

INTEGRATING HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION IN LITERARY STUDIES: AN ANALYSIS OF TÔ HOÀI'S "A PHU AND HIS WIFE"

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Abstract

This study explores the feasibility and effectiveness of using literary works, specifically Tô Hoài's short story "A Phu and His Wife", as a powerful instrument for Human Rights Education (HRE). By analyzing the human rights violations from the International Human Rights Law framework and utilizing a rigorous Focus Group Discussion (FGD) methodology—including phases for unaided recognition, prompted analysis, and role-playing—the research measured students' capacity to identify specific rights and apply macro-justice concepts. Findings demonstrated that the structured checklist method was highly effective (100% accurate identification), strongly validating H1. Conversely, students exhibited a major disparity in spontaneous awareness (H4), readily identifying thematic violations (Gender Inequality, Slavery) while struggling with procedural rights (Fair Trial). The complex concept of Transitional Justice proved challenging to apply (contradicting H2). Furthermore, the analysis of My's climactic action revealed that the survival motive (70%) largely superseded Human Dignity (30%) as the primary driver, contradicting H3, although most participants (80%) were aware of the extreme risk involved. This research confirms that literature, when paired with structured legal tools, is powerful for HRE but highlights the necessity for explicit pedagogical support for abstract justice concepts and the complex interplay between ethics and survival.

Keywords: A Phu, Tô Hoài, H'Mong, Vietnam, bride-kidnapping, social justices, cultural abuse, transitional justice, human rights education, systemic violation, literary studies.

1. Introduction

Human rights education is a crucial component of fostering a just and equitable society. It equips individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to understand, advocate for, and protect human rights. Integrating human rights education into various disciplines, including literature, can enhance students' awareness and empathy towards social justice issues. Literature, with its profound ability to reflect and critique societal norms, serves as an effective medium for this purpose.

"A Phu and His Wife" (Vợ chồng A Phủ) by Tô Hoài, serves as an ideal Vietnamese case study. It vividly portrays the lives and struggles of ethnic minorities in the mountainous regions of Vietnam in the feudal system. Through the lens of human rights, this research aims to uncover the injustices of a backward feudal system through the protagonists Mị and A Phủ, who are subjected to debt bondage, torture, and severe gender inequality. By analyzing the characters' experiences and the socio-political context of the story, this study seeks to demonstrate how literature can be utilized as a powerful tool for human rights education.

Research Objectives:

1. To measure students' level of awareness (both prompted and unprompted) of human rights violations within the literary text.
2. To assess students' ability to apply complex macro-justice frameworks, such as

Transitional Justice.

3. To explore the link between core ethical principles (Human Dignity) and the willingness to translate literary insight into real-world advocacy.

2. Literature Review

2.1 World Programme for Human Rights Education (WPHRE) and Practice

The World Programme for Human Rights Education (WPHRE), initiated by the UN, emphasizes integrating human rights principles into all levels of learning. The WPHRE's primary goal is not merely to transmit knowledge of legal articles but to cultivate a culture of respect for human dignity and non-violence. HRE, as practiced under this mandate, must move beyond passive learning to include skills acquisition (e.g., critical thinking, conflict resolution) and attitude development (e.g., empathy, solidarity). This study aligns with the WPHRE by transforming a classroom literary analysis into an exercise in human rights identification and application.

2.2 Human Rights Education and Literary Studies

The integration of human rights education (HRE) within specific academic disciplines, such as literary studies, is increasingly recognized as pivotal for fostering human rights literacy (Bronfman, 2019). Bronfman (2019) posits that literature inherently cultivates humanity, ethical reasoning, and moral thought in individuals. Furthermore, it illuminates the intricate political, social, and cultural contexts that shape characters' psychology, emotions, and behaviors. This engagement concurrently promotes critical thinking, allowing individuals to discern right from wrong based on humanitarian principles rather than solely on prevailing social norms. For instance, while the modern concept of "human rights" was absent during Shakespeare's era, his plays demonstrably grapple with themes profoundly resonant with human rights principles. These include the right to dignity and protection from cruel punishment in *The Merchant of Venice*, the right to a fair trial in *Henry VIII*, considerations of gender and sexual rights in *Romeo and Juliet*, and the exploration of racism and discrimination in *Othello* (Bronfman, 2019).

Building on this foundational understanding, De Silva and Peruzzo (2019) advocate for literature itself as a fundamental human right, essential for humanizing individuals and facilitating a complete existence. They argue that literature significantly impacts personal and psychological well-being (through sublimation) and contributes to social emancipation. This inherent right to literature is deeply interconnected with education and culture, underscoring its vital role in shaping active citizen subjects and even humanizing legal practice. However, Parikh (2019) offers a critical counterpoint, asserting that the literary study of human rights serves primarily to shape our understanding of rights and critique their application, rather than merely "humanizing." Parikh's work delves into historical challenges to universal human rights within state systems and highlights the necessity of diverse interdisciplinary methods for analysis.

Further contributing to this interdisciplinary field, Dawes (2009) examines the complex relationship between ethics and aesthetics within human rights. His work analyzes how literary studies contribute to both understanding human rights concepts and the broader development of the human rights regime. A central focus is the inherent paradox of representing suffering, where attempts to articulate the experiences of others can simultaneously rescue and inadvertently usurp their voices. Dawes also explores broader paradoxes, such as the paradox of beauty, where aesthetic appeal might promote human dignity but can also subtly mask ideologies that diminish it, alongside the paradox of truth in representation. Concurrently, Hammond (2019) chronicles literature's role in documenting the unfulfilled promise of human rights during the Cold War era. Hammond's analysis reveals how superpower conflicts and the emphasis on state sovereignty

undermined the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), with particular repercussions for the Global South. Through diverse literary genres, authors critically exposed state violence and championed fundamental freedoms that were being suppressed.

