha*), compassion (*karuṇā*), transcendence, and filial piety (*filial gratitude*). Data are analyzed through interpretive comparison to identify shared and divergent thematic structures and spiritual meanings.

The findings reveal that both Tram Ngan and the Ullambana Sūtra prominently reflect three shared characteristics: tragedy rooted in human suffering, compassion arising from empathetic understanding, and transcendence through moral and spiritual awakening. Notably, the Ullambana Sūtra introduces the explicit dimension of filial piety, which, when applied as an interpretive lens, offers new insights into Tram Ngan, particularly in terms of ethical responsibility and emotional redemption. This study affirms that Buddhist criticism is a valuable and effective

approach for illuminating the deeper humanistic and spiritual dimensions of contemporary literature while simultaneously recontextualizing classical Buddhist texts. Ultimately, the research highlights the enduring relevance of Buddhist teachings in interpreting modern human experiences and reinforces the integrative relationship between literature and spiritual philosophy.

**Keywords:** Buddhist criticism; Tram Ngan; Ullambana Sutra

## Introduction

This study seeks to elucidate the background, significance, and scholarly necessity of examining the intersection between literature and Buddhist philosophy, a field that while explored intermittently has yet to be systematically synthesised within Vietnamese literary studies. In literary criticism broadly, and Vietnamese studies in particular, the engagement between narrative art and Buddhist thought emerged relatively early and has yielded valuable interpretive insights. However, these efforts remain fragmented, lacking a cohesive theoretical framework capable of integrating modern literary texts with canonical Buddhist scriptures.

Against this backdrop, the short story *Tram Ngan* by Ngo Tu Ngan, recently published in *Van Nghe* (2024), has drawn notable critical and public attention. The work portrays themes of abandonment, itinerant existence, existential suffering, and the protagonist's yearning for reunion, thereby constructing a poignant tableau of human life that resonates strongly with core Buddhist principles such as impermanence (*anicca*), karmic causality (*karma*), suffering (*dukkha*), and the aspiration toward liberation (*mokṣa*). These thematic elements invite interpretation through a Buddhist-critical lens, positioning *Tram Ngan* as a contemporary literary manifestation of enduring spiritual concerns.

In contrast yet in dialogue with this modern narrative, the *Ullambaṇa Sūtra*—a foundational Mahāyāna Buddhist text—foregrounds filial piety (*hiếu đạo*) as a central ethical and soteriological principle. The *sūtra* emphasises liberation through compassion, meritorious action, and acts of gratitude toward one's parents, thereby transforming personal suffering into wisdom, loving-kindness (*mettā*), and spiritual awakening. Although differing in genre, historical context, and narrative strategy, both *Tram Ngan* and the *Ullambaṇa Sūtra* articulate the transformative power of Buddhist doctrine in reconfiguring human suffering into moral insight and compassionate practice. The contemporary relevance of *Tram Ngan* is further underscored by the controversy surrounding the 2022–2024 *Van Nghe* Short Story Competition, in which no first prize was awarded and *Tram Ngan* received a second prize. This outcome sparked significant public debate regarding aesthetic standards, thematic depth, and evaluative criteria in contemporary Vietnamese literature. Such controversy highlights an urgent need for rigorous, systematic, and theoretically grounded scholarly assessment of the work's literary and philosophical value. Within this context, the present study proposes a comparative analysis of *Tram Ngan* and the *Ullambaṇa Sūtra* through the framework of Buddhist criticism. By juxtaposing a modern Vietnamese short story with a canonical Buddhist scripture, the research aims to

expand the methodological scope of Buddhist literary criticism while reaffirming the enduring societal values of filial piety, compassion, and transcendence. Moreover, the study aspires to contribute to ethical and educational discourse by fostering awareness of virtuous and compassionate living, particularly among younger generations navigating contemporary social and existential challenges.

The research object is the interplay between Buddhist philosophy and narrative art as manifested in *Tram Ngan* and the *Ullambaṇa Sūtra*. The scope of the study is delimited to: (1) *Tram Ngan* by Ngo Tu Ngan (Van Nghe, 2024), situated within the context of Southern Vietnamese literature from 2000 to the present; and (2) the *Ullambaṇa Sūtra*, examined within the broader corpus of classical Buddhist scriptures. The study aims to elucidate representations of impermanence, karma, compassion, filial piety, and transcendence in both texts, as well as to identify points of convergence and divergence between modern literary expression and Buddhist canonical thought. To achieve these aims, the research undertakes four specific tasks: (1) systematising the theoretical foundations of Buddhist literary criticism; (2) analysing *Tram Ngan* and the *Ullambaṇa Sūtra* through a Buddhist-critical lens; (3) identifying three core shared characteristics between the two texts while highlighting the distinctive emphasis on filial piety in the *Ullambaṇa Sūtra* and refining the Buddhist-critical analytical framework; and (4) assessing the contributions of both texts to contemporary literature and spiritual life. Through these objectives, the study seeks to offer theoretical, practical, and educational contributions to Vietnamese literary criticism and Buddhist humanities scholarship.

