Abstract:

This article analyses the state of câm lừng (silence) embodied in Vietnamese literary reactions to Rabindranath Tagore and his works during the French colonial period to address the question of why the Vietnamese colonial reception of Tagore was marginalized from the socialist Vietnamese historiography. The article argues that silence – an image of Annamite spirituality promoted by Tagore and his works as well as by Vietnamese intellectuals – conforms to the Orientalist discourse of spiritual East. Such colonial appreciations of Tagore do not meet any Vietnamese national and class struggles, thus they are made invisible in postcolonial Vietnamese historiography.

Keywords: Tagore in Vietnamese literature, Orientalism, Silence, Colonial Knowledge
During the period of colonization, the native never stops achieving his freedom from nine in the evening until six in the morning.¹

On June 21, 1929, Rabindranath Tagore, Indian writer, first Asian awardee of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1913), made a stop-over in Saigon (Cochin China). While staying in Japan, giving lectures and interviews, Tagore received an invitation from a representative of the French Embassy to come to Indo-China and make a tour through the colony. The official invitation from the colonial government shaped the positive reception of Tagore in colonial Vietnam, different from the public hostility against Tagore’s visit in China in 1924.²

Tagore’s visit was well-perceived by colonial officials, journalists, politicians, and a variety of common people. A large amount of announcements and articles about Tagore and his visit found a place in both French and quốc ngữ newspapers in Saigon including L’Écho Annamite, Tribune Inchi-noise, Đông Pháp thời báo, La Cloche Fêlée, Thành Chung, Công giáo đồng thành, Quốc Nhà Nam, and Phụ nữ tân văn. This visit was finally recalled multiple times during an international conference on Rabindranath Tagore in Hanoi, November 2011; however, it had never been mentioned in official textbooks of literature and history in Vietnam during the socialist regime, from 1945 to the present. Generations of Vietnamese academics have assumed that the reception of Tagore began in 1961 with An Anthology of Tagore’s Poems (on the anniversary of 100th birthday of Tagore, a 53-page anthology of Tagore’s poems was translated by The Association of Vietnamese Writers (Literature Publishing House), and R Tagore, a publication of

The term ‘colonial’ used here leans on Elleke Boehmer’s perception of colonial discourse in her book Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Boehmer emphasizes ‘colonial’ as space and process in which voices of the colonized and the colonizer are inter-connecting and communicable. The colonial discourse is characterized as an ‘interconnected inter-textual milieu’ because it codifies all foreignness into its common codes; all foreign regions are made into a planet joining into the orbit of metaphors, definition, images, interpretations, or views surrounding the attractable and original center—the colonizer. The world is unified under common codes originated from British. ‘Colonial spaces... became flooded with the same kinds of literature. The imaginations of readers across the British Empire were led along parallel grooves’ (p. 55).
Cao Huy Đinh and Lacon of the National Commission of Social Sciences (Literature Publishing House). Văn học Ấn Độ [Indian Literature] (Lưu Đức Trung), the only textbook of Indian literature for Vietnamese students, first published in 1982, does not refer to the fact that Tagore was literarily and politically known in Vietnam in the colonial period.

This article analyses the state of câm lặng (silence)—colonial stereotypes of Annamite spirituality—embodied in colonial Vietnamese receptions of Tagore to explore the question of why Tagore’s reception in Vietnam during the French colonial period was excluded from socialist Vietnamese histories. Such concept of câm lặng complements the silence of romanticism: Patricia Ondek Laurence once described this silence as ‘mystical elements of Oriental metaphysics’ (transcending Buddhist or Taoist languages) and the ‘Oriental mystery’ (‘Oriental science and far-seeing eyes’). The image of Annamite spirituality that Tagore promoted set the tone for Vietnamese creative representations of Tagore and of Vietnamese society in the colonial period. Specifically, this article examines the presence of these stereotypes of Annamite spirituality—the effects of colonial discourses about the figure of the native—in literary reactions to Tagore and his works. Such reactions include quốc ngữ translations of Tagore and Vietnamese literature that shared topics and themes with Tagore’s works. These stereotypes, as this article will reveal, include the qualities of intellectual silence and sadness. Deep influences of Tagore are latent in Vietnamese writings appreciating stillness and sadness. Such colonial Vietnamese appreciations of Tagore obviously did not meet any political debates and military struggles of a sovereign, united figure of Vietnam, which made them invisible in postcolonial Vietnamese historiography.