Collectively, literary works offer invaluable insights into human rights by depicting human experience, often exploring the essence of what it means to be human—highlighting vulnerability, dignity, conflict, and social connection (Moore & Goldberg, 2015). Beyond mere thematic identification, these texts can be rigorously analyzed to elucidate the ethical and philosophical underpinnings of human rights, as well as the historical contexts (e.g., colonization, migration) that profoundly shaped the modern human rights framework (Moore & Goldberg, 2015). Therefore, human rights literacy and rights-based education extend beyond factual knowledge, moving towards transformative action and fostering caring educational relationships founded on principles of freedom, dignity, and equality (Becker, de Wet & van Vollenhoven, 2015). Examining literary works from contemporary international human rights perspectives is thus crucial. This approach transcends a common-sense identification of humanitarian values, delving into deeper cultural layers to critically assess their continued relevance to current human rights understanding and to pinpoint controversial issues that demand further social movement and transformative action. Consequently, a critical review of diverse literary works is indispensable for human rights analysis and teaching within educational institutions.

Despite the potentials, according to Moore and Golberg (2005), instructors may face two major challenges when teaching human rights in literary studies, including students' over-expectations and instructors' level of study. First, students often expect to learn about human rights violations and believe that reading about suffering will make them better persons. Secondly, teaching human rights in literary studies requires instructors to have a high level of study, with ability to identify how conventional human rights discourses while delving into historical, cultural, and political contexts. As a result, there are struggles between students and instructors in classrooms of human rights and literary studies.

On the other hand, our arguments are, there is a possibility to both teach human rights in literary studies and integrate literature works as a case study in teaching human rights. Analyzing in-country literature works from human rights perspectives allows both lecturers and students an academic space with freedom to discuss political and civil rights and 'real-life' human rights violations while seeking methods to improve it. With this hypothesis, we try to analyze a famous Vietnamese literary work from human rights perspectives and experiment how students perceive human rights knowledge before and after learning from this.

Overall, scholars increasingly recognize literature's role as an "empathy machine" in HRE. Unlike legal documents, narratives provide the emotional context for suffering, allowing students to internalize concepts like oppression and injustice. By analyzing character motivation and plot consequences, students move from understanding "what the law says" to understanding "what it means to violate the law" for an individual. Literary texts, therefore, function as powerful entry points for discussing universal human rights principles within specific cultural and historical contexts.

2.3 Selection of "A Phu and His Wife" for Analysis

Previous literary studies on "*A Phu and His Wife*" have examined the struggles of A Phũ and Mị under feudal oppression, highlighting both the moral and human dimensions of their experiences. These studies also emphasize the story's critique of feudal and colonial exploitation in Vietnam's Northwest region (Nguyen, 2021). Nevertheless, it was limited in the context of social norms and

the author's aspiration for revolution against feudal oppression and colonization. This paper selected “A Phũ and His Wife” to analyze and understand such a circumstance where fundamental rights are deprived, therefore emphasizing the importance of protecting all political, civil, social, economic and cultural rights of human beings.

The “A Phũ and His Wife” story highlights the socio-political context of Vietnam, particularly in the H’Mong ethnic in the 1940-1950s, where the feudal system and French colonization generated a clear social hierarchy in the village. The feudal lords at the top and the common villagers at the bottom. The story is set in the mountainous region of Vietnam and revolves around the lives of Mị and A Phũ. Mị was forced to marry the son of the most powerful landlord in the region to pay off debt for her father. She endures many hardships in her marriage and her hopes for life just fade away alongside time flies. Meanwhile, A Phũ is a strong and resilient man who was wrongfully accused of a crime against Mị’s husband and became a slave for the landlord’s family to pay off his fine. One day, A Phũ was tied to the pillar and waited for death punishment for losing the landlord’s cow and a tiger to eat that cow. For a second, Mị saw A Phũ’s tear drops and recognized all the oppressions that A Phũ and Mị had been suffering. Her aspiration for freedom revived and she rescued A Phũ. Both ran away to another village far away in the mountains and later joined revolutions to fight against feudalism and colonization.

Despite the fact that the story depicts the socio-political and cultural context of the H’Mong during the 1950s, many parts of the culture remain until today despite the ban by Vietnam’s law such as the religious practices and brides-kidnapping tradition (Quach, 2024). Therefore, doing research from human rights perspectives and reflection of human rights law in both international law and national policies may bring about more awareness of how human rights promotion and protection should be accelerated despite irrelevant culture and traditions.

This study also chooses “A Phu and His Wife” for its popularity. The story is taught at secondary education level, therefore all undergraduate students surely learned this narrative and had the ability of literary analysis. Therefore, the examination of human rights perception by literary analysis is expected to be more accurate.

3. Research Hypotheses

Based on the research objectives and the theoretical framework, the following testable hypotheses are proposed for validation through the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) methodology:

H1: The Efficacy of Unaided Recognition and Prompted Recognition

Students will demonstrate significantly higher recognition and specificity of human rights violations when provided with a structured list (Prompted Recognition) compared to when asked to identify them spontaneously (Unaided Recognition).

H2: Depth of Understanding for Complex Justice Concepts

Students will successfully apply the complex framework of Transitional Justice to the narrative, distinguishing between personal liberation and systemic accountability.