## **Objective**

1. To systematise the theoretical foundations of Buddhist literary criticism, with particular attention to its applicability to modern Vietnamese literature in dialogue with canonical Buddhist texts.

2. To analyse *Tram Ngan* through a Buddhist-critical lens, identifying the narrative manifestations of impermanence, karmic causality, existential suffering, compassion, and the aspiration toward liberation.

3. To examine the *Ullambaṇa Sūtra* as a doctrinal and narrative text, focusing on its ethical and soteriological emphases, especially filial piety, compassion, and merit-making as pathways to liberation.

## **Literature Review**

### **Buddhist Criticism in Literary Studies**

Buddhist criticism within literary studies constitutes a diverse and historically marginal yet increasingly systematised interpretive approach that integrates Buddhist philosophy with literary analysis. Early scholarly contributions, such as Skilton (2000), emphasise the symbolic and

discursive dimensions of Buddhist canonical literature, laying a foundation for understanding Buddhist texts as sophisticated literary constructions rather than solely religious scriptures. Building upon this groundwork, Williams (2009) and Lopez (2013) expand the scope of inquiry by examining Mahāyāna philosophy and aesthetics as they manifest in literary discourse, particularly through concepts such as emptiness (*śūnyatā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and non-duality. In the Vietnamese academic context, Nguyễn Thành Trung’s recent body of work represents a pioneering effort to systematise Buddhist criticism as a literary methodology. His studies—*A Critical Metaphysics Approach in Jean-Paul Sartre’s Nausea toward Vietnamese Spirituality in Yogācāra Vijñaptimātratā and Existentialist Literature* (2021), *Thái Nguyên Culture and the Novel The Chancellor Lưu Nhân Chú Viewed from the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* (2022), and *Reception of Võ Khắc Nghiêm’s Novel Thi Lộ Chính Danh from the Perspective of the Śrīmālādevī Siṃhanāda Sūtra and Quảng Ninh Provincial Culture* (2023)—apply Buddhist philosophical frameworks to both Western and Vietnamese literary texts. These works demonstrate the analytical efficacy of Buddhist criticism in elucidating the interrelationship between literary form, aesthetic expression, and spiritual ideology. Collectively, these studies conceptualise Buddhist criticism not merely as a form of religious exegesis but as an emergent interpretive paradigm in literary studies. As Nguyễn Thành Trung argues, Buddhist criticism examines how Buddhist thought is transformed into literary expression, offering an alternative trajectory for literary theory—one historically present yet insufficiently prioritised and theoretically consolidated.

### **Studies on the Ullambaṇa Sūtra and Buddhist Filial Piety**

Scholarship on the Ullambaṇa Sūtra and the concept of Buddhist filial piety possesses a long-standing tradition in East Asian studies, particularly in relation to the seventh lunar month and the Ullambaṇa ritual cycle. Existing research has approached the text from religious, ritualistic, and socio-cultural perspectives. Berezkin (2016, 2020, 2021) foregrounds the Ullambaṇa Sūtra within the “scripture-telling” tradition, highlighting its narrative strategies and ethical emphasis on filial devotion. Through comparative analyses of tales such as *Lady Bright Eyes* and *Jin Qiaojue of Changshu*, Berezkin demonstrates how incarnations of Kṣitigarbha (*Dizang*) Bodhisattva embody filial piety as a central Buddhist virtue. Similarly, Gildow (2014) elucidates the integration of the Ullambaṇa Sūtra into Chinese social and moral values, arguing that the text functions as a unique religio-cultural symbol. It preserves Buddhist transcendental aspirations while simultaneously reaffirming filial piety as a foundational ethical principle within Buddhist praxis. These studies collectively position the Ullambaṇa Sūtra as a crucial nexus where soteriology, ethics, and cultural adaptation converge.

