

On some trends of contemporary Vietnamese novel after 30 years of renovation

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Abstract: *After 30 years of renovation (since 1986), Vietnamese novel - the main genre of literature in which are cristalized the achievements of a literary period - has attracted many new pens, giving birth to many creations, and especially witnessing some new novel trends in this period. This paper makes an overview of creation achievements, main trends of novel during 30 past years, thence providing us with multilateral informations on literary life today.*

Keywords: Literary renovation, Novel, Creation trend, Novel physiognomy, 1986-2016.

I. Stage of 30 years: Renovating country, renovating literature

The 6th Congress of Party in 1986 made an important landmark in national history from that Vietnam began to move on the itinerary of renovation. During these last three decades, Vietnam has reached great achievements in various domains, including literature and arts. According to Resolution 05 of Party Politburo that decided to “untie” the literature and arts, literature has affirmed its role in the renovation. The thriving of literature with true aesthetic values is manifested in various aspects: author, creation, reader, creation activities, theory and criticism, translation... Especially, the view and evaluation of reality by literature have also

become more flexibly than ever. Many old problems are also reexamined in new spirit, by more open and democratic view. The world literature by various ways has strongly impacted to give new colours to Vietnamese literary life. Despite the modest achievements, Vietnamese literature still shows more or less an open and dynamic thought.

Novel is a big and most important genre of Vietnamese contemporary prose. After 1986, in untying condition, our literature has truly prospered, especially the novel. Greatest achievement is the change of literary conception and human life. Thence there appears a completely different writing manner from previous one, making to emerge great authors and

creations. These authors are interested in human fate, universal human values, interrogation and dialogue with reality. Though the novels are shortened in scope, they still make the physiognomy of novel of this period. We can mention some representative novels as follows: *Remote Time, Two Families* (by Lê Lựu), *Wedding Without Marriage Certificate, Against the Flood* (by Ma Văn Kháng), *A Tiny Human World* (by Nguyễn Khải), *Toward the Wilderness* (by Nhật Tuấn), *Black and White Bits of Life* (by Nguyễn Quang Lập), *An Ixora Time, Offshore Promised Land* (by Nguyễn Quang Thân), *Heavenly Messenger* (by Phạm Thị Hoài), *Paying the Penalty, Big Wave, Land of Dream* (by Triệu Xuân), *Swallows Fly* (by Nguyễn Trí Huân), *Sorrows of War* (by Bảo Ninh), *No Husband on the Port* (by Dương Hương), *Land with Men and Ghosts* (by Nguyễn Khắc Trường), *Begging the Past, Street, Life is Long* (by Chu Lai), *Zodiacal Day* (by Nguyễn Đình Chính), *One Day and One Life, Storm* (by Lê Văn Thảo), *Lost in the Forest* (by Trung Trung Đĩnh), *Left Family Annals* (by Đoàn Lê), *Flood and Fire as Robbers* (by Hoàng Minh Tường), *Restoration* (by Thái Bá Lợi), *Father and Son with the Law of Life* (by Nguyễn Bắc Sơn), *Exiled Soil* (by Hoàng Đình Quang), *Small Family* (by Dạ Ngân)...

From 1998 to 2015, during 17 years, Vietnam Writers Association organized 4 novel competitions (one every 5 years). There were about 1,000 literary works participating in these four competitions (to not mention the novels participating in other competitions held by various central organizations in co-ordination with Vietnam

Writers Association such as Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of Transport). There were writers that won in these competitions such as: Nguyễn Xuân Khánh, Tô Nhuận Vỹ, Nguyễn Quang Thân, Nguyễn Bắc Sơn, Nguyễn Khắc Phục, Đào Thắng, Trung Trung Đĩnh, Trần Văn Tuấn, Xuân Đức, Vũ Huy Anh, Bùi Việt Sỹ,... Other newly emerging writers are discovered in competitions such as Thùy Dương, Nguyễn Xuân Hưng, Thiên sơn, Trần Nhã Thụy, Nguyễn Danh Lam, Nguyễn Đình Tú,...

