

TO DEVELOP FURTHER VIETNAM'S LITERATURE OF MODERNITY, HUMANITY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

NGUYEN DANG DIEP *

Abstract: After nearly thirty years of *Doi moi* (renovation), Vietnam has gained remarkable developments in modernization and integration with the world literature, in addition to great achievements in other sectors, such as: socio-economic, political and cultural. Besides the achievements, however, there are shortcomings and inadequacies in literature at present. “*When will we get pinnacles of art?*” is not only a big concern for writers but also a legitimate expectation for readers. It requires us to summarize practices of literature for the past 30 years, analyzing and evaluating its achievements and shortcomings as well as drawing experiential lessons and suggesting solutions to development of Vietnamese literature for the coming time.

Key words: Literature, literature of the period of *Doi moi*, national identity.

1. Living space and development of literature at the period of *Doi moi*

Although there were signs of renovation in Vietnamese literature in the late 1970s, the concept of “*renovation literature*” or “*literature at the period of Doi moi*” was attached to 1986, when the Communist Party of Vietnam officially launched a comprehensive renovation in the whole country. It was the moment, when many profound changes took place in the world political and economic life, resulting in the collapse of the socialist system and afterwards the fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991. In our country, we sometimes encountered a severe socio-economic crisis, due to the US embargo as well as hindrances caused by our bureaucratic and subsidized system, the voluntarist thinking, and the backward management mechanism. Owing

to the sound policy of renovation fortunately, Vietnam step-by-step overcame the critical situation, proving its position as a country of dynamic development. In 2007, it officially joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) and started its profoundly and comprehensively international integration.

All the above-mentioned political and socio-economic changes show that Vietnamese literature experienced the past 30 years with a completely different context from that before 1975. Based on the viewpoint of renovation and sustainable development, we need to make clear and evaluate objectively the renovation literature, *viewing the renovation thinking as the key and considering modernization as the major sense* for development and international

(*) Assoc. Prof., Ph.D., Institute of Literature.

integration. To make a precise assessment of literature at the period of *Doi moi*, it is firstly necessary to analyze and interpret thoroughly impacts caused by a range of factors, including: impact caused by market economy on literature; domination of audio-visual culture and other modern means of communication; erosion by new cultural ideas from outside in the context of “a flat world”; changes in psychology and liking of readers; publishing situations and ways to maintain literature in the context that traditional modes of cultural dissemination is gradually replaced by the internet...

There are some advantages for literature at the period of *Doi moi*, such as: the sense of democracy has become more prominent; cultural exchanges have been more expanded; experimental and creative activities have been more incentivized; positive changes have been made in literary and cultural management. As affirmed in the 5th Resolution of the Party, “*it is necessary to encourage searching and experimenting with various measures, aiming at meeting requirements of spiritually healthy life for people and eliminating the writing tendencies of depravity and inhumanity*”. This is an open and favorable framework of thinking for creation-related activities in literature at the period of *Doi moi*.

Apart from the above-mentioned advantages, however, literature at this time also faces a lot of challenges and difficulties, of which the most noticeable is negative impacts caused by market economy and commercialization of literature; the market of literature is

getting smaller due to the rise of audio-visual culture; influence caused by exotically unfamiliar ideas on traditional sense of beauty increases the risk of oblivion and disappearance of national cultural identity. On the other hand, the thinking that overvalues economic goals but disregards cultural development as well as the pragmatic lifestyle partly causes the syndrome of insensibility among individuals at the modern time, leading to the nihilism in lifestyle as well as practices of literary creation. For the past 30 years, advantages and disadvantages have always co-existed, which requires those who work in the field of literature and arts to: comprehend tendencies of the time; awake the national spirit and aspiration for renovation; combine and promote reasonably both external and internal power, in order to create excellent quintessential products of art that are typical for the position of our nation at the new era.

2. Actual state of literature at the period of *Doi moi*

2.1. Major achievements

A lot of remarkable achievements have been gained in literary creation for the past 30 years. Literature practices at the period of *Doi moi* have been really eventful with a lot of diversified and attractive literary works as well as tendencies and innovations in art. In the sense of “looking straight at the truth” and respecting individual creativity, writers are no longer afraid of writing about sensitive topics; they are free to choose the penmanship and language of expression etc.