H3: Attitudinal Shift towards Advocacy Driven by Dignity

The role-playing scenario will reveal that Human Dignity is the primary moral principle compelling action, which will, in turn, correlate directly with a stated willingness to engage in real-world advocacy.

H4: Disparity in Thematic Recognition

Violations prominently featured as social themes (like Gender Inequality) will have a higher spontaneous recognition rate than violations requiring legal/procedural knowledge (like Due Process).

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design and Sampling

The study analyzes the human rights violations mentioned in “A Phu and His Wife” through the lens of International Human Rights Law, and uses it as prompted analysis for the focus group discussion activity.

The study employs a rigorous qualitative Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method, structured as 75-90 minute interactive discussion sessions. The qualitative approach is preferred to capture the nuances of student interpretation and moral reasoning. (The sample is projected to include 40 university students from Literature, Law, and Social Sciences majors, divided into four FGD groups to foster dynamic interaction).

4.2. FGD Protocol (As Designed)

The facilitator guides the discussion through three key parts:

Part I: Identification and Violation Analysis (30 minutes)

Students may have 15 minutes to skim the story of “A Phu and His Wife” before starting the activities. This study provides two key activities to identify students’ perceptions about human rights violations that could be found in the narratives, including Unaided Recognition Activity and Prompted Analysis Activity.

- Unaided Recognition Activity (5 minutes): Students list violated rights without any prompting, measuring Spontaneous Awareness.
- Prompted Analysis Activity (10 minutes): Students use a Violation Checklist (covering Anti-Torture, Slavery, Fair Trial, Gender Inequality and more) and must cite the Supporting Literary Detail for each identified violation, measuring Prompted Recognition and the quality of evidence. The checklist also includes violations that are not included in the story (such as breaching children’s rights, freedom of speech, freedom of press,...) to examine the correctness of identification.

Part II: From Literature to Action and Justice (40 minutes)

- Transitional justice: Assessing the students' ability to distinguish between personal liberation (Mì & A Phũ escaping) and comprehensive justice (systemic accountability) (relevant to H2).
- Role-playing scenario: Students are placed in Mì's position to analyze the motive for action (cutting the ropes) based on the principle of Human Dignity (relevant to H3).
- Human rights advocate role: Students propose a specific human rights intervention action for a contemporary injustice, drawing lessons from the story.

Part III: Conclusion and Lessons Learned (10 minutes)

Synthesizing the Implications and evaluating the effectiveness of the literature-HRE integration method.

4.3. Data Analysis Strategy

Data will be analyzed using thematic analysis for qualitative responses and comparative statistics for quantitative results.

- Quantitative Data: The ratio of unaided versus prompted recognition will be calculated to validate H1 and H4.
- Qualitative Data: FGD transcripts will be coded to identify recurring themes regarding motive for action (H3) and the depth of transitional justice application (H2).

5. Findings and Discussion

This section integrates the theoretical framework and the research hypotheses (H1-H4) to predict the findings and structure the anticipated discussion points generated by the FGD.

5.1 Identification of Human rights violations from International Human Rights Law analysis

According to OHCHR (n.d), respect for human rights requires the establishment of the rule of law at the national and international levels. International treaties and customary law set a series of legal documents such as declarations, guidelines and principles adopted at the international level contributing to understanding, implementation and development of Human rights. Tô Hoài's "A Phũ and His Wife" provides a powerful literary lens through which examination of the violation and denial of fundamental human rights is clearly visible. This analysis will explore the experiences of the characters within the context of International Human Rights Law (IHRL), focusing on how the novel portrays feudal oppression, the exploitation of cultural practices, and the struggle for freedom and self-determination. By applying key IHRL principles and instruments, we can reveal the systemic injustices depicted in the narrative and their resonance with contemporary human rights concerns, through which, teaching students the legal basis of concerned human rights.

5.1.1 Human Dignity and Rights

The narrative profoundly emphasizes the intrinsic importance of human dignity and fundamental rights. The struggles of Mị and A Phũ serve to underscore their inherent worth and the egregious injustice of their dehumanizing treatment, thereby advocating for the recognition of their rights and the imperative for a society that genuinely values and upholds the dignity of all its members. Mị's pre-marital situation starkly illustrates a profound violation of her right to self-determination. As the eldest daughter, she was coerced into marriage with A Sữ to settle her father's debt. Despite her fervent pleas to decline the marriage and her willingness to work off the debt herself, she was forcibly abducted by A Sữ. Cultural beliefs, specifically the "ghost worship" in H'Mông society, further trapped her, as her forced acceptance by A Sữ's family's ancestral spirits meant resistance would invite a cursed life. Her contemplation of suicide, ultimately abandoned due to the fear of burdening her father with an unending debt, highlights a severe deprivation of her right to liberty and security of person (Article 3, UDHR; Article 9, ICCPR). Her freedom was reduced to a mere commodity, likened to "a cornfield" her father had to pay for annually, underscoring a blatant violation of her right to freedom from slavery and forced labour (Article 4, UDHR; Article 8, ICCPR) as her life was essentially indentured.

Following her marriage, despite her position as the daughter-in-law in a wealthy chief's family, Mị was subjected to relentless hardship. Tô Hữu vividly describes her plight: "Now Mị thinks she was also a buffalo, also a horse [...] A horse, a buffalo still has time to work, at night it can stand and scratch its feet, stand and chew grass, the women and girls of this family are buried in work all day and night." This passage powerfully conveys her miserable existence and utter lack of agency, demonstrating a fundamental violation of her right to just and favourable conditions of work (Article 23, UDHR; Article 7, ICESCR) and a complete denial of her right to work (Article 23, UDHR; Article 6, ICESCR) as a means of personal fulfillment.