There is a remark that could be controversial as follows: Novels through four competitions have had only “foundation” but not “peak”, had “works” but short of “authors”, had “persons” but short of “personages”, had “words” but lacking the “novel language”. And through competitions, there emerged a question of “novel thinking”. There are not less writers who still confuse “long story” with “novel” when noting the genre name for their creation. The life of creative work after having received prize is short,... (Bùi Việt Thắng, 2016). In 2002, Vietnam Writers Association held a workshop on renovation of novel thinking, whose reports later were published into book *Renovation of Novel Thinking*. It can be seen that, through their ups and downs, and although there were insufficiencies of prize awarding, and even there being a opinion that “a competition having no first prize means that the novel is stopping short” (Bùi Việt Thắng, 2016), but the novels of 30 past years have reflected their true physiognomy in the common development of literature.

There are those novels that raised controversy such as: *God's Chance* by Nguyễn Việt Hà, *A World without Women* by Bùi Anh Tấn, *River of Sugar-cane* by Đào Thắng, *Human World* by Từ Nguyên Tĩnh, *Old Quiet Boat Port* by Xuân Đức, *Holy Forest with Clear Stream* by Trần Văn Tuấn, *Ghost Woman* by Nguyễn Khắc Phục, *One Hundred Fugitive Years* by Vũ Huy Anh, *Exiled Soil* by Hoàng Đình Quang, *Knife Throwing Target* by Mạc Can, *Settlement in Foreign Land* by Thùy Dương, *City Wall* by Võ Thị Xuân Hà, *Searching in Memory* by Lê Ngọc Mai, *Oath-taking Ceremony* by Nguyễn Quang Thân, *Summer Horizon* by Hữu Phương, *Deep Place* by Nguyễn Quang Hà, *Quyên* by Nguyễn Văn Thọ, *Xuân Từ Chiếu* by Y Ban, *Mountain Mother*, *Hồ Quý Ly* by Nguyễn Xuân Khánh... In these works, their authors have also touched on the delicate questions of the times, expressed those questions that previously were the taboos. Even the novels of revolutionary war also have a new breath, a "different" physiognomy. The authors have made the novels in a new creation trends, among which there are the ones that are welcome, but the others raise much controversy.

There is also an opinion that in recent years the new novels have not yet the strong breakthrough of artistic thinking. "It seems that competition organizers chose a safe solution: Awarding prize to those novels that have the trend of renovation on the traditional foundation of narration" (Đỗ Hải Ninh, 2010). However, with the breakthrough of quantity during 30 past years, we still expect and hope for

a "new chance" of novel. And in the critic Đỗ Ngọc Thạch's words, "it seems that novel 'is cleaning up the battlefield' of 'renovation literature' to seek a new breakthrough?" (Đỗ Ngọc Thạch, <http://www.bichkhe.org/home.php?>) - a breakthrough both of art and thinking of creation.

II. Some trends of contemporary novel

1. Postmodern trend

"In Vietnam, there couldn't be a postmodernism in literature with the full sense of this term. Nevertheless we still have a foundation for affirming that there are its marks and signs" (Phùng Gia Thế, 2007). The most prominent mark of postmodernism in literature is just the postmodern perception. The concrete socio-historical times naturally give birth to corresponding social mentality and state of spirit: The breakdown of living order, the imposition of orthodoxy, the upset of living values scale, the loss of faith, the loneliness, the anxiety and doubt. "Nationalist thought and cultural view of Nguyễn Xuân Khánh in his novels as *Hồ Quý Ly*, *Mountain Mother* and *Bringing Rice to Pagoda* express the cultural axes. We can't put the label of postmodernism on Nguyễn Xuân Khánh, but we must recognize that his novels, especially the *Bringing Rice to Pagoda*, have the postmodern colour" (Nguyễn Hồng Dũng, 2016). The problem of Taoism in Vietnam has become an important subject of the novel *In Private* by Nguyễn Đình Tú. He has deciphered the culture by a quite new view. In the novel *Saints and Butterflies*, Đỗ Minh Tuấn has examined the human awareness of the problem of traditional