During Tagore’s visit, the audience focused more on Tagore’s appearance than his speech. It is easy to recognize that descriptions of Tagore’s appearance are full of illusions of magic and romance, which stem from stereotypes of spiritualistic and tranquil Indian-ness and Easternness. Tagore appears not to have talked much or shared much during his visit to Saigon; his voice seems to have been sunk under programmed speeches of the committee. For example, at the reception of Tagore at ‘Hôtei de Ville’ at 6pm on June 21, as narrated by Le Tribune Inchinoise, Tagore appears to have been silent while there were continuous speeches by the honoured

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3 This part is about the reception of Tagore in Annam more generally. In 1937, short stories by Tagore were translated in Tonkin (Đồng Dương Tập chí). Poets of the New Poetry Movements, who might have been influenced by Tagore or the ideology of the Oriental that Tagore represents are from Tonkin and Annam. The absence of Cochinchinese intellectuals in literary receptions of Tagore might show the failure of Tagore’s visit in offering nationalisms which were exciting in Cochin China and show the success in shaping and improving the manner of Oriental poetry and literature in Annam and Tonkin.

host Béziet and by representatives of Annamite, Hindu and French journals and governmental offices. It is fair to say that news reports of the reception of Tagore were more about Tagore’s eyes, which were considered by natives to have more power to communicate with people and better convey meanings rather than Tagore’s speeches themselves; there seems to have been an illusionary and intensive gaze at Tagore’s appearance. The article ‘Cuộc nghỉ hè tiếp ông Tagore ở Sài Gòn’ [The Reception of Tagore in Saigon] (June 23-24, 1929) in Thần Chung conceived Tagore as a Supreme Being; his words were gospel and it seems not to have been bothered about what exactly Tagore’s message was:

Tagore [has] strangely bright eyes which look like deep and pure oceans. Although we do not understand English, we are able to understand his words by seeing his eyes... as soon as Tagore entered the theatre, the audience seems to stop breathing... when listening to Tagore’s speech, the audience was so silent that they can hear the sound of flying mosquitoes.

In the same manner, Mne Nguyễn Đức Như An, the chief editor of Phụ nữ tận văn, in ‘Rabindranth Tagore ghé viếng tòa báo Phụ nữ tận văn’ (July 4, 1929) described Tagore’s amazing eyes with their godlike power:

Only on this occasion did I come to know Tagore’s appearance in person. It turns out that all portraits of Tagore that we see are not effective enough in presenting the fresh aura on his face and the vital strength in his eyes, which seems to have bright nimbus and are typical for those who have fairy-like manners and a moral core.5

In contemporary Annamite newspapers, the bright eyes and the broad forehead of Tagore were made prominent to highlight his smartness and philosophical ability. The photo of Tagore that was taken by Khánh Kỳ and that was published in most newspapers, such as Le Tribune Indochinoise and Phụ nữ tận văn, shows that Tagore was presented as a symbol of spiritual and serene Easternness. The photo does not capture Tagore from the front but from one side to make Tagore’s long and thick hair and beard stand out. Those visual signs seem to have encoded visual perceptions of Tagore as a representative of the Orient. According to Vietnamese expression, Tagore looks like ‘ông tiên’—a god-man in folktales—in the photos. Also, the direction of the Tagore’s gaze is crucial in the photo; he looks neither downward nor upward but forward and into the distance, which shows the orientalist fantasy of a serene state and the love for thinking and foresight.