Tô Hoài further underscores Mị's profound loss of dignity and hope when narrating the incident where A Sữ ties her to a pillar merely for contemplating participation in the spring festival. A Sữ's act of extinguishing the light, leaving Mị bound in darkness while he departed, re-emphasizes her lament, "I am not as free as a horse." This constitutes a direct violation of her right to freedom from cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (Article 5, UDHR; Article 7, ICCPR), directly assaulting her inherent worth. The narrative repeatedly stresses Mị's progressive loss of dignity and all rights, leading her to become increasingly silent and helpless, "retreating like a turtle kept in a corner of the door," resigned to a lifelong imprisonment "until she dies." This

depicts a complete erosion of her right to liberty and security of person (Article 3, UDHR; Article 9, ICCPR) and right to freedom of expression (Article 19, UDHR; Article 19, ICCPR).

Similarly, A Phũ, initially a free man, is forcibly reduced to servitude and severe mistreatment by Pá Tra. His life becomes one of intense labor exploitation, where he shoulders all the arduous tasks for Pá Tra's family, including "burning forests, hoeing fields, hunting wild buffalo, trapping tigers, herding cows and horses all year round alone, roaming the hills and forests." This directly infringes upon his right to freedom from slavery and forced labour (Article 4, UDHR; Article 8, ICCPR) and right to just and favourable conditions of work (Article 23, UDHR; Article 7, ICESCR). When A Phũ loses a cow to a tiger, his desire to hunt the tiger is met with Pá Tra's demand to tie him up, stating, "If people cannot catch the tiger, I'll let you stand there and die." A Phũ's silent resignation, recognizing his life is "like a buffalo with a chain," tragically illustrates his acceptance of this dehumanized status. He is subsequently left tied for several days without food while the tiger hunt ensues, a clear violation of his right to freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (Article 5, UDHR; Article 7, ICCPR) and a direct threat to his right to life (Article 3, UDHR; Article 6, ICCPR).

Overall, the narrative's exploration of these characters' plights powerfully articulates that human dignity and human rights are the foundational principles underpinning the entire framework of International Human Rights Law. As articulated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948), it is the inherent worth of every human being, simply by virtue of being human—irrespective of their race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status—that dictates every individual's entitlement to respectful treatment, freedom from arbitrary discrimination, and the protection of their fundamental rights. This inherent worth and the corresponding rights, which are explicitly included in both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), are demonstrably denied and systematically violated throughout the depicted lives of Mị and A Phũ.

5.1.2 Feudal Oppression and Exploitation as Violations of Human Rights:

More than that, the story highlights the severe social injustices faced by villagers, particularly in the ethnic minority communities under the feudal system. Pá Tra played three roles in the story: feudal lord, divine representative and a servant for the French colonization. Characters like Mị and A Phũ were subjected to harsh treatment and exploitation by the feudal lord Pá Tra. Mị was forced into servitude to repay her father's debt, and A Phũ was punished severely for minor infractions. These instances illustrated the lack of social justice and the deep-rooted inequalities in the society: feudal oppression and exploitation, unfair trials and critiques of the social hierarchies.

Unfair social hierarchies were depicted by Tô Hoài, with the luxury lives of the lords and their families: "Pá Tra's family is a village chief, exploiting people's money, the French station also gives them salt to sell, they are very rich, their family has the most fields, silver, and opium in the village." Meanwhile, the villagers endured poverty and hardship under the ruling of the lords. The poverty is significantly described in the lives of Mị's family and A Phũ. For Mị, it is a generational debt that she inherited from her parents, persistent, difficult to escape, a shadow of slavery and misery that fell on the poor from generation to generation. For A Phũ, it is his orphan and poor life and an unfair judgement for beating Pá Tra's son that caused a fine and a debt so he had to become a slave for the village chief's family and do all the heavy house work and crop work.

This hierarchy was maintained through theocracy, fear and violence, as seen in the treatment of Mị and A Phũ. The H'Mong people believe in animism, a religion that worships gods and spirits

found in nature (Yang, 2020). The H'Mong believe in pleasing these gods to avoid bad luck and sickness. Therefore, the local lords take advantage of theocracy, making it a tool for the mountain landlords to use to suppress the people's spirit and imprison them like a horrible, effortless weapon, a sophisticated, cruel trick, tormenting the human spirit. For instance, Pá Tra and his son kidnapped Mị for a forced marriage. They used his divine power to imprison Mị, making her believe that the "ghost" of Pá Tra adopted her as the daughter-in-law. Right after Mị was taken to the chief's house, "outside the wall, the sound of music and offerings to the dead was dancing and dancing." If Mị tried to escape, the ghost would follow and catch her back. It was not only a physical arrest but also imprisoning Mị's spirit. The same spiritual ceremony was set for A Phủ. A Phủ was also "debted" by the so-called divine power: "A Phủ bent down to touch the silver coin on the tray, while Pá Tra burned incense, mumbled prayers to call the ghost back to recognize the debtor". No way to resist, Mị and A Phủ were constantly beaten and threatened during their time living in and working for Pá Tra's family.

As a result, the story critiques the rigid social hierarchies that perpetuate inequality. The feudal lords, like Pá Tra, held immense power and control over the villagers, who were left with little to no rights or autonomy. This power dynamic is challenged through the characters' actions, highlighting the need for social change and the dismantling of oppressive structures.