cultural belief in the time of market economy. Đỗ Minh Tuấn used the language of parody with a nuance of bitter in order to portray the process of cultural change in the countryside, when the town thinking and life-style penetrated and eroded traditional culture and faith. The saints are lost, remaining only butterflies with their short mortal life, so butterflies no longer respect and fear the saints (Nguyễn Hồng Dũng, 2016). The novels by Nguyễn Bình Phương are an obsession, an agony and stagnancy of life. In the novels by Nguyễn Việt Hà we find a chaotic and broken life. In the novels by Tạ Duy Anh there is an anxious search of ego, a confused explanation of miseries of mankind. In the novels by Hồ Anh Thái we see the puzzlement about the mankind. Apparition of postmodernism in Vietnamese literature in general and in novel in particular is not a borrowed and imported phenomenon. Through creations of the writers in the renovation epoch, we see that: the socio-historical conditions during 30 past years have given birth to postmodern mentality, perception and cultural type in Vietnamese literature.

2. Existential trend

Existentialism appeared in Vietnamese literature since the first half of 20th century with the novels by the literary circle of “Self-reliant Literary Group” (Tự lực văn đoàn). In the late 20th century and especially in the early 21st century, the existential trend has existed in parallel with other trends. Thái Phan Vàng Anh (2015) remarked that “The obsession with existence of human nature is also an origin of literary deep dimension”. In the new

context, existentialism has the favourable conditions for penetrating into Vietnamese literature, contributing to diversity of aesthetic colours of literature, affirming particular styles, creating the existential mentality in literature.

Existential mentality in Vietnamese novel since 1986, especially in 1990s, is mainly expressed in the care and worry about the human nature and condition. In a lot of works, existential obsession is even suggested right by the title of novel: *A Tiny Human World* (by Nguyễn Khải), *Children Dying Agedly* (by Nguyễn Bình Phương), *One Day and One Life* (by Lê Văn Thảo)... “Since having more or less a existential spirit, after about 30 years of development, our literature has had an existential trend in the multitrending panorama of the novels in the early 21st century” (Thái Phan Vàng Anh, 2015).

Novels in the early 21st century pay a special attention to existence of mankind. They express the conception of entity, freedom, absurdity, engagement, rebellion, body and sex. We can somewhat perceive the existential marks through the titles of novels such as: *Missing T* (by Thuận), *And When There Are Ashes and Dust* (by Đoàn Minh Phượng), *At the Strange Beginning* (by Nguyễn Bình Phương), *Late Apocalypse* (by Nguyễn Việt Hà), *Love Story in Variety Show* (by Lê Anh Hoài), *Return of Scratch* (by Trần Nhã Thụy), *In the Back Current*, *In the Siege of World* (by Nguyễn Danh Lam), *Grey Shore* (by Vũ Đình Giang), *Absence* (by Đỗ Phấn)... So-called existential novel has touched on the most radical aspect of life: that is the

existential life. It seems that the existential novel at the same time can interfere with many other trends of novel. Thus the existential trend of novel is maybe a particular current, but to a certain extent it may comprise many other novel currents (Thái Phan Vàng Anh, 2015).

2. *Historicizing trend*

Renovation enterprise of country and the changes in social life, the cultural and aesthetic environment together with the changes in literary direction coming from politics to culture, all have influenced much the movement and development of novel in general and historical novel in particular. Another also very important factor contributing to create epochal knowledge horizon and conditioning the formation of historical novel after Renovation day is the awakening of the ego of writer, the aspiration for escape from the old, seeking the new in artistic creation of historical topic. The researcher Nguyễn Văn Hùng (2016) remarked: "The writers have right to openly express their personal awareness of those ideals that were imagined as immutable, to doubt the dogmas, to dedivinize the idols, proposing new standards". Because now even the novelists writing about history do not describe the history by usual manner, but they create by their personal perception.