## Contemporary Vietnamese Literature and Tram Ngân

Within Vietnamese contemporary literary history, scholars have observed a significant transition from epic–collective narratives toward individualised and introspective modes of expression (Nguyễn Thế Kỷ, 2020). This shift reflects broader socio-cultural transformations and a reorientation toward private consciousness, trauma, and ethical ambiguity. Thai Phan Vang Anh (2024) further highlights the role of female authors in constructing narrative spaces characterised by fragmentation, multiplicity, and layered meanings. Against this backdrop, Tram Ngân (Ngô Tú Ngân) emerges as a notable figure in contemporary Vietnamese literature. Her short story *Trầm Ngân* was awarded the second prize (with no first prize awarded) in the 2022–2024 Văn Nghệ competition, announced on 24 July in Hanoi. The award sparked intense debate within literary circles, as reflected in media responses such as “Award-Winning Văn Nghệ Short Story Sparks Controversy, Criticised by Many Writers” (Thiên An, 2025) and “Debate Surrounding Văn Nghệ Prize-Winning Short Story” (Phương Linh, 2025). These polarized reactions underscore the text’s aesthetic and ideological complexity. Viewed from a multilayered, female-authored perspective, *Trầm Ngân* should not be regarded as an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it represents a pivotal node in contemporary Vietnamese literary innovation, one that resonates with enduring Buddhist traditions and ethical concerns, thereby warranting sustained scholarly examination.

## Materials and Methods

Buddhist criticism approaches texts as literary–Buddhist discourse, illuminated through impermanence, karma, compassion, and transcendence; defined as “employing Buddhist thought and artistry to investigate and resolve literary-artistic issues” (Nguyễn Thành Trung, 2022, 1306). In *Reception of Vo Khắc Nghiem’s Novel Thị Lo Chinh Danh from the Perspective of the Śrīmālādevī Siṃhanāda Sūtra and Quảng Ninh Culture* (2023), the author clarifies the method’s scope beyond literary problem-solving to becoming Buddhist studies’ object. Specifically, comparing literature and Buddhist studies manifests bodhisattva spirit through adept application of both worldly and Buddhist teachings. Accordingly, three specialised methods are deployed: narratology, poetics, and socio-cultural analysis.

Narratology, initiated by Tzvetan Todorov in *Grammaire du Décaméron* (1969) upon Vladimir Propp’s morphology (*Morphology of the Folktale*, 1928) and Ferdinand de Saussure’s structural linguistics (*Course in General Linguistics*, 1959), seeks narrative grammar – laws governing plot, character, time, perspective, and voice. Its strength lies in scientific structural analysis, facilitating comparison and interdisciplinary application in literature, film, and media. However, formalist emphasis risks historical–social contextual neglect and reductive treatment of textual polysemy and openness (Bal, 2009; Herman, 2011; Todorov, 1969). Here, narratology analyses itinerant plot structure, viewpoint, and character tragedy.

Poetics originates in Aristotle’s *Poetics* – the first systematised literary theory centring tragedy, epic, and catharsis. For Aristotle, poetry is regulated mimesis wherein plot structure and aesthetic effect determine artistic value. The method’s strength is foundational tools for Western literary criticism, establishing genre standards and linking art to ethical – humanistic values. Yet its scope is narrow, primarily Greco-tragic, rendering Aristotelian universals challenging for modern or non-Western literatures. Nonetheless, poetics remains vital for formal and aesthetic inquiry (Aristotle, 1996; Else, 1957; Halliwell, 1986). Poetics examines symbols (boat, river, dream), tone, and technique in the short story.

Socio-cultural analysis developed from Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society* (1958) and *Marxism and Literature* (1977), integrated with Stuart Hall’s 1970s – 1990s popular culture and media theories. Literature is inseparable from cultural production/consumption contexts, reflecting and participating in power, ideology, class, gender, and race relations. Advantages include expanded analytical frames decoding socio-historical complexity and interdisciplinary foundations across literature, media, and politics. Limitations involve aesthetic dilution into sociological interpretation, risking extremism and subjectivity (Williams, 1958, 1977; Hall, 1997; Storey, 2015). This method situates *Tram Ngan* within Southern Vietnam, clarifying social origins of suffering. The research model is summarised below:

**Table 1** Research Model

Research Hypothesis	Method	Object Characteristics	Research Aspect	Theoretical Significance
Maternal tragedy	Narratology	Tragedy	Plot, viewpoint	Emphasises impermanence–karma
Compassionate power	Poetics	Compassion	Symbols, tone	Affirms soteriological dimension
Transcendence orientation	Socio-cultural	Transcendence	Artistic theme	Links society to Buddhist liberation