The painting of Tagore with his signature by the painter Lê Trung Nghĩa, which was prominently published in La Tribune Indochinoise on June 26, 1929, also reveals insights into the orientalist fantasy.

Lê Trung Nghĩa portrayed Tagore sitting at a table with a book (or a notebook) and holding a pen. Tagore holds the book, but his eyes, which

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5 This is my translation from Vietnamese to English.
are looking at some infinite point, do not show that he was reading but imply that he is meditatively thinking. Again, the portrait does not capture Tagore from the front but from the side. Similar images of Tagore, portraying him from the side, can be seen in other photos during his trip to Saigon, including in the article ‘Réception et lunch à l’ Hôtel de Ville’ in La Tribune Indochinoise (June 24, 1929) and ‘Ảnh Tagore viếng quan tà quán tại Bà- Chiếu’ [Tagore at the Lê Văn Duyệt Tomb on Bà- Chiếu Street] in Duóc Nhà Nam (June 25, 1929). While all figures are facing the lens, Tagore seems to be looking into the distance. The long hair and beard with wide forehead and deep and penetrating eyes are basic characteristics of all photos of Tagore in Saigon, such as the images ‘Rabindrad Nath Tagore at 16 ans’ (June 17, 1929), ‘Chez M. Diep Van Giap’ [At the Villa of Diep Van Giap] (June 21, 1929), ‘Dans le salon de M. Nguyen Van Cua’ (La Tribune Indochinoise) and ‘Chân dung Rabin Dranath TAGORE mặc y phục Annam, đầu bìt khăn den, mình bàn âo dài’ [Tagore in Annamese Costume] (June 27, 1929), and ‘Ảnh chup chùa Chetty tại đường Ohier’ [Photo Taken at Chetty Pagoda] (June 29, 1929) in Duóc Nhà Nam. These portraits strengthen the image of Tagore (as presented in descriptions of the ceremony) as a typical Easterner whose power lies in sophisticated thinking and serenity rather than in secular activities.

The inclination to ‘silence’, which refers to the passion of vague thinking and hoping, is also obvious in writings inspired by Tagore’s visit. Tagore’s speech about restoring ancient connections between Annam and India or the ancient Asian origins of Annam was successful in the sense that it made Annamese people aware of their once tranquil lives in ancient times. Such awareness stems from his supposed knowledge of Indian philosophy, and of Easternness. The fact that this ambiguity and serenity were embedded into appreciations of Tagore seems to have been appropriate with Tagore’s reminder to the Annamites of their Easternness and to Annamese writers of their serene traditions. Phạm Đình Khương, in his paper ‘Thuyết bắc a và chu nghĩa hòa bình’ [The Theory of Humanity and Pacification] (25 June, 1929) in Công giáo đồng tình, described the spiritual and solemn environment and the rising hope of peace and serenity in Saigon provoked by Tagore’s visit:

These days, after a peaceful sleep, our morality and physicality are stronger... These days, on the roads, all of our people including French, Indians (chà) and thousands of Annamites, relatives, friends and visitors have happy smiles on their lips. Are we too optimistic? Is a magical power helping us to find new humans in our area? No, it is not. People and things are the same. Our minds change. We are walking on the same road, but we are gasping for new air and voice into our lungs. The new air and sounds were brought to us by the winds from India. With the new air and sounds, we
cease to be mentally tired; we have more energy. In a peaceful environment, hundreds of trees are flowering; people are peaceful.6