A proportion of historical novels after Renovation day is differed from the traditional historical novels which considered the truth and objectiveness as vital criteria. These new historical novels approach the past by the subjective view

and attitude of creator. Review of history and interpretation of history from "other" views are given more attention than the search of truth and restoration of true physiognomy of history as by previous conceptions. The historical novels like *Hồ Quý Ly* (by Nguyễn Xuân Khánh), *Pyre* (by Võ Thị Hảo), *Oath-taking Ceremony* (by Nguyễn Quang Thân), *Pathetic History of Tây Sơn* (by Lê Đình Danh), *Secret of Imperial Palace* (by Bùi Anh Tấn),... all have obvious personal colour and experience. Novelists incline to interpret the history rather than describe and illustrate it. "This interpretation comprises the new conception of history and a new discourse of history, leading to interpret the past with the spirit of dialogue and dedivinization, as well as the doubt of "grand narrative" of history (such as the thoughts, doctrines, religions, beliefs, myths, archetypes...)" (Nguyễn Văn Hùng, 2017).

Thence there are new horizons for imagination and interpretation of history, leading to many trends and original styles. "Life reality is not only reduced to the historical changes and events and community life; and these are not viewed by the admirable and worshipful view, but by the wider, deeper and more "secular" vision. Literature has just touched on the nature of things, discovered the history, culture and human being at the depth of mysteries, unseeableness, consciousness and unconsciousness, noble aspiration and trivial desire" (Nguyễn Văn Hùng, 2017).

3. *Feministic trend*

In Vietnam, the feministic spirit has come to the throne and gradually becomes a

prominent literary trend, especially since the beginning of 21st century. Vietnamese feministic literature is not a main stream in the common current of modern literature as in France and USA, where the gender equalitarianism is strong. However, to the need of “re-awareness” toward eliberating the women on many aspects, many Vietnamese female writers have somewhat affirmed the right of women through literature.

Feministic trend of novel is often associated with the creations of Y Ban (*Xuân Từ Chiều, Emotion Destroying Game*), Dạ Ngân (*Small Family*), Đoàn Lê (*Predestination*), Lý Lan (*Woman Novel*), Thuận (*Chinatown, Paris in 11th August*), Đoàn Minh Phượng (*Rain in the Next Incarnation, And When There Are Ashes and Dust*), Võ Thị Xuân Hà (*In Chilly Water*), Phạm Thị Hoài (*Heavenly Messenger*), Thùy Dương (*In Bare Feet*), Phong Điệp (*Blogger*), Đỗ Hoàng Diệu (*Incubus*)... and somewhat with the creations of other authors like Đỗ Bích Thúy, Linda Lê... The researcher Thái Phan Vàng Anh (2013) thinks that: “The awareness of female value in the novels of early 21st century is expressed first by the negation of official values of patriarchy, associated with the notion ‘phallogentrism’ (J. Lacan); being orientated towards identifying and deciphering the female aspects that are explicit or hidden in the works. ‘On behalf of feminineness’, the women writers not only interrogate, speak about the dolour of human condition, but also attack the ‘taboos’ in order to affirm their voice, their rights of women, including the gender right”.

4. Magic realist trend

In the article “An approach to Vietnamese novel of the Renovation time”, the researcher Nguyễn Bích Thu (2006) considered that contemporary novelists are aware of deepening the inner world toward discovering the spiritual depth in order to perceive the true human being. The concept of magic realism is no longer strange to readers and researchers. The literary current of magic realism appeared quite long ago, becoming an important school in the Latin America and the West. In Vietnam, in the 21st century, this trend has truly developed, becoming a hot tendency of young writers.