## Results

### Tragedy and the Maternal Quest

Both tragedies pivoted maternal imagery and filial anguish. Maudgalyāyana’s tragedy is not personal suffering but agonised compassion witnessing his mother’s torment in the hungry-ghost realm, emaciated and parched. This pain intensifies given his supreme supernatural powers yet inability to save her: “Seeing his departed mother reborn as a hungry ghost, skeletal and famished, Maudgalyāyana grieved deeply, knowing her hunger and thirst yet bound by profound

filial love” (Thich Hue Dang, 2017, 7). *Tram Ngan*’s tragedy is maternal absence a lifelong ontological craving; the protagonist endures solitude, familial rejection, and an overriding desire to find his mother, searching from youth to old age despite terminal illness. Through filial quests, both works exalt profound filial piety, culturally resonant and enduring in East Asia.

Second, both depict individual effort’s futility against formidable barriers. Maudgalyāyana confronts karma; despite six supernatural powers enabling universal search, he cannot overcome entrenched retribution. Offered rice turns to burning coals; the Buddha declares even celestial kings’ aid insufficient. *Tram Ngan* faces fate and social circumstance; an ordinary, disadvantaged man battered since birth. Decades of wandering yield no maternal trace: “He had no home, no roots. He was an unacknowledged child. Often, he wished he had never been born. Life was riddled with questions a twenty-something man could not answer” (Ngo Tu Ngan, 2024). Barriers include human transience, informational voids, and mortal brevity compounded by illness. From a Buddhist lens, both tragedies stem from maternal karma—greed or abandonment. Causality renders filial ameliorative efforts futile. Thus, filial piety is a worldly truth; karma, a transcendent truth governing plot and incident.

Finally, both seek supramundane, spiritual resolutions. Maudgalyāyana relies on the Sangha’s collective merit on the fifteenth of the seventh month, enabling maternal karmic transformation and escape from ghostly rebirth: “Alone, none can intercede. Though your filial devotion resounds to the ninth heaven, reaching gods, demons, and four heavenly kings, even the six realms’ practitioners cannot save your mother. Only the ten directions’ monastic power can” (Thich Hue Dang, 2017, 8). Conversely, *Tram Ngan* achieves reunion only in death, unattainable in life, failing earthly search. Reunion and liberation arrive aboard the boat of Impermanence at life’s final dock: “Legs weary, eyes dim, he stepped toward the yellow light, boarding the small boat recognising the ferryman as the oft-mentioned Yin and Yang of Impermanence. He had reached life’s ultimate shore” (Ngo Tu Ngan, 2024). In the beyond, he meets his mother, learning she too searched for lifelong. Death fulfils lifelong yearning. Tragic dimensions are tabulated below:

**Table 2** Comparative Maternal Tragedy and Quest

Aspect	<i>Tram Ngan</i> (Ngo Tu Ngan)	<i>Ullambaṇa Sūtra</i>
Central figure	Abandoned child, itinerant, maternal-deprived	Maudgalyāyana—arhat powerless before maternal karma
Core tragedy	Maternal reunion yearning, manifest in dreams	Witnessing maternal hellish torment, exceeding personal capacity
Message	Human suffering tied to maternal absence	Karma renders filial devotion insufficient for maternal salvation

In sum, one tragedy pits a saint against karma, the other a mortal against fate; both sacralise maternal bonds, filial anguish, and inability to fulfil piety, ultimately seeking supra-personal liberation. However, *Tram Ngan* reflects social tragedy versus *Ullambaṇa*'s moral tragedy. Consequently, internal moral tragedy is more resolvable than external social tragedy beyond individual agency, especially for socially marginal subjects. This embodies Buddhist humanism charting existential escape within saṃsāra; realism employs illusion and dream for resolution.

### Compassion's Power and Soteriological Dimension

First, both texts affirm compassion as inaugural and foundational soteriological motive. In *Ullambaṇa*, Maudgalyāyana's maternal rescue springs from filial piety and profound compassion. Upon attaining six powers, he first employs clairvoyance to locate his mother in gratitude. Witnessing her ghostly starvation, he grieves, and exhausts rescue means. His piety "resounds to the ninth heaven": "Before Buddha's altar or stūpa, monastics chant for fulfilment, then partake of lunch. Upon the Buddha's pronouncement, Maudgalyāyana and bodhisattva-monastics rejoice; Maudgalyāyana ceases weeping" (Thich Hue Dang, 2017, 11). In *Tram Ngan*, lifelong maternal devotion transmutes into troupe camaraderie. All are drifting souls sustained by mutual compassion. This shields the protagonist in later years, transcending familial rejection. Compassion connects, liberates suffering, and seeks happiness; though *Tram Ngan* dies tragically, Buddhist-critically, his compassion radiates transformative depth – likely a prize factor.

