
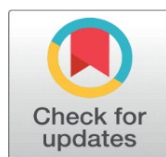


# THE FRAGRANCE OF VIETNAMESE CULTURE, IDENTITY AND FEMININITY: EXPLORING THE SCENT OF GREEN PAPAYA AS A CULTURAL COMMENTARY

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines *The Scent of Green Papaya* (1993), a film by Tranh Ahn Hung, set against the backdrop of 1950s Saigon, when France had a profound impact on Vietnam and the country was undergoing a tremendous change in the social and political scenario. The film portrays the complexities of Vietnamese culture, identity, and femininity deeply intertwined with Confucian values that shaped societal norms. The story of Mui, the protagonist, who embarks on a journey through two households and finds her own identity as Mrs. Khuyen, the Vietnamese culture as shown in both the households and the portrayal of femininity through the characters of the mother and the daughter-in-law – all these throws ample light on the nuances of psycho-social relationships and cultural bonds and Confucian ideals. This paper aims to tease out these concepts through a close reading of the narrative, themes and cinematography. Through a close reading and in-depth analysis of mise-en-scène, sound design, and narrative structure and themes, this paper sheds light on the film's critique of the societal role of women in the specific social backdrop. It also voices the patriarchal norms and the condition of women in Vietnamese society. This study aims to understand the intersections between cinema, gender, and culture and examines how cinema becomes a tool for societal change.

**Keywords:** Vietnamese Culture, Identity, Femininity, Psycho-Social Relationships, Confucianism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Vietnamese culture places significant importance on family, which is often viewed as a close-knit blood-related community. This bond forms the foundation of social structures, traditionally referred to as “Gia Phong”. Such cultural values, which are based upon Confucianism and prioritize family cohesion, respect for elders, and ethical behaviour, have defined the community's practices and lifestyle. Traditional Vietnam is deeply influenced by Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhist systems that have collectively shaped the nation's social and moral codes.

Confucianism emphasizes harmony, respect for elders, and moral conduct, which are essential factors in defining cultural ethics across Vietnamese society. The concept, which originated in China, has significantly influenced East Asian societies, reinforcing patriarchal structures and gender norms. Diasporic directors have often incorporated these values into their cinematic narratives, blending the themes of love, femininity, and Confucian ideals to explore Vietnamese identity. This strategy has been keenly observed in Tran Ahn Hung's *The Scent of Green Papaya*, a 1993 film that reflects the complexities of Vietnamese culture during the social and political scenario of the 1950s Saigon. Hung, a Vietnamese-French filmmaker, offers a visual exhibit of these cultural themes through the frame of his protagonist, Mui.

The film revolves around Mui, a 10-year-old, who comes from a rural village to serve an aristocratic family. Set against the background of the post-war Vietnam period, it was a complete chaos of social instability where traditional values were being challenged. Regardless of the patriarchal structures of the time, the film underscores the resilience of Vietnamese women, exhibiting their ability to maintain familial harmony and emotional stability. The emergence of Mui from servitude to self-discovery reflects the evolving role of women in the Vietnamese society. Through Mui's journey of self-discovery for her identity, Hung mirrors his struggle to navigate his own Vietnamese culture and identity where he desires to convey the feeling of nostalgia and the notion of being an "oriental". Stuart Hall defined "Identities as they are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves in the narratives of the past" [Hall \(1990\)](#), 225. Through the film, the traditional concept of Vietnamese women is portrayed, highlighting the four fundamental virtues expected from a woman in an East-Asian society. It defines the ideal standards for women, generally known as "Công dung ngôn hạnh".