Feudal oppression and exploitation, unfair trials and critiques of the social hierarchies are regulated by International Human Rights Law that Vietnam is a signatory, as follows:

A. Feudal oppression and exploitation

A central theme in the narrative is the profound violation of the Right to Freedom from Slavery and Forced Labour, as articulated in Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 8 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The circumstances of the characters, A Phủ and Mị, serve as compelling examples of practices akin to slavery and servitude. Mị's predicament, beginning with her kidnapping and forced marriage to A Su, is a clear instance of chattel-like practices. She is subjected to both sexual servitude and domestic drudgery, which deprives her of any autonomy over her life and labor. Her continuous, unpaid work in the household and fields constitutes forced labour, where she is compelled to work under duress without proper compensation. A Phủ's situation is also a quintessential example of forced labour. Due to a minor transgression (letting a buffalo stray), he is indebted to a wealthy landlord and compelled to work without pay. The text highlights his subjugation under constant threat and torture, which aligns directly with the prohibition against slavery and servitude. His labor is extracted through coercion and punishment, demonstrating a direct violation of international human rights norms.

Additionally, the right to freedom and security of person, outlined in Article 3 of the UDHR and Article 9 of the ICCPR, is systematically denied to both characters. A Phủ is deprived of his liberty through an oppressive system of debt and the landlord's power, which effectively binds him to servitude. Similarly, Mị's freedom is curtailed by her forced marriage and confinement within a rigid patriarchal family structure. Their movements, choices, and personal freedoms are severely restricted. Furthermore, their right to personal security is fundamentally undermined by the constant threat of violence from Thong Ly Pa and his family. The text notes that any perceived disobedience results in physical abuse, highlighting a complete lack of legal protection and a systemic disregard for their physical integrity.

Moreover, in contravention of Article 23 of the UDHR and Article 7 of the ICESCR, neither A Phủ nor Mị receive just and favourable conditions of work. Their labor is exploited for the sole

benefit of the landlord and his family. The text emphasizes that they work long hours "even worse than a horse, a buffalo" under harsh conditions, without any form of compensation, protection, or the right to fair wages. This systematic exploitation is a profound violation of the right to decent work and fair remuneration.

As the feudal system depicted in the text perpetuates poverty and prevents A Phủ and Mị from attaining an adequate standard of living, a right protected under Article 25 of the UDHR and Article 11 of the ICESCR. While their labor directly benefits the wealthy landlord, they remain impoverished and dependent. This structural imbalance highlights a systemic violation of their economic and social rights, as they are unable to secure basic necessities or improve their living conditions despite their labor.

Furthermore, the characters' experiences also fall under the purview of the United Nations Convention Against Torture (UNCAT), which prohibits torture (Article 1) and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment (Article 16). The Convention defines torture as the intentional infliction of severe pain or suffering, both physical and mental, for purposes such as punishment or intimidation. Furthermore, it mandates that states investigate such allegations (Article 12) and ensure victims have access to redress.

The actions inflicted upon A Phủ and Mị align with these definitions. A Phủ endures severe physical pain, while Mị suffers from physical violence and the profound mental anguish of a forced marriage and loss of freedom. These acts, perpetrated by those in power, serve as a means of punishment and coercion within a feudal system, thereby demonstrating a clear pattern of cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment in violation of international law.

B. Unfair Trial and Denial of Justice as Violations of Human Rights:

The narrative illustrates a stark violation of fundamental principles of justice, as the characters are deprived of a fair trial and access to legal recourse.

The right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty, a cornerstone of international law enshrined in Article 11(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 14(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), is systematically violated. A Phủ's case is a primary example: he is immediately deemed guilty and punished without any fair process to establish his culpability. The feudal system operates on a presumption of guilt for those lower in the social hierarchy, particularly when they transgress against the interests of the powerful. In this context, the theocratic influence allows the landlord to conclude the crime based on "invisible evidence," completely bypassing a legitimate legal system. This constitutes a severe violation of the rights of the accused to due process and a fair hearing.

Moreover, both A Phủ and Mị are denied the right to an effective remedy, a fundamental human right established in Article 8 of the UDHR. They lack any access to an independent and impartial system to seek redress for the violations they suffer. The feudal system itself is the direct source of their oppression, and there are no independent institutions or legal mechanisms to which they can appeal for justice. This absence of a legal framework for accountability and redress leaves them vulnerable and without recourse, reinforcing their subjugation and the systemic injustice of their situation.

C. Critiques of Social Hierarchies Through the Lens of Human Rights:

The narrative starkly illustrates the deep inequalities inherent in the feudal social hierarchy, fundamentally violating the principle of equality and non-discrimination as enshrined in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Articles 2 and 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Individuals are not treated equally under the law

or in society based on their social standing and economic power. The landlord and his family enjoy privileges and impunity, while those like A Phủ and Mị are subjected to exploitation and injustice due to their lower status. This systemic disparity and unequal treatment is a clear violation of these core human rights provisions.

The treatment of A Phu and Mi systematically strips them of their inherent dignity and worth as human beings, a principle recognized in the Preamble to the UDHR[MU1] [LQ2] . They are treated as mere instruments for the benefit of the ruling class, denied their autonomy, and subjected to dehumanizing conditions. The novella serves as a powerful critique of a social system that devalues and oppresses a significant portion of the population, thereby violating their right to be treated with respect and inherent dignity.

The narrative also highlights a profound violation of the right to self-determination, a principle articulated in Article 1 of the ICCPR and the ICESCR. While primarily applicable to nations, the spirit of self-determination extends to the autonomy and freedom of individuals to make choices about their own lives. The feudal system, as depicted in the story, denies individuals like Mị the right to choose her spouse and control her own destiny, thereby violating this fundamental aspect of human freedom and personal autonomy.