Second, salvation derives from communal, not solitary, power. *Ullambaṇa* underscores individual supernormal incapacity against heavy karma. The Buddha teaches that despite Maudgalyāyana's miraculous powers and celestial aid; solitary rescue is impossible. Only the Sangha's collective ethical cultivation suffices. *Tram Ngan* cannot self-extricate from fate. Salvation arrives via troupe compassion. They nurse his illness, worry, and escort his remains home for final propriety. The troupe – as community – grants consolation unattainable individually: "The troupe leader said, 'I'll take you home, perform in the village too. Long journey – halfway we'll stop, perform a few days, then continue, alright?' Tram Ngan nodded. The troupe joyfully escorted him home, farewell kin with full propriety. Seeing universal care and encouragement, Tram Ngan felt all ailments dissolved; in this life, such love and support sufficed for fulfilment" (Ngo Tu Ngan, 2024). Yet communal nature differentiates soteriological efficacy. The Sangha's supernatural morality redirects merit, liberating Maudgalyāyana's mother via self-transformation from evil realms. *Tram Ngan*'s troupe – wandering performers, impoverished villagers—offers limited material aid (corpse repatriation), leaving core tragedy unresolved. The literary community is reality-constrained, humane yet fate-impotent; the scriptural Sangha

symbolises compassion for resolving tragic origins. Thus, *Tram Ngan* remains modern realist (with fantastical undertones) without trespassing scriptural mysticism.

Third, compassion profoundly heals giver and receiver; both narratives culminate in liberation and fulfilment. In *Ullambaṇa*, Sangha potency is no external miracle but internally catalyses maternal karmic purification and liberation. In *Tram Ngan*, compassion transforms the troupe. The protagonist's optimistic deathbed serenity awakens them; the leader Binh abandons vendetta, concluding life's painful drama. Compassion heals all, enabling full living. Though dying ill, *Tram Ngan* departs serenely, fulfilled by troupe love. Death is no ultimate tragedy but liberation from tribulation and maternal reunion at life's terminus.

**Table 3 Comparative** Compassion and Soteriology

Aspect	<i>Tram Ngan</i>	<i>Ullambaṇa Sūtra</i>
Compassion source	Troupe sheltering abandoned child	Maudgalyāyana's filial compassion, amplified by monastic power
Outcome	Protagonist consoled, loneliness alleviated	Mother escapes hell realm
Message	Communal compassion heals	Compassion and filiality enable transcendent liberation

In sum, despite generic and contextual disparity, both texts converge on a profound message: compassion and love especially communally enacted are supreme soteriological forces healing, transforming suffering, and granting complete liberation. Compassion transcends tragedy, simultaneously personal (inner peace) and transpersonal (soul salvation). Both affirm compassion's soteriological dimension beyond temporary solace, opening human and communal liberation.

### Transcendence and Social Cohesion

Comparing religious canon and modern literature, both the third fourth-century *Ullambaṇa Sūtra* and 2024 *Tram Ngan* by Ngo Tu Ngan aspire to transcend suffering maternal separation or evil karma while fostering social cohesion through filial bonds. *Ullambaṇa* manifests optimistic supernatural transcendence: Maudgalyāyana rescues his mother from ghostly rebirth via Sangha offerings, redirecting merit to wholesome realms; social cohesion emerges through communal seventh-month *Ullambaṇa* rites generating merit and familial unity. Originating in China, the text transformed Confucian filiality into Buddhist instrument, supporting monastic interests, later disseminating to Vietnam integrating ancestral veneration and folk exorcism. Conversely, *Tram Ngan* offers pessimistic transcendence attainable only posthumously for the fruitlessly searching

wanderer, eschewing Buddhist elements; social cohesion critiques familial and societal indifference yet implicitly urges solidarity via Mekong Delta village compassion for marginalised, isolated, fate-battered souls like *Tram Ngan*: “If only he had some looks, I’d cast him as prince or general. Pity he joined young, now nearing fifty, still errand boy, playing crippled soldiers, ugly disabled. Heaven’s unequal favour. Some have talent, beauty, wealth, love; he has nothing” (Ngo Tu Ngan, 2024). Textually, this opposition reflects *Ullambaṇa*’s Buddhist–Confucian–folk acculturation versus *Tram Ngan* ’s realist tragedy.