Công represents a woman who handles domestic duties and caregiving, prioritizing womanhood and keeping families together. Dung is one facility that reflects beauty, grace, and elegance, and the importance of looks and posture. Ngôn means being polite; Ngôn implies women should be modest, so their speech and actions must be elegant. Finally – Hạnh is the epitome of virtue, compassion, loyalty, and devotion, reaffirming a woman's allegiance to kin and love [Lê \(2021\)](#). In *The Scent of Green Papaya*, these virtues are subtly yet powerfully structured into the protagonist Mui's journey. Her dedication towards household duties and her quiet devotion to her employers reflect Công, illustrating her adherence to conventional expectations of Vietnamese womanhood. Her natural grace and gentle appearance embody Dung and reinforce the idea of feminine elegance. Through her soft-spoken and gracious nature, Mui exemplifies the quality of being humble reflecting on the virtue of Ngôn. Most significantly, Hạnh is reflected in her unwavering loyalty, kindness, and emotional resilience, particularly in her silent devotion to Khuyen. These traits are shown in the film as the components shaping Mui's identity not as a rigid constraint but as an integrating cultural tradition with personal growth. These virtues have been traditionally practised by Vietnamese women and recognised as a standard for identifying and evaluating their dignity. These actions can be observed across the female characters of the film where in one way or another they stick to these virtues thus signifying their close entity and commitment to societal structures.

## 2. FROM CONFUCIAN VIRTUE TO CONTEMPORARY DESIRE: MUI'S FEMININE TRANSFORMATION

Vietnamese Confucianism defines clear perspective of the qualities of a woman and the director explores this through the themes of love, gender, and family dynamics in the film. Tran Anh Hung's exploration of identity mirrors the experiences of diasporic filmmakers, who often find themselves caught between the construction and deconstruction of their individual identities [Nguyen \(2020\)](#), 50. In his film, which showcased a life full of jostle and individuals are portrayed running to make the two ends meet and on the verge of survival, they tend to lose their humanity and morality. A thorough analysis of *The Scent of Green Papaya* brings to light the representation of Vietnamese culture in the 20th century. The film is set in the background of the 1950s-60s Saigon as the camera does not provide a detailed scenario of urbanised Saigon but rather focuses on the two households which centre on the two periods of life of Mui - her solitary journey from servitude to becoming the mistress of the westernized household [Nguyen \(2020\)](#). Mui travels from the rural space to the urban space of Saigon in search of work as a young maid at the age of 10, and after 10 years of service in the household she is transferred into another household. In response to the two periods of her life and the two domestic spaces, the director explores the two different levels of love and femininity.

The first level is from the virtues of Confucian tradition where women should be tolerant and should sacrifice to maintain their family structure. This level is resonated through the character of the "mistress" in the film. This lady lives with her husband, four children and her husband's mother. Her husband had three sons and a daughter. His daughter passed away at a very young age owing to severe illness and Mui was of the same age as her. The household where Mui worked as a servant maid housed three generations, including the children, the parents and the grandmother. Their interactions are presided over by the principles rooted in Confucian family traditions [Nguyen \(2020\)](#), p.55). The principle states "that family has an owner and, this owner is a man" [Tran \(1989\)](#), p.34. However, in the film, the father figure appears to be an amateur Confucianist. He is more interested in singing than in managing the family business. The narrative shows how he lavishes all the family money and returns bare handed. He exhibits the least interest in money management. He behaves as though he is the head of the family, positioning himself at the centre of the dining table and asserting his authority despite his evident neglect and lack of responsibility toward his family. The mistress appears to be a thoroughly traditional Vietnamese woman. Everything about her – from her external appearance to her disposition – perfectly fit the Confucian tradition. She exudes innocent beauty, serenity, and reticence which is prevalent in the tradition of Confucianism [Nguyen \(2020\)](#), pp.56-57). She also possesses the old-time virtues of a typical Vietnamese woman.

Love is an indispensable part of femininity in *The Scent of green papaya*. Only the presence of a female in the household can harmonise the structure of the family. The film clearly portrays that it is the woman in the family who cares for the entire family and arranges the house beautifully, even though the man enjoys the position of the patriarch owning the house. The character of the mistress evidently displays that it is the woman who manages the family from all perspectives. Her love is not expressed loudly but is a subtle presence throughout the film, her quiet eyes displaying the silent love of a woman. It is the mistress who shoulders the sole responsibility of the family. Tran Anh Hung focuses on the

mistress who takes care of the meal and her struggle to fill up the emptied rice vessels. When the husband deserts them and squanders away all the money that was saved painstakingly, she is left alone to support her family including his mother and children. But she continues to maintain a routine life despite the absence of her husband, who is the owner of the family. She never claimed the 'pillar' position of the household: she compiles all her pain into silence and never resents her husband [Nguyen \(2020\)](#), p. 56.