During more than 30 past years, manifestations of magic realism are seen here and there in creations of such authors like Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Nguyễn Bình Phương, Hồ Anh Thái, Nhật Chiêu, Đặng Thân, Hoàng Ngọc Thư, Nguyễn Vĩnh Nguyên, Lê Anh Hoài, Vinh Huỳnh, Hoàng Ngọc Tuấn, Đỗ Ngọc Thạch... The writers welcome the magic motif as an effective artistic means in order to transmit to readers the vivid approaches to reality. For this trend, we can mention some works such as *Angel Doing Penance* (by Tạ Duy Anh), *Heavenly Messenger* (by Phạm Thị Hoài), *Scar and Bald Head* (by Võ Văn Trục), *Swallows Fly* (by Nguyễn Trí Huân), *Pyre* (Võ Thị Hảo), *Absent Man* (by Nguyễn Bình Phương), *Man at Dream River* (by Châu Diên)... In magic realist trend, though the writer can write with certain fantasy, but if they express attractively the new significant message about the life, then they may bring to the readers a useful spiritual food.

5. *Autobiographic trend*

Observing the evolution of novel during 30 past years, we find a trend expressing quite obviously the renovation of artistic thinking, that is the trend of autobiography. In fact, this trend appeared before 1986, but due to its historical proper circumstances, it must wait for the early 21st century to develop more strongly.

Purpose of autobiography is to learn about a real personage with his history of personality formation; meanwhile the autobiographic novel also uses those personage and plot, but they are fictionalized or are given a fictional appearance. Vietnamese literature after Renovation day has had considerable changes in conception of reality and man, conception of writer in relation with public and with himself. This is the basis for the autobiographic trend in Vietnamese novel to become relatively popular in comparison with previous period of literature, taking the materials from personal life of writer himself, that is the biographic details of writer himself that reveal obviously the personal ego: *Remote Time* (by Lê Lựu), *Sorrows of War* (by Bảo Ninh), *Story of 2000* (by Bùi Ngọc Tấn), *God Laughs* (by Nguyễn Khải), *Small Family* (by Dạ Ngân), *Three Other Men* (by Tô Hoài) and a series of novels by Ma Văn Kháng from *Wedding without Marriage Certificate*, *Against the Flood* to the most recent novel *Alone on Horseback*. Although having some marks of autobiography, these novels are not the autobiographies according to a conventional genre of autobiography, but they are the novels having the autobiographic trend.

Up to now, despite the terms of *novel having autobiographic trend* and *autobiographic novel* being not understood unanimously in researcher community, it is still affirmed that this is a representative trend of contemporary novel. “Autobiographic trend of novel helps the readers decipher the person of author and the epoch not only by details associated with biography and real life of author, but also by his experiences and sincere confessions” (Đỗ Hải Ninh, 2009). Just such change in literary thinking through autobiographic trend shows that Vietnamese literature is transforming in order to integrate into common current of world literature.

3. **Conclusions**

There are many criteria for dividing Vietnamese novel of the 21st century into trends (though there are always the relativity and overlapping in division): theme, creative inspiration, artistic form, genre thinking and style... “Such division into trends is not enough for whole identification of the early 21st century novel, but given similarity between trends of postmodern aesthetic thought and such novel trends, we could see more obviously the postmodern perception in a proportion of Vietnamese literature” (Nguyễn Văn Hùng, 2017).

Discussing the future of novel, its achievements and shortcomings, Bùi Việt Thắng (2016) argued that: “Anyhow, in historical process of modern Vietnamese literature, the novel is still a young genre, and like a living language, it is an only changing and developing genre (according to M. Bakhtin). Observing the literary

creators born in 1960s and 70s, we have more evidences to believe in the future of novel. And in the next time there will come the generation of writers born in 1980s. Young writers will dare try the strength of making novel because it is a artistic form effective to keep the image of history and portray the epochal personages. In the near and far future, novel will be the pillar genre of national literature”.

However, it can be seen, the worry about the problem of literary renovation is always present. “Since the Renovation day of 1986, there is a question of where Vietnamese literature is in the world literature map, and of what we have contributed to more enrich the spiritual heritage of mankind” (Nguyễn Đăng Điệp, 2014). This question is not only put to novel, but also to the whole national literature in the future □

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