In general, there have been two tendencies of renovation in Vietnamese literature for the past three decades, including: *Tradition-based renovation* and *Western modern art-oriented renovation*. Depending on specific status and individual fortes, each writer could decide to choose his/her appropriate way of renovation.

The most outstanding feature of literature at the period of *Doi moi* is that writers make every effort to express the patriotism, humanism and show more concern about burning issues in human life as well as psychology at the modern time. Most of writers have a strong attachment to the national destiny and lively practices of the process of renovation; they not only pay attention to topical issues but also continue to exploit historical, revolutionary and national cultural issues from the perspective of modern arts.

A lot of significant achievements have been also gained in the fields of literary research, theory and criticism. On the one hand, literary researchers and critics have been determined to use Marxism as the key ideology in their works. On the other hand, they have actively introduced and applied the world modern theories in their own research, critical and theoretical works. Many new research approaches have been applied, helping to get positive results such as: prosody, psychology, structuralism, semiotics, and discoursing etc. Re-evaluation of literary works from the Resistance War time has been carried out properly with a

scientific unruffled attitude, avoiding extreme, unilateral assessments and historically unrealistic opinions. Respectable contributions made by *Tu luc van doan* (Self-Strengthening Literary Group) and *Tho moi* (The New Poetry Movement) etc. have been recognized; many literary phenomena, which used to be viewed as “problematic” or were not appropriately evaluated, have been reviewed more precisely. Although the number of literary critics still remains little, lively and sophisticated literary practices have been relatively well updated.

There have been a lot of fundamental changes in the work of literary direction and management, creating dynamics for literary development. The talk between Nguyen Van Linh, Secretary General of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and the circle of writers and artists in 1987 was a great encouragement to writers and artists in their aspiration for creation at the beginning of *Doi moi*. The Party's thinking and leadership in arts and letters, which was expressed in documents, resolutions, and instructions, show that awareness renovation has taken place synchronously in both literary management and literary practices. As the readers' role and position have been higher appreciated, on the other hand, the sense of dialogue has been absorbed in creation, stimulating new discoveries of the artistic truth among writers. All the above-mentioned achievements in literature at the period of *Doi moi* originated from some basic causes, as enumerated below:

Firstly, the consciousness about improving artistic thinking and liberating individual creativity among writers is the first factor that makes literature diversified (in terms of tendencies, styles, tones and prosody etc.). Writers have overcome “the thinking subsidy” in order to set up individual thinking for their world of art. The process of literary creation is an endless and interesting expedition; it is an incessant dialogue and interrogation about life and human values. A smart choice made by the most creative writers of Vietnamese literature at the period of *Doi moi* is to start with traditional values and the perspective of modern thinking in art.

Secondly, achievements in literature at the period of *Doi moi* are closely attached with cultural exchanges and international integration that have been increasingly greater. This is not only for literary creation but also for literary research, theory and criticism. The update and application of modern methodologies have brought a new view and the sense of self-motivative creation to literary research. Literature at the period of *Doi moi* is more diversified and original, owing to the spirit of dialogue and argument as well as the existence and the right to speech between “the mainstream” and the “sub-stream”. Cultural exchanges in the context of international integration enable us to get the mankind cultural quintessence, making a contribution towards acceleration of the national cultural modernization appropriately in the global context.

Thirdly, achievements in literature at the period of *Doi moi* are closely linked with the management and policy renovation. Many policies involved with culture and art were promulgated properly, showing a thorough concern of the Party and the State about literary development. The management mechanism has been more favorable. Some literary advertising strategies have been implemented and have brought initial positive effects. The management in the field of arts and letters has been more active in giving instructions for activities of literature and art.

2.2. *Literary shortcomings and inadequacies at the period of Doi moi*

Overall, a lot of significant achievements have been gained since 1986, but basically we have to admit that Vietnamese literature has just developed *horizontally* without *special peaks*. Some shortcomings in literature at this period can be enumerated as below:

Firstly, creative talent of writers has not been promoted at the maximum extent. Literature of a nation is measured by practical numbers; for example, how many talented writers have there been? And, how many masterpieces have been produced? Perhaps, the biggest shortage in Vietnamese literature is that our writers have been equipped with neither deep understanding of philosophy, nor a profound aesthetic sense, nor a really fine and sensitive artistic view. There are still writers remaining stuck in little and petty emotions; they are satisfied with simple and instinct philosophies; they

have neither touched the deep core of life nor “penetrated” the most profound calls from spiritual life; they have not mixed themselves with great changes in history; they have not expressed the liveliness of people’s souls or our national aspiration in the process of national renovation.