The quest for love is another aspect of femininity as portrayed in the film. Mui is seen to be awaiting affirmation of love throughout the film. Her journey from the old household to the new one which is more westernised, adds light to her femininity and her inner desires. Khuyen is a western intellectual who is a well-mannered pianist. Mui presents herself as an "oriental" woman in this completely western space of the new household. Mui's face is compared to the statue of the Buddha. She transforms the very atmosphere of the household through her meals, practices, and attire. In her quest for love, Mui tries donning lipstick. Before leaving the house, she is seen adoring the gift of traditional jewellery and clothing of her old mistress. Tran Ahn Hung focuses on her eyes, which speak of nervousness and the desire for Khuyen to see her in this attire even though she is shy. She wishes to show off her youthful beauty and the woman who was initially afraid and bewildered with her master, Khuyen, was now full of love for him and was prepared to accept him although she knew that he was already in another relationship. In this scene we can see how Mui deviates from her traditional Confucian ethics [Nguyen \(2020\)](#), pp.57-58). Khuyen also ends his relationship with the western girl and falls for the traditional oriental Mui, thus portraying his return to the cultural roots, leaving behind the tempting western culture. Now we see the transformation of Mui from being a servant maid to becoming the mistress of the Khuyen household. She takes care of the entire family with great love and affection and soon becomes pregnant with his child. He also tries to teach her to read and write, thus walking her towards the path of a modern western woman [Nguyen 2021](#).

### **3. HYBRIDITY, SYMBOLISM, AND THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF FEMININITY**

The film's narrative structure is linear in nature and Tran Ahn Hung subtly emphasises family structure and social dynamics. The paper examines the traditional conventions in which Vietnamese women have been shaped into structured femininity and family dynamics. The concept of hybridity explains how colonized cultures blend with foreign influences while maintaining their Indigenous identity. The second household, where Mui becomes the mistress, is a symbol of cultural hybridity. Her new environment is more westernized - Khuyen is a pianist, and the household embraces more European customs - yet Mui remains deeply rooted in Vietnamese traditions. Her ability to blend both worlds represents the fluidity of identity in postcolonial Vietnam.

Though the film is structured in a slow narrative process it depicts the mundanity of life, appreciating the surroundings and values the modesty of life. Tran Ahn Hung highlights the two images of women. The first scene shows the mistress who is dressed in the traditional Vietnamese attire (áo dài) donning a dejected countenance. In the next scene, the director employs the montage style which is the special technique of the auteur employing close-up shot. The heroine's patience and resilience are expressed through a close shot of her feet. The scene also portrays the son trying to touch his mother's feet as he realises the pain and

suffering that she has been enduring over the years. These shots demonstrate how the women characters embody beauty and sacrifice their individuality in their efforts to maintain the family edifice that men yearn. Women express their love and femininity through the everyday household chores. These emotions are not expressed outwardly. The image of papaya holds symbiotic significance and acts as a metaphor for growth, transformation and patience. The milk from the papaya implied the longing for love [Liu \(2022\)](#), 1432.

#### 4. VISUAL AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

Moving on to the mise-en-scene analysis, each scene unfolds with a measured, unobtrusive rhythm. Director Tran Anh Hung spins a lucid spatial narrative that gently lights up the inner contours of a woman's life. Inspired by traditional Vietnamese Confucian architecture of the 18th and 19th centuries, the house is carefully designed to reflect the distinctive characteristics of the era. Notably, the home features a range of rooms, including a master bedroom, servants' quarters, children's rooms, a kitchen, a garden, a dining room, and a room altered for the grandmother upstairs as she has not left the room for over 8 years; the room serves as a sacred space where she prays and offers incense, honouring the memory of her loved ones. In this room, the confluence of Vietnamese heritage and family atmosphere is palpable, capturing the essence of the house. Within the modest kitchen space, the servants and mistress join forces to create authentic Vietnamese dishes over firewood, catering to the family's tastes.