*Ullambaṇa* and *Tram Ngan* exert differential reader, era, national, and ethnic impacts. For readers, *Ullambaṇa* inspires concrete action (offerings, filiality), granting inner peace; *Tram Ngan* evokes profound empathy yet helplessness, especially among youth. Epochally, third–fourth-century Chinese *Ullambaṇa* bolstered monastics against Confucian critique; post-COVID Vietnam, it became collective stress-relief ritual. *Tram Ngan* mirrors 2020s migration, urbanisation, and Southwest underdevelopment. Nationally, *Ullambaṇa* facilitated Vietnamese Buddhist war-transcendence via nationwide temple festivals. Maudgalyāyana’s maternal rescue prompted the Buddha to institute *Ullambaṇa* basin practice universally: “Use valuable offerings... Before Buddha’s altar or stūpa, monastics chant for fulfilment, then partake of lunch. Upon pronouncement, Maudgalyāyana and bodhisattva-monastics rejoice; Maudgalyāyana ceases sorrow” (Thich Hue Dang, 2017, 11). This birthed the *Ullambaṇa* festival – filial emblem in Buddhism, reminding communal parental gratitude. From personal tale, *Ullambaṇa* became ethically momentous, fostering peaceful, happy society. Despite negatives, its national value is overwhelmingly positive. *Tram Ngan* underscores Southwest tragedy amid urban erosion of traditional beauty, cherished across classes. Ethnically, *Ullambaṇa* reinforces Confucian–Buddhist filiality, disseminating “drink water, remember source” domestically and diasporically; *Tram Ngan* alerts to market-era ethical erosion in personal, familial, communal cores.

In 2025 post-pandemic, urbanised Vietnam, *Ullambaṇa* and *Tram Ngan* complementarily form a dual theoretical model: religion supplies ritual action; literature activates ethical reflection. *Ullambaṇa* – historically transforming Chinese Confucianism for monastic support, integrating Vietnamese folk rites (ghost appeasement, ancestral worship) – delivers supernatural salvation and durable communal cohesion. *Tram Ngan* adds realist depth, warning of personal tragedy, spurring societal awareness via literature. This religion–literature tandem – one meeting collective spiritual need, the other ethical critique – offers interdisciplinary application for collective consciousness in developing nations, healing social wounds, preserving identity, and fostering cohesive, transcendent society.

In sum, both texts’ core convergence links personal transcendence to social cohesion. Humans cannot liberate solitarily but rely on communal ethical and compassionate power. Individual transcendence inspires, teaches, radiates, healing the collective; transcendence is inseparable from community, entwined with individual – society relations. This reveals social

cohesion's linkage to Buddhist liberation – from personal tragedy, works expand into communal soteriology, liberation, and filiality lessons.

## Discussion

This section discusses the research findings in relation to the study objectives, situating Tram Ngan within contemporary Southwest Vietnamese prose and Buddhist literary criticism. The analysis addresses (i) cultural–artistic limitations, (ii) the award-related controversy, and (iii) the dual Buddhist–literary value of the work, supported by comparative analysis and relevant theoretical perspectives.

### Cultural–Artistic Limitations and Intertextual Influence

The findings indicate that Tram Ngan exhibits certain cultural and artistic limitations that warrant candid acknowledgment. These include minor inaccuracies in cultural detail—such as performers wearing cold-weather costumes inconsistent with traditional troupe practices—and discernible intertextual traces of Nguyen Ngoc Tu's prose, particularly in linguistic choices, rain–sun imagery, and motifs of Southern tragedy. Such features have fueled critical claims of imitation. However, comparative analysis demonstrates that, despite surface-level similarities, Ngo Tu Ngan (Tram Ngan) and Nguyen Ngoc Tu diverge substantially in stylistic execution, character construction, philosophical orientation, tonal register, and artistic intent (Table 4).

**Table 4** Cultural–Artistic Limitations

Criterion	Nguyen Ngoc Tu	Ngo Tu Ngan ( <i>Tram Ngan</i> )
Style	Simple, restrained, metaphoric/symbolic; melancholic, poignant tone	Colloquial, rustic, prolix passages
Character construction	Poor Southwest peasants, tragic yet escape-scarce	Abandoned child, itinerant, unjust; distinctive dream-maternal transcendence ending
Philosophy – ideological depth	Existential sorrow: life as tragedy, scant hope	Buddhist: life as <i>duḥkha</i> , yet compassion – liberation path ( <i>nirvāṇa</i> )
Tone	Lyrical, plain, pathos-rich, poetic	Intimate, narrative, raw, oral-proximate, occasionally unrestrained