Secondly, literary commercialization, customer attraction, and pursuit of “up-to-date” topics, which attach too much importance to the entertaining function but disregard the functions of humanity and social criticism, have been relatively common in the fields of letters and arts for the past years. This is the reason for “thinking decadence” in literature. Artistic innovation is extremely important for literature, but some writers have been in extremism or xenophobia; they have dropped away our cultural identity, describing strange living styles that are completely unfamiliar to the national sense of beauty.

Thirdly, literary disseminating and introducing activities (for domestic as well as overseas literary works) still remain disordered and spontaneous. Introduction of the world modern literary theories has been made ineffectively and asynchronously. Although research theories are applied effectively in many literary works, there are still other works, in which research theories are not applied cleverly. Some writers have adopted and appreciated too excessively the idea of the “up-to-date” artistic trend; they disregarded values of the classic arts, especially the traditional culture of our nation. This is a manifestation of impatience for reception of

the new as well as the attitude of extreme xenophobia. Although a lot of efforts have been made in literary criticism, but this field still remains too slowly innovated; the task of public opinion orientation has not been fulfilled; and, new aesthetic thinking has not been created.

Fourthly, although a lot of changes have been made relating to consciousness and management methods, the management work in the field of arts and letters sometimes is not very proper and has not met requirements for literary development. We sometimes slacken it, but sometimes close it too much, because of the excessive concern about the duality of literature. Some literary management officials are not professionally skillful; consequently, some literary problems, such as a recent case about Nguyen Ngoc Tu, have not been flexibly solved, causing negative reactions from public opinions. Investment into literary activities still remains too little and too scattered; the work relating to talent discovery and fosterage is not effectively done; the award of literary prizes is sometimes dominated by non-literary reasons.

3. Solutions, recommendations for literary development at the new period

To achieve the goal of making Vietnamese literature full of modernity, humanity, and national identity, I would like to present some recommendations and measures for our discussion at the conference, as below:

Firstly, Vietnamese literature must be enriched with of humanity and progressive thinking of the time. Marxism-Leninism,

Ho Chi Minh's Thought, and the Party's viewpoint on arts and letters should be considered as the ground for our literature. At the same time, it is necessary to promote greatly our cultural identity as well as adopt reasonably the mankind cultural quintessence in order to enrich and diversify our national literature.

Secondly, it is essential to respect creations of writers as well as individual findings and experiments, while avoiding insular prejudices, especially politically unjustly labeling. A favorable development environment should be set up so that writers can make the most of their talent and passion for artistic creation and enhance the sense of responsibility for the cause of national renovation. It is necessary to strengthen further dialogues for the sake of the truth seeking and properly struggle against manifestations of deviations in thinking and artistic practices.

Thirdly, it is important to: develop cultural exchanges; strengthen literary translation; introduce actively works of the mankind cultural quintessence in order to improve the quality and the extent of international integration; increase the cultural knowledge of writers; and, encourage the active role of people in reception of literary works. It is necessary to develop appropriate strategies for literary dissemination, increasing the position and influence of Vietnamese literature in the region and the world as well.

Fourthly, appropriate guidelines and policies relating to literature and arts should be promulgated properly; it is necessary to

make reasonable investments into literary activities, encouraging literary talents and initiatives for development of the national literature.

Fifthly, it is essential to strengthen literary criticism. It should not only focus on giving praise and blame or showing the right and the wrong, but more importantly it should be also generalized more profoundly; professional expertise of literary and critical activities should be improved.

Sixthly, it is necessary to change literary management methods; there must be an appropriately open mechanism for literary management. In addition to encouraging those who work in the literary field to improve their knowledge, professional skills, and aspiration for creation, it is also necessary to promulgate the policies on improvement of management officials' knowledge and qualifications, in order to avoid shortcomings and inadequacies in literary assessment and verification as well as minimize obstacles against literary development and originality in creations of spiritual values. The State prizes in literature should praise precisely individuals and values, showing high esteem for talented people in society and considering them, including those in literature and other fields, as precious property of the nation.

All the above-mentioned suggestions and recommendations aim at achieving further development of Vietnamese literature in the new period. I hope the conference participants will discuss thoroughly and fully all the issues presented in this introduction.

