

# Artistic fiction in historical Novels: new opportunities for Novels and History

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**Abstract:** *Historical fiction has recently sparked an interest among Vietnamese writers and researchers. Much has been discussed, including opposing opinions, about the matter of fiction in historical novels. This paper deals with different viewpoints of the relationship between historical reality and artistic fiction in historical fiction; thereby asserting that artistic fiction has opened up new opportunities for both novels and history as well.*

**Keywords:** Fiction, Historical Fiction, Historical Reality, Artistic Fiction

## 1. Introduction

Since 1986, Vietnamese historical novels have received much attention from writers and literary researchers. Many novels written on historical topics appeared with such names as Hoang Quoc Hai, Ngo Van Phu, Le Dinh Danh, Luu Son Minh, Nguyen Quang Than, Nguyen Xuan Khanh... Many issues related to history were set. In addition, many issues related to historical novels were discussed, including issues that attracted the attention of many readers, created controversial debates, and brought a lively and interesting atmosphere in literature. The relationship between historical reality and artistic fiction in historical fiction is one such topic of interest.

## 2. About historical novel

Historical fiction is a type of novel that writes about real characters and events in

history and uses history as writing materials. Around the conception of historical fiction, there are a number of concepts given as follows:

According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, historical fiction is “a novel that sets a historical period as a setting and aims to propagate the spirit, style, and social conditions of a period in the past with realistic details and faithfulness to historical facts (however in some cases this allegiance is contrived). The creative work may refer to real historical figures... or it may involve a mixture of historical figures with fictional characters” (Quoted in Nguyen Van Dan, 2011: 32).

According to the *Literary Dictionary: New Series*, historical fiction is considered as a “fictional narrative that centers on historical themes. History in its general sense is the development process of nature

and society. The social sciences (also called historical sciences) investigate the human past in its specificity and diversity. However, historians', as well as writers' interests, are often about the formation, prosperity, and destruction of states, and major events in the social life of nation-states in relations between countries such as wars, revolutions, etc., the lives and careers of figures who influenced the historical process" (Do Duc Hieu, Nguyen Hue Chi, Phung Van Tuu, Tran Huu Ta eds., 2004: 1725).

According to some researchers: "historical fiction, also called "the interpretation of history", includes works written on historical topics through the descriptions of characters and events, artfully reproducing the appearance of society and the development trend of history for a time in order to bring readers useful suggestions and literary aesthetic" (Tran Nghia, 1997: 11); or "historical fictions are works that carry all the characteristics of fiction but take history as the subject and inspiration for artistic creation. Here, basing on past events, the author fictionalizes and imagines to create a work that attracts readers. Historical fiction, although borrowing themes and taking inspiration from history, is not away from current missions and times (...). Although taking historical events and characters, the authors of historical fiction not only present in a historical viewpoint but also tell us many other aspects of human life, even aspects of the character's private life" (Bui Van Loi, 1999b: 23).

Many other researchers have also given different interpretations of *historical fiction*, but they all agree that it is *a type of fiction that takes real stories and characters in history to recreate space and a period in*

*the past in order to clarify historical issues and those of today's era.*

### **3. Artistic fiction in historical fiction**

Historical fiction takes history as a theme, recreating a historical period in which real people and events exist. So the question is: In what way is historical fiction different from a historical work?

Besides restructuring the historical story in a new way, which is not as simple and sequential as a chronicle, breathing life into the language and tone to enhance its aesthetics and using a variety of other literary devices to build characters and develop plots, the novelist used his imagination to fictionalize, creating contents that had not been in history, in order to make the work richer, more vivid and suggestive. In the *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, some authors state that: "works written on historical subjects contain fictional characters and details, but the main characters and events are created based on authentic historical documents, remaining the languages, clothing, customs and practices that were appropriate to the historical period. Historical fiction often borrows stories from the past to talk about the current life, absorb the lessons of the past, and express sympathy for the people and eras that have passed while not modernizing the ancient people to destroy the historical authenticity of this genre" (Le Ba Han et al., 2007: 30). It can be seen that the relationship between historical reality and artistic fiction has generated controversies in studies. There are also opposing views in the world, such as A. Tolstoy, a famous Soviet writer, who said: "My novel is exactly like a work of historical research and that is its power", and Alexandre Dumas, a famous French novelist, who said: "What is history to me?"