Criterion	Nguyen Ngoc Tu	Ngo Tu Ngan ( <i>Tram Ngan</i> )
Artistic value	Distinctive style, novel Southwest breeze	Alleged imitation, yet Buddhist-critically: novel compassion – transcendence in Southwest prose

While Ngo Tu Ngan’s prose lacks Nguyen Ngoc Tu’s stylistic finesse and economy, it introduces a distinct Buddhist-critical dimension. The work inherits the construction of marginal lives common in Southwest realism but elevates these characters through Buddhist concepts of karma, compassion, and liberation. As a result, suffering is not merely represented as an existential dead end, as in much realist prose, but is reframed as a condition that can be transformed through ethical and spiritual insight. This philosophical repositioning differentiates Tram Ngan from both conventional realist short stories and Nguyen Ngoc Tu’s tragic existentialism. Accordingly, although stylistic shortcomings remain, the narrative achieves an authentic everyday texture well suited to portraying suffering and the yearning for liberation. This balance contributes to the work’s literary legitimacy and helps explain its recognition despite ongoing artistic debate.

### Award, Reception, and Critical Controversy

Tram Ngan’s second prize in the 2022–2024 Văn Nghệ competition provoked public controversy, centering on allegations of Nguyen Ngoc Tu imitation, lack of stylistic distinctiveness, and cultural inaccuracies. From a Buddhist-critical perspective, however, the primary value of the text lies not in technical refinement or linguistic novelty, but in its capacity to transform representations of suffering into narratives of compassion and transcendence. Much of the criticism focuses on unpolished language and perceived derivative motifs. Yet such continuity can also be interpreted as opening alternative literary pathways. Rather than reiterating Southwest sorrow as an end in itself, Tram Ngan affirms Buddhist dimensions that elevate quotidian tragedy into a religio-humanistic narrative. This approach aligns with the central principle of Buddhist criticism: the ultimate aim of discourse is to guide beings toward enlightenment, while language and form function as instrumental vehicles rather than ends in themselves. This view resonates with the Buddhist metaphor of language as “the finger pointing at the moon,” emphasizing that excessive concern with form may obscure essential meaning (Śūraṅgama Sūtra, 1983, p. 36). From this standpoint, linguistic roughness does not invalidate a work whose core achievement lies in communicating compassion and insight into suffering.

Furthermore, the narrative evokes empathy for socially marginalized lives and conveys the lesson that suffering can be transformed through compassion. The protagonist’s solace within the troupe and the transcendent dream-like ending suggest a form of salvific faith. This reflects the second principle of Buddhist criticism—adaptation to audience capacity—where doctrine is conveyed in forms accessible to specific readerships. In this respect, Buddhist criticism intersects

with reception aesthetics, emphasizing audience resonance. Like the Ullambaṇa narrative, whose widespread influence derives from its articulation of universal filial ethics, Tram Ngan addresses lower-stratum lives in a rapidly changing Vietnamese socio-cultural context. Its focus on traditional performing arts and compassion for disadvantaged artists generates broad affective engagement. For Buddhist readers, such compassion is associated with merit-making and spiritual reassurance; for general readers, the story remains familiar, accessible, and emotionally persuasive factors that substantiate the award decision.

### **Dual Buddhist–Literary Value**

The analysis further reveals that Tram Ngan achieves a distinctive synthesis of Southwest realism and Buddhist philosophy. The work vividly depicts Mekong Delta life—poverty, itinerancy, riverine existence, and abandoned individuals—through concrete imagery and regional language (Ngo Tu Ngan, 2024). Traditional troupes, emblematic of Southwest culture, are portrayed as both shelters for marginal lives and spaces of fragile belonging. Crucially, the narrative moves beyond pathos by employing Buddhist concepts of impermanence and karma to interpret the origins of suffering. The protagonist’s name, Tram Ngan, symbolically signifies an inherited burden, while his terminal illness becomes a site of philosophical reflection rather than despair. His acceptance of death viewed as part of the continuum of *saṃsāra* articulates a calm, compassionate worldview uncommon in conventional realist tragedy. Unlike closed tragic narratives that end in impasse, Tram Ngan reorients suffering toward transcendence. The maternal quest functions as both a psychological longing and a spiritual journey, transforming personal loss into a search for salvation and meaning. Death is not annihilation but the completion of a karmic cycle, suggesting release rather than defeat (Ngo Tu Ngan, 2024). Artistically, the work combines rustic, colloquial Southwest diction with emotive narration to evoke deep empathy one reason for comparisons with Nguyen Ngoc Tu. However, its integration of Buddhist philosophy ultimately distinguishes it from harsh realism by offering a framework for resolving suffering rather than merely depicting it. Karma, impermanence, and rebirth are embedded organically within the life story, avoiding doctrinal didacticism while remaining philosophically legible. Thus, Tram Ngan possesses a dual value. Literarily, it extends Southwest prose beyond social reflection toward existential and ethical inquiry. From a Buddhist-critical perspective, it demonstrates how narrative fiction can effectively convey core doctrines—*duḥkha*, impermanence, *saṃsāra*—in accessible, humane forms. By enabling readers to recognize suffering and intuit a path toward liberation, the work exemplifies literature’s potential as both aesthetic practice and compassionate pedagogy.