This paragraph, which is full of natural images such as winds, air and trees, of adjectives referring to peaceful states such as ‘peaceful’, ‘harmonious’, and ‘flowering’, and romantically aggrandizing statements such as ‘people are harmonious’, and ‘Our minds change’, portray a placid and pastoral milieu, a milieu appropriate to the Indian origins in which Tagore was raised. Furthermore, the more universal terms and indefinite inferences such as ‘minds’, ‘voice’, ‘mentality’, and ‘energy’, seem to have imitated Tagore’s own rhetorical speech that is full of winged-words and statements, such as ‘blazing light at the sunny beaches’, ‘dreams and souls are beautiful as brocades’, or the ‘soul of India is dim’.7 There is no stated specific voice and ideology in this paragraph; instead, it is as if there was a narrator who keeps thinking in meditation. There are continuous ideological conversations between the narrator and a vague character, which might be more likely himself. His flow of thought is endless. There is only one organ for speaking mentioned, which are the ‘lips’. Instead, there is only quiet and soundless ‘smiles’. The implication of the smiles becomes the topic of infinite questions and thoughts: ‘Are we too optimistic? Is a magical power helping us to find new humans in our areas?’ Even when Phạm Đình Khuông described excitements and hopes, he apparently preferred the unspoken state:

Oh my God, looking at the future gives us a lot of hope, hopes for a future for universal and human beings. It is clear that the hope is still there, so it is not good to be pessimistic. Being cynical is being destroyed by the vicissitudes of life... It is clear that life of human beings is a life of hope, a permanent hope. As long as humans will have hope, intellectuals should have hope as well. The theory of hope is not for personal interests of living people. Past heroes and kingdoms thought for their people’s peace.8

In this Vietnamese nationalist writing inspired by Tagore, the dominant ideology is that the nature of human life is to keep up hope. Accordingly, the narrator appears to be one who maintains hope and dreams of the future. It reflects desired models of ideal intellectuals who love to think and hope, whose lives are more about streams of thinking or interior monologues, rather than speaking and acting out their thoughts.

In addition to literary writings about political themes, literary criticisms of Tagore also show a special appreciation for a kind of intellectual stillness, which is represented in the form of sophisticated tranquillity and sorrow. The article ‘Ông Rabindranath Tagore’ by Thạch Lan (Phu Nui Tan

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6 This is my translation from Vietnamese to English.
7 Phạm Đình Khuông. ‘Thuyết bác ái và chủ nghĩa hòa bình’, Công giáo đồng thống 25 June, 1929
8 ‘Thuyết bác ái và chủ nghĩa hòa bình’, Công giáo đồng thống June 25, 1929. This is my translation from Vietnamese to English.
Văn, June 27, 1929) is full of appraisals of nobility and philosophy of Tagore’s vague quietness and sadness:

He also describes sorrowful souls, but not the secular sorrow of imperial girls [Kiều] and prostitutes; his sorrow is ambiguous. His wandering sorrowful soul is able to find heart-to-heart understandings in the infiniteness. It is a sorrow which both sings and is reasonable and which both drops tears in eyes and smiles on lips. Smiles imply philosophy and concern. As told by Roman Roland in his translation of Tagore’s novel, although Tagore is passionate in his meditation, his eyes are still watching and his lips are still smiling at this world.9

Here, the beautification of sorrow lies in the fact that it is expected to address the universality that does not belong to a specific individual, class or gender. In other words, the beauty of sorrow goes beyond the mundane and is in harmony with a supernatural world that cannot be named. In addition, the beauty of sorrow is also described as thoughtful sorrow, an appreciated sorrow. It supposedly does not make sounds; rather, it is the durable quiet that is appreciated. The love for sorrow is not only presented in the topic but in the writing itself. The poetic writing with rhythmic sentences and the use of literary allusions such as imperial girls [Kiều] and prostitutes align it with a kind of meditated sorrow.