It is just a nail for me to hang my paintings” (Quoted in Bui Van Loi, 1999a: 83). Many people support A. Tolstoy’s opinion, saying that novels must absolutely respect the accuracy of history, while many find that A. Dumas’s opinion has opened a new way for writers to compose works. According to them, history is just a background, a white wall that novelists can hang their own colorful paintings.

The same in Vietnam, there are different opinions around this issue in the creative and research circles. How and to what extent should the technique of fictionalizing in historical fiction be implemented? Is it the point that distinguishes the novel from a historical work? Should it be absolute when evaluating a work on historical themes?

In the Middle Ages, historical fictions were often written in Chinese characters and in a chapter-session structure, based mainly on official history with artistic fiction but not clear. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a number of novelists writing on historical topics in Vietnam appeared, such as Nguyen Tu Sieu, Nguyen Huy Tuong, Ngo Van Trien, Tan Dan Tu, Khai Hung, Lan Khai, etc. At that period, historical fictions are still mainly based on official history, but some works clearly showed the modernity of fiction in the modern direction of Western novels by building characters, structures and lively languages, which were romantic, expressing the creativity of the writers. Literature after 1986 was really renewed, the concept of art also changed, thereby, the artist was free to create and express his personality. The concept of history also changes, so does the view towards the novel. Historical fiction is more interested, and the problem of fiction in the art of writing historical fiction is

highlighted. However, depending on each person’s historical and artistic concepts, there are different trends in composition, along with the different directions and degrees of artistic fictionalizing.

While Hoang Quoc Hai, the author of *Bảo táp triều Trần* (a set of six books), *Tám triều vua Lý*, was classified by Nguyen Van Dan as an author of historical novels written in the direction of teaching, judged as too dependent and constrained on historical facts, limiting the art of fiction, Nguyen Xuan Khanh and Nguyen Quang Than represent the trend of composing interpreted historical novels, emphasized the exploitation of factors such as argumentation and psychology, considered historical novels first and foremost as novels (i.e. emphasizing the fictionality in works written on history), “emphasizing the liberty and freedom of intuition” (Nguyen Van Dan, 2011: 39). Bui Van Loi (1999a: 27) says that: “one of the most important characteristics is that an artist must revive historical documents with his imagination, with his right to fictionalize and create artistically”, the study of history “does not replace the imagination, fiction and creativity of writers”. In another work, Bui Van Loi (1999b: 29-30) considers that historical fiction and historical document are related but there is a fundamental difference: “In historical fictions, writers have the right to fictionalize due to the genre characteristics of historical fiction. In contrast, the writing style of the official history has only one way, which is to be faithful and accurate to the “truth”. In other words, it is the duty of the historian to “transmit the truth”, the importance is the “truthfulness”, while the duty of the historical novelist is narrating stories, the

importance is “narratives”. Historian’s writing is about facts while novelist’s writing is about fiction. In novels, writers often fictionalize the real and actualize the unreal, it evokes the imagination and enhances the literary aesthetic.

The writer’s interpretation of history is another interpretation: it is a personal choice of the writer, where historical foundations can be altered to reveal other issues and aspects that may have existed but have not been recorded in the chronicles. However, most writers and researchers agree that fiction can open new doors for readers to penetrate history, but this does not mean that it has the right to lose historical authenticity.

#### **4. New opportunities for fiction and history**

Literary scholar Vinhem Serer once said: “I am inclined to admit that memory and imagination are the same: it is the ability to recall old symbols” (Quoted in M. Arnaudov, 1978: 253). M. Arnaudov considers memory and imagination as two bordering functions of the mind. Memory brings clichéd associations, and imagination creates a grouping of those symbols in an uninhibited and logical way. Thus, memory and imagination, reality and fiction are actually not as different as we think. Because, on the basis of “grouping” the symbols in memory, consciousness and experience, imagination and fiction are developed, sometimes they reflect things that have never existed in reality but not impossible. Sometimes the truth lies not in what happened, but in where it is likely to happen.