In this film Mui is an embodiment of quiet resilience and nurturing emotions and that is the mark of her femininity. Hence this film does not sexualise the character as we see in Laura Mulvey's concept of the 'male gaze'. Mui's character is portrayed as she comes into the space as a child. The camera fully focuses on her eyes as she explores the space; everything is fascinating for her; she conveys strong emotions as she navigates through the altar room which makes the space seem strange and familiar through her eyes. The traditional Vietnamese family is symbolised by the garden. The papaya trees with the fruits become the glamorous space for Mui and a close-up shot signifies sensuality and vitality. "The dialogue is also very scarce. A gentle, peaceful atmosphere is created even when the family is going through a most difficult situation. For example, there are only two scenes where the mistress bursts into tears. In one of the scenes, she cries in front of her mother-in-law, bowing her head as if crying." [Nguyen \(2020\)](#), pp.57) This scene shows women's endurance and suffering to maintain harmony within the family. The mistress is being blamed by the grandmother as she cannot make her son happy and satisfied which may be the sole reason that he was running away from home frequently. In the next scene, when she cries, she shows the suppressed emotions and vulnerability of losing Mui as their family can no longer support the servants. Mistress entitles Mui as her "daughter". In this scene she is not sobbing in silence but rather aloud to show her deeply founded affection and attachment towards Mui. Even when her husband returns home after squandering all the hard-earned money, she does not criticise him, instead, calls upon a doctor to seek help for her husband to recuperate. She also understands his passion for singing and hires a music player [Nguyen \(2020\)](#), p.57). All these actions by the mistress portray love and femininity in the aspect of "Công dung ngôn hạnh." The film frequently uses over-the-shoulder shots to frame Mui's perspective, emphasising her role as an observer - quietly watching, yet deeply engaged. The visual boundaries create a sense of confinement, reinforcing the themes of social



hierarchy. Silence often surrounds Mui, highlighting her presence through her gestures, and reinforcing the power of quiet resilience [Nguyen \(2020\)](#).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Tran Anh Hung's film *The Scent of Green Papaya* is a fascinating visual reflection on family dynamics, Vietnamese traditions and customs and gender roles of the society. Through a *mise-en-scène* observation of the film one can see how Vietnamese identity and femininity are shaped by Confucian principles. The film portrays women as the only ones who maintain and manage family harmony even in the absence of men. This paper analyses, how the movie depicts values of Confucianism, like "Công dung ngôn hạnh," by exploring the duality of traditional femininity. Additionally, this analysis shows that Confucian virtues tend to value female submission, Tran Anh Hung subverts this ideal through the portrayal of the characters Mui and the mistress. Their ability to maintain emotional and domestic stability is a powerful counterpoint to male absence.

The film focuses on Mui's journey from servitude to self-discovery and provides an insight into identity construction. Moving from an aristocratic family to a westernized environment, Mui represents the changing faces of femininity and cultural identity as portrayed within the diaspora. The film argues that traditional values must not be in the form of oppression; instead, these values can coexist with modern changes.

*The Scent of Green Papaya* is not merely a nostalgic representation of the Vietnamese society but also a deeper analysis of how cultural identity and gender roles are shaped and reconstituted. It celebrates Vietnamese women as central figures in maintaining the family and cultural stability as they navigate themselves through the changing society. This paper explores how the film reinterprets traditional gender roles within a postcolonial framework, and positions Vietnamese women as active agents of stability rather than passive symbols of tradition.

The film's powerful depiction of femininity, family bonds, and evolving traditions offers a poignant reflection on the balance between cultural heritage and modern progress. This layered exploration reinforces the significance of cinema as a tool for cultural commentary, allowing viewers to reflect on social values and gender norms in contemporary society.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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