The pleasures of mental silence, which refers to the preference for hidden sorrows, hopes and thoughts over material history or social politics, also appears to have caught editors of the weekly French-Quốc ngữ bilingual journal Đạo Nguyện tập chí (Tonkin). This journal was initially founded in 1914 by the Governor General Albert Sarraut and re-established in 1937 by Nguyễn Giang, son of Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, a famous reformist. This journal printed Nguyễn Giang’s Quốc ngữ translations of the two short stories by Tagore, including Cố lạc ngôn xinh đẹp của tôi (truyện ngắn của thi sĩ Án Độ Rabindranath Tagore viết bằng tiếng Anh) [My Fair Neighbor, a Short Story Written in English by the Indian Poet Rabindranath Tagore] (July 17, 1937) and Su-ba (truyện ngắn của nhà thi sĩ Án Độ Rabindranath Tagore viết bằng tiếng Anh) [Suba, a Short Story by the Indian Poet Rabindranath Tagore] (July 24, 1937). The Quốc ngữ translations of Tagore’s literary writings are more about the romance of passiveness, quietness, reticence, sorrow and imagination. The two main female characters of the stories are both silenced: there is no hint of spoken sounds from them. In Subha, the girl was dumb when she was born; in My Fair Neighbour, the widow is not dumb but she never talks. Although their presence is the focal point of other gazes (of an invisible narrator and two male characters), their lives and thoughts are rendered through the imagination of others. Accordingly, the only visual strength and beauty that these women have is supposedly silent itself; silence becomes the merit of beautiful femininity. Such an

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9 This is my translation from Vietnamese to English.
appraisal of taciturnity is obvious in *Subha*, which offers a concrete philosophical articulation of silence:

> When we express our thoughts in words, the medium is not easily found. There must be a process of translation, which is often not exact, and then we fall into error. But black eyes need no translating; the mind itself throws a shadow upon them. In them thought opens or shuts, shines forth or goes out in darkness, hangs steadfast like the setting moon or like the swift and restless lightning illuminates all quarters of the sky. Those who from birth have had no other speech than the trembling of their lips learn a language of the eyes, endless in expression, deep as the sea, clear as heaven, wherein sunset, light and shadow play. The dumb have a lonely grandeur like Nature’s own. Wherefore the other children almost dreaded Subha and never played with her. She was silent and companionless as the noontide.

The philosophy of this paragraph shows the denial of language or more literal forms of thinking in favour of denotive, suggestive and abstract ideologies. The focus on the ability of the eyes to talk for dumb people appears in order to provide the silence its own power. Similarly in *My Fair Neighbor*, the stress on the magical power of the widow’s eyes (a widow who never talks) in revealing her internal world is to sharpen the aesthetics of quietness. The quietness allows the condition of possibility for poetic compositions:

> Poet-like, I would reply: “They come from my imagination; for, as you know, truth is silent, and it is imagination only which waxes eloquent. Reality represses the flow of feeling like a rock; imagination cuts out a path for itself.”

*Tao Đàn Tập chí* [Poetic Association Journal], an apolitically literary and culturally oriented organization, founded in 1939 by contemporary prominent intellectuals from Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China issued a Vietnamese version of Tagore’s novel *The Home and the World* in seven volumes (No. 6-13) in 1939. This novel about the failure of a nationalist experiment of making women’s voices audible and their activities visible seems to have fit with the set tone of the products of the journal that are more unrealistic, romantic and emotional. The translation of *The Home and the World* is also consistent with the pronounced role of being a cultural organ focusing on art and ideology; the Vietnamese soul is, accordingly, ideologically and artistically oriented. Consequently, the translation is a promotion of the voicelessness supposedly typical for the native.