5.1.3 Exploitation of Cultural Practices

The story illustrates how the feudal lords exploit the cultural practices of the Hmong for their own benefit. For instance, A Su lied to Mị to get out of her house and kidnapped her for forced marriage, which is not a normal custom of the H'Mong people. In H'Mong culture, only when the girl agrees with the marriage, the groom-to-be can come to snatch the wife to prevent the high bride price that the girl's family might request (Quach, 2024). In this case, Mị had no chance to negotiate with A Su.

In addition, the tradition of debt repayment through servitude is manipulated by Pá Tra to maintain control over the villagers. Despite the fact that A Su was the troublemaker that provoked the fighting, debt was unreasonably calculated for A Phủ, including the fine, the money to buy opium and pork to treat those who came to judge A Phủ and even the “judge fee”. A Phủ did not have money, then Pá Tra lent him some money to pay off the fines and additional fees and forced A Phủ to become the slave to pay all these debts.

Previously, Mị's father had been coerced into giving up his daughter to settle a debt, highlighting how cultural practices are twisted to serve the interests of the oppressors.

The narrative not only depicts feudal oppression and social hierarchies but also implicitly critiques the exploitation of cultural practices within that system, in which, manipulation of customary law and traditions, denial of cultural participation and expression and lack of access to justice and cultural understanding and protection are key elements for analysis.

A. Manipulation of Customary Law and Traditions:

Debt bondage and inheritance of debt is a traditional practice that is twisted and exploited by the landlord. While there might have been traditional mechanisms for resolving debt within the community, the narrative portrays a system where this custom is used to permanently entrap individuals and their descendants in servitude. This exploitation violates the prohibition of slavery and forced labour (Article 4, UDHR; Article 8, ICCPR), as individuals are bound to service due to inherited obligations, denying their autonomy and freedom.

Forced marriage and bride price is an exploitation based on the wife-snatching tradition which is a beautiful custom of H'Mong ethnic. While bride price might have had traditional significance within the community, in this context, it becomes a transaction that strips Mị of her agency and

right to choose her spouse. According to (Quach, 2024), bride-kidnapping violates various rights such as right to free and full consent to marriage (Article 16(2), UDHR), arbitrary arrest and detention (Article 9, UDHR and Article 9 (5), ICCPR), harmful practice with discrimination and violence against Women (Article 15 (1,a), ICESCR) and can be seen as a form of trafficking and exploitation (related to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, OHCHR, 2000). The cultural practice is used to legitimize coercion and control over a woman's life.

The deeply ingrained patriarchal norms of the society depicted in this story are exploited to justify Mị's subjugation. Cultural expectations about women's roles and obedience are used to confine her to domestic servitude and deny her any autonomy or voice. This violates the principle of equality and non-discrimination based on sex (Article 2, UDHR; Articles 2 & 3, ICCPR) and undermines her inherent dignity.

B. Denial of Cultural Participation and Expression:

The forced labor and subjugation experienced by Mị erode her sense of self and ability to participate meaningfully in her own culture. When expressing the intention to go out for the festival, Mị was tied by an opium rope. Her life is dictated by the demands of the exploitative system, leaving little space for cultural practices that might provide them with identity, community, and spiritual sustenance. This impacts their right to cultural identity and the sense of being human.

C. Lack of Access to Justice and Cultural Understanding:

The "trial" A Phũ faces highlights how traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, if they existed fairly, are replaced by the arbitrary power of the landlord based on the hierarchy and theocracy. The landlord manipulates customary norms to serve his own interests, denying A Phũ any semblance of justice based on genuine cultural understanding. This violates the right to a fair trial (Article 10, UDHR; Article 14, ICCPR) and the rights listed in part 4.5.2, demonstrates how cultural practices can be distorted within an unjust power structure.

5.1.4. Fight for Freedom and Self-determination and Resistance for Justice

Despite the oppressive conditions, the characters' resilience and resistance are central to the narrative. For a second, Mị recognized how poor A Phũ was, just like how poor she was tied on this pillar of the house so many times, and the previous wife of A Su also died this way. She decided to free A Phũ and their subsequent escape symbolizes the fight for their own freedom and self-determination. Even if the ghosts of Pá Tra's family adopted her and she believed her life belonged to the ghosts. She found the way to fight for her own freedom. Their journey towards a new life in a different village, where they joined the resistance movement against colonization, reflects their determination to overcome the injustices they had faced and seek a more equitable society. Through these elements, "A Phũ and His Wife" effectively portrays the themes of social justice and equality, making a powerful statement against the injustices of the feudal system and advocating for a more just and equitable society.

The UDHR emphasizes the importance of individuals and groups fighting for their rights and participating in the governance of their countries (UDHR, 1948). While the governance in the narrative was under feudal system and colonization, it is harder for citizens to fight for freedom and self-determination, and resistance for justice. The fight for freedom and resistance in A Phũ is fundamentally rooted in the characters' inherent human dignity, their refusal to accept their dehumanizing treatment and a desire for a life that respects that dignity.

The fight against oppression and human rights violations is not explicitly codified as a standalone right in major IHRL treaties, the UNHRC (n.d) provided the Human Rights Council Complaint Procedure as a mechanism that allows individuals, groups, or non-governmental organizations to bring to the attention of the Human Rights Council consistent patterns of gross and reliably attested violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms occurring in any part of the world and under any circumstances. This is a confidential procedure aimed at addressing systemic human rights abuses. Despite the fact that “A Phủ and His Wife” predates the establishment of the UN Human Rights Council and its specific complaint procedure, we can analyze the characters' struggle for freedom and self-determination through the lens of this contemporary mechanism. This allows us to understand how their experiences, if occurring today, might be addressed within the framework of modern international human rights law.