Artistic fiction in historical fiction has, therefore, given us a new perspective not only of fiction but of history as well. In this respect, history has the opportunity to be re-

examined with scientific skepticism, when it is approached from more perspectives and angles than from a single way, which is the data contained in the official history. Besides, fiction also has the opportunity to promote its own strengths when exploiting historical themes. From this, historical fiction is no longer too constrained to what one can see in historical works. It is added “additives”, even included non-historical elements, because, as said by Ha Minh Duc, “there is the right to violate the correctness of historical facts because the author only needs to idealistically correct” (Quoted in Bui Van Loi, 1999a: 27).

Viewing history as an unfinished process, writers have reconstructed historical reality with micro-narratives. If in the past, grand narratives were of interest, historical fictions often re-enacted major events with characters whose fates are associated with history, all artistic methods are directed to describe the greatness, patriotism against the enemy, fighting for the community of the character, since Renovation period, with the spirit of modernization in the field of literature and art and with the tendency to promote democracy in artistic creation and cultural activities, artists have the opportunity to be creatively free, and what they aspire to is micro-narratives. It is about a longer and more thorough pause in the human condition. It is about allowing the pen to penetrate deeper into every corner of the character’s soul, making their spiritual life come alive, evoking the reader’s emotions and reflections about people in the past, reviving not only names in history but also their whole person with full shapes, personalities, feelings, thoughts and fates. Phan Boi Chau in *Trùng Quang Tâm Sử* “defied history” (Quoted in Bui Van Loi,

1999a: 84). He created many things that were not found in official history, from forms, actions, dialogues to the thoughts of characters such as Le Loi, Tran Quy Khoang, Nguyen Canh Chan, Nguyen Xi... In *Chúa Trịnh Khải*, the writer Nguyen Trieu Luật has fictionalized many details that were not found in historical documents, such as the detail that Trang had hang over Trịnh Tong to Nguyen Hue, the author described Nguyen Hue's actions and words as a selfless, generous hero. Nguyen Huy Tuong in *Đêm hội Long Trì* enhanced Dang Lan's personality with details depicting his cruelty, lewdness, and even creating an unreal character in history, i.e. Nguyen Mai. Lan Khai also enhanced the cruelty and brutality of *Vua Ngô Triều* with many details, notably the detail that this king tortured the monk. In addition to the elements that are not in history, Lan Khai in *Cái hột mận* has successfully built his character, making it lively and attractive. This is also applied by many writers, especially those who focus on post-Renovation historical topics, in their artistic poetry, such as Nguyen Huy Thiep, Vo Thi Hao, Nguyen Quang Than, Nguyen Xuan Khanh.

With descriptions of the appearance, actions, and dialogues of the characters in *Mẫu Thượng Ngàn* and *Hồ Quý Ly*, Nguyen Xuan Khanh used his imagination and fictional techniques to recreate historical figures lively. It is these "additives" that make the literary work attractive and poetic; moreover, it makes people think about history as a "dynamic" rather than "static" narrative, something that *can happen* but not what *happened*. For example, compared to the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, the character Ho Quy Ly in Nguyen Xuan

Khanh's novel *Hồ Quý Ly* has become much different and more vivid. In official history, this character is considered as a renegade, while in Nguyen Xuan Khanh's story, he is viewed from many perspectives. In this historical fiction, readers see Ho Quy Ly with his inner world which is full of complexities and contradictions. Besides his role as a usurper, Ho Quy Ly is shown as a talented person who is concerned for the country. Nguyen Xuan Khanh's writing has really allowed history to be re-examined in an objective and multi-dimensional way, giving fiction a new standpoint: ready to express personal views on historical subjects, ready to reinvent history from an artistic perspective.

In short, artistic fiction in historical fiction has opened up opportunities for fiction and history to fulfill their missions more fully: with history, it is the recognition and rethinking more openly; with fiction, it is towards wide horizons, where fiction restructures reality to find other realities, where writers can show their speculation, imagination and personality. However, according to Nguyen Van Dan (2018), the role of fiction should not be absolute when evaluating a writer's artistic success. Because, if fiction does not rely on certain principles of creativity in expressing historical themes, the work will be pushed away from history, then, readers will be disoriented and confused and might misconceive about history □

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