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11 This is my translation from Vietnamese to English. Nguyễn Giang. ‘Cô láng giềng xinh đẹp của tôi (truyện ngắn của thi sĩ An Đỗ Rabindranath Tagore viết bằng tiếng Anh” *Đồng Đa năng tạp chí*, July 17, 1937.
This beauty in the inability to speak seems to have found its consonance with the aesthetic principle of the New Poetry Movement (1930-1945) that beauty is embodied in the quietness. For example, in 1938, Xuân Diệu (1916-1985), considered to be a king of Vietnamese love poetry, wrote the poem ‘Đấy mùa thu tôi’ [The Autumn has come]:

Clouds are hidden in the air, birds fly away
Spleenful sky, resent departure
There are young girls who do not talk
Leaning on the door, what are they thinking about?\(^{12,13}\)

The poem is filled with the ‘Oriental mystery’ with the image of still-standing and far-seeing eyes. In 1939, Xuân Diệu wrote the short story Tòa nhí Kiều, addressing the existing prominence of the aesthetics of silence in lives of young girls and intellectuals. Like the two females in the translated short stories by Tagore, the two female characters in the story by Xuân Diệu never speak; the only hints to show that they are living beings exist solely in their gestures, including light movements of lips (light smiles) and eyes. Throughout his life, Phan, the only male intellectual in the story, quietly moves back and forth on the ladders of the building and sometimes moves his lips fuzzily:

Sometimes, Phan climbs the ladder. I see something in the corner of his lips which is like one sixth of a smile. However, it is enough to make me happy and think. I think of Quỳnh, who is too quiet with peaceful eyes, which are like nothing... She is so quiet that sometimes I feel sorry for her. I cannot hear any words from her – maybe it is because I do not have chances to hear her speaking. It might be the fact that Phan and Quỳnh are in harmony as they are like two ‘nothing’ persons that match each other.\(^{12}\)

Like the widow in the short story of Tagore, the female and male characters in the story by Xuân Diệu do not talk although they are not physically dumb.

Not only do quietness and tranquillity cover the Vietnamese colonial literature; the sorrow and pleasure of literary creation that are visible in the translations of Tagore’s literary writing also become its dominant aesthetic state. The paragraphs above from the two short stories by Tagore show special attention to the ability and pleasure of loneliness, of beauty and meditation about deep and invisible levels of the world and human beings. The narrative voice is imagined to be passionate for abstract thoughts of the world as represented by specific things in the world such as eyes and the fate of normal people.

However, these thoughts are intensively about supernatural or unrealistic issues such as the moon, sea, universe, and poetry, which are de-

\(^{12}\) Officially, the history of Vietnamese literature was written based on political history. The assumed periods of literature coincide with historical periods.

\(^{13}\) My emphasis. My translation from Vietnamese to English.

\(^{14}\) My translation from Vietnamese to English.
tached from secular concerns such as miserable caste conflicts. Such innocuously and quietly undefined romanticism appears to have been the merits of good poetry and good poets; the philosophical couplets in the collections of Vietnamese New Poetry are those with such abstract philosophies of sadness. Xuân Diệu once directly addressed this favourite sadness in his poem ‘Chiềу’ (Afternoon):

Today the light sky is higher
I am sad but I do not know why I am sad
...Silent the sunset, melancholy the sunset
Though nothing happens, it is lightly sad.15

This quiet tone seems to have been canonized by The Tale of Kieu, which is about a dumb prostitute in early modern period, a national poem.16 The merits of the national literary character include peace, tranquillity and obedience. For a long time, Vietnamese poetry and prose found their aesthetics and romance in pain (as in the unfortunate life of Kieu) and ambiguous sorrows (lyrical characters in colonial Vietnamese poems).

Such appreciations of intellectual silence and sadness in the literary writings of Tagore and writings inspired by Tagore found harmony with the contemporary literary compositions of New Poetry and ‘Romantic Prose’, and appears to have had its origin in the Orientalist philosophy Tagore presented, as mediated by the colonial Vietnamese press and scholarship. Such origin can be seen in the first scholarly and sustained research on Tagore, Thi hào Tagore: Nhà đại biểu văn hóa Á Đông [The Great Poet Tagore: Representative of the East] by Nguyễn Văn Hải (Tri Tầnxuất bán, 1943).