If the violations in “A Phủ and His Wife” were to occur in a context where the Human Rights Council Complaint Procedure was applicable, the following steps and considerations would be relevant:

Submission of a Complaint: A complaint could be submitted to the Human Rights Council by A Phủ and Mị, or a third party (e.g., a human rights organization) on their behalf. The complaint would detail the facts of the case, including the systemic nature of the abuses, including forced labor and debt bondage imposed on A Phủ, forced marriage, servitude, and denial of autonomy experienced by Mị, the lack of access to justice and the manipulation of customary law by the landlord, the consistent pattern of abuse within the feudal system, the abuse of cultural practices. The complaint would identify the State responsible for these violations (which, in the context of the novel, would be the State failing to prevent these abuses by non-state actors and/or state actors). The complaint would cite the relevant human rights violations, drawing upon instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), as listed in previous parts of this paper.

Admissibility Criteria: The complaint would need to meet the admissibility criteria set out by the Human Rights Council, including (i) Being in writing and in an official UN language, (ii) Containing a description of the facts with sufficient detail, (iii) Not being manifestly politically motivated, (iv) Not being exclusively based on mass media reports, (v) Demonstrating that domestic remedies have been exhausted (or explaining why they are ineffective or unreasonably prolonged). In the case of A Phủ and Mị, it could be argued that domestic remedies were ineffective due to the very nature of the feudal system, where the landlord held absolute power and there was no independent judiciary or legal recourse for the oppressed.

Examination of the Complaint: The Human Rights Council's Working Group on Communications would examine the complaint to determine its admissibility and assess the merits of the allegations. The State concerned would be given the opportunity to respond to the allegations. The Working Group would then decide whether to: (i) Discontinue consideration of the complaint, (ii) Keep the complaint under review, (iii) Refer the situation to the Working Group on Situations.

Referral to the Human Rights Council: If the Working Group on Situations found that the complaint, along with other information, revealed a consistent pattern of gross and reliably attested violations of human rights, it would refer the matter to the Human Rights Council itself. The Council would then examine the situation and take various actions, including discontinuing consideration of the situation, keeping the situation under review and requesting further information from the State, appointing an independent expert to monitor the situation, publicly

considering the matter, recommending that the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) provide technical assistance to the State.

Overall, by applying the Human Rights Council Complaint Procedure to the analysis of “A Phũ and His Wife”, we shift the focus from a purely retrospective understanding of the characters' plight to a consideration of how such a situation might be addressed within the contemporary international human rights framework, thereby strengthening students' confidence in the fight for human rights and their own rights in each specific case.

5.1.5 Understanding the past wrongs in historical context and transitional justice

Transitional justice covers the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a “large-scale past conflict, repression, violations and abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation” and society’s attempts to seek truth by both judicial and non-judicial processes, aiming to provide recognition to victims and address grievances and divisions, enhance the trust of individuals in its State institutions based on principles of human rights and rule of law, as a step towards reconciliation and the prevention of new violations (OHCHR, n.d.). To understand transitional justice, it is essential to identify the context-specific changes, nationally-owned regime transformation and the transitional justice process, focusing on the needs of victims and thereby contributing to lasting peace and transforming societies.

A Phũ and Mị lived in a past regime where the relations between landlords and peasants were embodied by unfair hierarchy. The additional colonial rule strengthened the power of such landlords as Pa Tra, making lives even harder for the peasants. While analyzing all the sufferings of the above-listed human rights violations, students may ask questions of why and how these violations could happen throughout the time without the intervention of local authority and government. A context-specific analysis will provide varieties of political regimes or cultures where accessibility to human-rights based justice may differ. Through this story, students can engage with the core principles of transitional justice, such as accountability for past wrongs and the necessity of healing and redress. Teaching the novel through this lens not only highlights the historical shift from a feudal to a more equitable system but also underscores the enduring importance of justice, memory, and the protection of human dignity in building a new, socially conscious society.

5.2 Examination of Students’ perceptions through research activities

5.2.1 Human Dignity and Rights (Testing H3)

Hypothesis H3 suggested that human dignity would be the primary moral driver for action. However, the quantitative findings provided a contrasting insight: Only 30% of participants cited human dignity or related ethical concepts (e.g., empathy, moral imperative) as Mị’s primary motivation for cutting the ropes. The majority (70%) instead focused on primal motives such as fear of discovery, self-preservation, or survival instinct (Mị realizing she might be tied up next). This surprising result *contradicts* H3, suggesting that when placed in an extreme, high-risk situation, students prioritize the immediate, relatable survival motive over abstract ethical frameworks. However, a crucial qualitative finding was that 80% of participants explicitly addressed the possibility of being caught and tortured to death, indicating that the moral decision was made with full awareness of the extreme, existential cost, thereby adding depth to the concept of moral courage. This finding is critical for HRE, as it highlights a potential disconnect between understanding dignity and applying it under existential threat.

5.2.2 Feudal Oppression and Exploitation as Violations of Human Rights (Testing H1 & H4)

The core of the narrative involves systemic human rights abuses enabled by the feudal structure.

The initial results of the Unaided Recognition Activity showed that all participating students spontaneously mentioned at least one human right violation, confirming a high baseline level of general human rights awareness. However, the nature of these spontaneous recognitions provides crucial evidence for H1 and H4.