## **Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that Buddhist criticism constitutes a coherent and productive literary-critical theory when applied to contemporary literature in dialogue with canonical Buddhist texts. Through a comparative analysis of *Tram Ngan* by Ngô Tú Ngân and the *Ullambaṇa Sūtra*, the research confirms that both works articulate three convergent dimensions—tragedy rooted in human suffering, compassion as a transformative ethical force, and transcendence as liberation from existential limitation—despite differences in genre, historical context, and narrative strategy.

The findings reveal that *Tram Ngan*, while marked by certain stylistic and cultural limitations, achieves significant literary and philosophical value when examined through a Buddhist-critical lens. The narrative reframes social marginalisation and maternal absence not merely as irreversible tragedy, but as conditions that can be ethically and spiritually transformed through compassion, communal solidarity, and acceptance of impermanence. When juxtaposed with the *Ullambaṇa Sūtra*, the short story gains additional interpretive depth, particularly through the *sūtra*'s emphasis on filial piety and collective merit as mechanisms of liberation.

At the theoretical level, the study affirms Buddhist criticism as more than a form of religious exegesis; rather, it functions as an integrative literary theory capable of mediating between aesthetics, ethics, and spirituality. By foregrounding concepts such as *duḥkha*, *karma*, *karuṇā*, impermanence, and transcendence, Buddhist criticism enables scholars to reassess contemporary literature beyond formalist or sociological paradigms alone. Ultimately, the research underscores the enduring relevance of Buddhist thought in interpreting modern human experiences and contributes to the consolidation of Buddhist criticism as a viable and innovative approach within contemporary literary studies.

## **Suggestions**

### **Suggestions for Implementation**

First, Buddhist criticism should be systematically integrated into literary research and teaching, particularly in regions where Buddhist culture constitutes an essential component of social and ethical life. University curricula in literature and cultural studies may incorporate Buddhist-critical perspectives alongside existing Western theories, thereby broadening students' interpretive frameworks and encouraging cross-cultural theoretical dialogue.

Second, contemporary literary evaluation—especially in award adjudication and critical reception should consider ethical–humanistic depth and spiritual resonance, not solely stylistic novelty or technical refinement. Works such as *Tram Ngan* demonstrate that literary value may reside in the capacity to transform representations of suffering into ethical insight and compassion, aligning literature with broader social and educational functions.

Third, interdisciplinary collaboration between literary studies, Buddhist studies, cultural studies, and education should be encouraged. Such collaboration can enhance the practical applicability of Buddhist criticism in addressing contemporary social issues, including alienation, moral erosion, and the psychological consequences of rapid modernisation.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Future research should expand the scope of Buddhist-critical analysis beyond a single text or author. Comparative studies involving multiple contemporary Vietnamese short stories or novels particularly those emerging from marginalised regions such as the Mekong Delta would allow for more comprehensive evaluation of stylistic patterns and philosophical tendencies.

Additionally, further research may explore cross-national and cross-cultural comparisons, examining how Buddhist criticism operates in Southeast Asian, East Asian, or global literary contexts. Comparative studies between Vietnamese literature and other Buddhist-influenced traditions (such as Thai, Chinese, Korean, or Japanese literature) would contribute to the internationalisation of Buddhist literary criticism.

Finally, future studies could investigate reader reception and pedagogical impact, analysing how Buddhist-informed narratives influence ethical awareness, empathy, and spiritual reflection among contemporary readers, particularly younger generations.

### **Declaration of Interests**

The author declares that there are no financial, professional, or personal interests that could be perceived as influencing the research reported in this article.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study is based exclusively on published literary and religious texts and does not involve human participants, personal data, or sensitive materials. All sources have been cited in accordance with academic standards, and the research adheres to principles of scholarly integrity, intellectual honesty, and respect for cultural and religious traditions.

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