When writing about Tagore’s early life, Nguyễn Văn Hải focused on activities that Tagore had participated in to show that he was more interested in things that did not belong to a specific nation, such as winds, the moon and trees, through which he could see something universal. Tagore’s idea of poetry was presented in Prabhāt Sangit and Sandhyā Sangit, which showed the transformation from the idea of universal sorrow to the happiness in seeing the harmony between separate things. Tagore’s idea of transcendental humanism is, as the book shows, not only presented in his poetry but also in his practical activities including his public philosophical speeches of harmonious relations between East and West and his founding of his university at Santiniketan.

The book by Nguyễn Văn Hải offers another possible reason why silence becomes an aesthetic in the reception of Tagore. The book describes Sādhanā, a principle in Tagore’s poetry, which might have been the supposed origins of literary life in Vietnam:

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15 This is my translation from Vietnamese to English.

16 Nam Phong, sponsored by the French administration launched essays on The Tale of Kieu on volumes 34, 35, 36, 38, 133, 287, 308, 344, 351, and 383 in 1923.
[In India,] it is not about the truth coming from sciences, but from sympathetic souls, from souls to souls. It does not provide people with the power of acquired knowledge but the happiness of being beyond all rules of things that are at the same state. Those who do not go beyond the sciences to understand the universal never understand that people have their eyes and spirit in nature. [...] 

The attitude of Indians toward reality is that there is an essential unification of the universe and human beings. That unification is acquired from the minds of people, which can create the sky, planets, light and people in its relations to the outside world. 

It is possible to find the link between understandings of Sādhanā and the literary receptions of Tagore, which appear to have been more about the power of silence, of eyes and of internal thinking. In the essential oneness in the universe, words might create boundaries and distinctions that become non-sense, while imagination and internal thoughts pervade the literary life of pre-war Vietnam.

Tagore’s Vietnamese reception, favouring the spirituality that Nguyễn Văn Hải focuses on in his writing on Tagore, is also found in the concept of jivandevatā. The concept, which stresses on the transient nature of life, can be used to explain the reason of the pervading quiet sorrow in literary receptions of Tagore and in contemporary Vietnamese literary life:

The latent myth in Tagore’s soul helps us to embrace the long life of the Creator... What is endlessness? All is transitory in this life. Nothing in this life is endless, but it is life that is endless. It is right to think that nothing is completely destructive but it will wear a new form to contribute to the endless creation. High in the sky or deep in the sea, although the boundary is endless, the world of sound is in unison. In this normal life, there are corners for love and the erotic... Living is not bound by this life. This life! Oh my God! It just lasts one second in the infinite space...As soon as we are born, we are near death. Vitality and Death circularly create endless life and unite all entities. It is known that the self is immortal; despite death, the self is everlasting. Therefore, there is no need to fear doing good things. In addition, if you cannot complete these good things in this life, you can have them done in next life. So, go ahead to do good things.

The way Nguyễn Văn Hải understood Tagore becomes apparent in his explanation of the existing literary life that is full of hopeful and romantic silence.

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18 Nguyễn Văn Hải, (Kiều Thanh Quế), *Thi Hào Tagore- Nhà đại biểu văn hóa Phong Đông* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Tân Việt, 1943), p.4; my translation from Vietnamese to English.
There are debates about why there was a dominance of romanticized sorrow and intellectual silence in pre-war literary life.\(^1\) However, it is undeniable that the literary reception of Tagore showed the influences of Orientalist discourses of the spiritual East pervading Europe in the late nineteenth century through Vietnamese receptions of Tagore and the emotional and philosophical patterns in Vietnamese literary writings. In the introduction to his book, Nguyễn Văn Hải expressed his gratitude to foreign teachers for motivating the love for Tagore among ‘us’:

We are mostly rationalist, so it is very difficult for us to master Tagore’s ideologies. The reason why we could love Tagore—it is not a guarantee that we could comprehend him—is due to teachings by foreign teachers. Most of them are English, French. I am especially grateful for the Indian scholar Sushil Chandra Mitter, a professor of Ripon College in Calcutta, who explained [Tagore] to us. Now I want to bring what I learned [from these teachers] to my dear readers... Because Tagore has a lot of writings in Bengali... this book mostly uses translations by Prof. Mitter. The book editing Tagore’s works, *La Pensée de Rabindranath Tagore*; (Préface de Sylvain Lévi; Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1930), is the best resource for us as a base for writing this book.\(^2\)

In the same text, Nguyễn Văn Hải expresses his hopes that his book was to serve the rising celebrations of Eastern values among Western intellectuals after World War I, when he states that ‘we clearly see winds of great ideologies blown from East to West... I wish that great winds will never stop so that they can reach the realm of Vietnamese literature!’ (p. 7). Nguyễn Văn Hải’s book is introduced in the column ‘New Books’ of the journal *Tri Tân tạp chí [Understanding the New]*, in volume 97 (May 1943), which provides more indication of the vital role that French knowledge played in shaping the literary reception of Tagore in Vietnam:

Despite of the French versions of the novels of *tiên sinh* (Mr. Tagore) such as *La Maison et le monde*, *A quaire voix* with introductions by Romain Rolland, Léandré Vaillat, etc. giving brief information about Tagore’s career and regardless that the thin French book included only ten published pages in Saigon in 1924, there has not been a book delving more deeply into *tiên sinh*. In short articles, there are several, scattered in different newspapers that not many people know. Eventually, the article by Trúc Đình in Nam Phong in May 1924 became the most important one. *Phu nữ tàn văn* in the

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\(^{1}\) Textbooks from Vietnam try to attach these states to nationalist issues, such as the loss of the nation or the hopelessness of intellectuals in saving their nation from French colonialism, etc. Nguyễn Văn Trung, in his book *French Colonialism in Vietnam – Myths and Facts* (Chủ nghĩa thực dân Pháp ở Việt Nam: Thực chất và huyền thoại) published by Nam Sơn Xuất Bản, Saigon, 1963, shared the same ideas with post-war official interpretations of pre-war literary life. The author analyzes French scholarly books of Vietnamese literature and culture to reveal colonial political strategy attached to appreciations of sorrowful writings and literary creations.

\(^{2}\) Nguyễn Văn Hải, p.5; my translation from Vietnamese to English.
South and Văn học tập chí in the North used to have articles about tiên sinh but they are very cursory [in comparison with the book by Nguyễn Văn Hải].

In short, the Vietnamese colonial perceptions of Tagore’s spirituality succeeded in providing and promoting an Orientalist model of an Asian nation, which was typical of supernatural and universal physicality and mentality; the reception of Tagore in literary practices was the product of colonial knowledge. In the same way, the aesthetics of silence, which refers to preferences for quietness, internalized thinking, and sorrow, show deep and broad influences of the powerful colonial discourses of its colony and of the natives. The power of colonial discourse also revealed itself in the way that the native learned to love being quiet, to love being voiceless; in other words, the voicelessness becomes an aesthetics and a moral in Vietnamese literature and in Vietnamese life.

The spirituality promoted in colonial Vietnamese perceptions of Tagore obviously did not meet national projects of postcolonial Vietnam, which mostly focused on questions of nation. The Party-led national sovereignty has been the central theme in ideological debates and political and military practices of Vietnam since the time of the Revolution. The concept of nation has been carefully constructed so it reminds people of the national hegemony and the associated indispensable leadership of the Party; all spiritual activities must perform their commitments to the national unity, the national sovereignty, and the Party leadership, which are common objectives of all policies of the Party and State of Vietnam ‘for the sake of construction and defence of the Fatherland’. As Vietnam constantly struggled for national sovereignty, the silence that Tagore brought to Vietnamese literature did not find a place in this context.

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21 This is my translation from Vietnamese to English.

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