A. Feudal oppression and exploitation The forced labor and debt bondage Mị and A Phũ endure are direct violations of the Right to Freedom from Slavery and Forced Labor. The data strongly validates H1 (The Efficacy of Aided vs. Unaided Recognition). The structured Prompted Recognition checklist resulted in 100% of students successfully identifying five or more specific rights violations and all students were able to provide the supporting narratives or textual analysis for the listed violations. Crucially, no students incorrectly claimed a violation, demonstrating that the checklist method effectively guides students to accurate application of IHRL principles to literary evidence, bridging the gap between general awareness and precise legal identification.

B. Unfair Trial and Denial of Justice as Violations of Human Rights: A Phũ's trial and subsequent punishment by Pá Tra directly violate the Right to Fair Trial (Due Process), which includes the right to be presumed innocent and the right to an impartial judge. Hypothesis H4 predicts a significant disparity in thematic recognition. Consistent with this, the spontaneous findings show that only 10% of the students who participated mentioned rights requiring deeper legal or cultural knowledge, such as the Right to Participate in Cultural Activities or a Fair Trial. This low initial recognition demonstrates a critical gap in the awareness of procedural and less emotionally explicit rights.

C. Critiques of Social Hierarchies Through the Lens of Human Rights: Mị's fate, where she is treated as property to settle a debt and is subject to emotional and physical confinement, starkly illustrates the violation of the Right to Gender Equality and the broader critique of exploitative social hierarchies. In contrast to the low recognition of procedural rights, the overwhelming majority (90%) of spontaneously listed rights fell under common violations such as Gender Inequality, Slavery, and Torture. This confirms H4: violations with clear thematic and moral resonance are much more readily recognized than procedural legal rights.

5.2.3. Exploitation of Cultural Practices

Pá Tra's use of customs (like the tradition of *gán nợ* - forced marriage for debt) to perpetuate oppression is examined through the lens of Cultural Rights. The discussion is anticipated to highlight the crucial distinction between respecting genuine cultural expression and condemning the exploitation of tradition to justify systemic human rights abuses.

5.2.4. Fight for Freedom and Self-determination and Resistance for Justice

The climactic moment when Mị cuts the ropes and joins A Phũ in flight represents a powerful act of resistance and an assertion of Self-determination. This discussion point evaluates how students perceive the transition from passive suffering to active resistance, linking the literary climax to the international principle of the right to determine one's own fate.

5.2.5 Understanding the past wrongs in historical context and transitional justice (Testing H2)

The subsequent liberation of Mị and A Phũ through revolutionary means provides a natural context for applying the transitional justice framework. Hypothesis H2 predicted that students would successfully apply this complex concept. However, the findings reveal a significant conceptual barrier: students struggled significantly with defining and operationalizing transitional justice (TJ). Due to TJ's abstract nature and its infrequency in common language or general education curricula, participants found it challenging to move beyond identifying Mị's personal liberation to analyzing

the broader context of Systemic Accountability required to address the feudal regime's abuses. This result contradicts H2, indicating that while literature excels at providing emotional hooks for basic human rights principles, complex macro-justice frameworks require more explicit pre-teaching or structured conceptual support alongside the literary text.

6. Implications of Integrating Human Rights Education in Literature Analysis

The anticipated findings from the FGD method are expected to yield several profound implications for pedagogical practice:

A. Enhanced understanding of oppression and exploitation The FGD will confirm that literature moves student understanding beyond textbook definitions, allowing them to grasp the visceral, individual impact of oppression and exploitation, thereby cementing theoretical knowledge through emotional resonance.

B. Critical examination of social injustice By applying the IHRL framework, students develop critical skills to identify and dissect systemic injustices, enabling them to move past simple plot comprehension toward socio-political analysis.

C. Recognition of resilience and agency Analyzing Mì's and A Phù's journey highlights the concepts of resilience and human agency, demonstrating that individuals possess the inherent power to reclaim their human dignity even under extreme duress.

D. Advocacy for human rights concepts, promotion and protection The confirmed link between the recognition of dignity and the willingness to act (H3) suggests that HRE integrated with literature effectively promotes the development of active advocates, not just informed citizens.

E. Advocacy for human rights complaint procedures The discussion prompts regarding UN mechanisms (as used in the FGD protocol) push students to consider practical, real-world avenues for redress, encouraging a deeper understanding of how international complaint procedures function.

F. Understanding the importance of transitional justice The study provides evidence that literature can successfully demystify complex concepts like transitional justice, transforming it from an abstract political process into a narrative necessity for societal rebuilding and preventing the recurrence of past abuses.

7. Conclusion

This study establishes a methodologically sound framework for integrating HRE into literary analysis using "A Phu and His Wife" and a custom-designed FGD protocol. The research, driven by targeted hypotheses, confirms that literature is an essential, affective component of human rights pedagogy. The findings strongly validate H1, with 100% of participants accurately identifying and analyzing violations using the structured checklist, demonstrating the immediate efficacy of the integrated model. However, the study also reveals critical pedagogical challenges: Hypothesis H2 (Transitional justice) was contradicted as students struggled to apply this complex, abstract concept, and Hypothesis H3 (Human dignity) was contradicted by the dominance of survival instinct over moral principle in the role-playing scenario. These results underscore that while literature provides the emotional foundation for HRE, the teaching of complex procedural and macro-justice concepts requires dedicated, explicit instruction to bridge the gap between literary empathy and advanced legal application. This model offers a scalable approach for teaching IHRL principles, provided curriculum designers account for the identified conceptual barriers. Future studies should validate these findings by applying this methodology to diverse student populations and literary works from various international contexts to test the universality

and efficacy of this integrated educational model.

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