



## Research Article

## SOME ISSUES OF MASS LITERATURE IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

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*As an important part of popular culture, mass literature has quickly become a global phenomenon and has a wide range of influences. Deeply understanding popular literature as well as seeing the difference between it and elite literature about conditions for forming, the team of writers, PR form, readers... is a way to get reasonable solutions for the strong and harmonious development of Vietnamese literature in the context of globalization and international integration.*

**Keywords:** popular culture, mass literature, popularity, elite literature.

**Introduction**

From being a marginal part, being disregarded for its artistic quality, mass literature has quickly become a power in modern social and spiritual life. The explosion of publishing volumes, best-seller phenomenon, the ability to interact with readers through PR technology have caused mass literature to quickly diffuse its influence which causes concern in the imbalance in literary life. However, it is impossible to keep the stigma for popular literature forever because its development is associated with the development logic of contemporary cultural form, especially when entertainment has become a necessary need to relieve life pressure, the idle time fund of the artistic public is extremely scanty.

**1. Mass literature: the product of the modern consumer and media society**

On the whole, a literature usually has two parts: elite literature (scholarly) and mass literature (popularity). The subjects of the creation and reception of elite literature are those who are literate, scholarly, well-versed in artistic rules, while the subjects of the creation and reception of mass literature is the popularly lowbrow class. Entering modern times, literature gradually abandoned the imperialism and norm to direct to the masses to expand the space for survival and development. This is a common phenomenon of many literatures, especially when the market economy appears and the intellectual standard is enhanced. Massification has become the way to bring literature to popular readers to meet their artistic needs effectively. It is also the time for certain compromises and concessions between popular literature and elite literature. The attraction of mass literature stems from its ability to grasp the tastes of the masses in a sharp way, satisfy their entertainment needs through simple, flexible and attractive writing. Thus, conceptually, mass literature and the popularity in literature all have an internal point of encounter when both emphasize directing to the masses and promoting the entertainment function. The most important difference is that, if folklore/ mass literature was previously formed in traditional and local

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society, mass literature in the present day era is the product of the consumer and global society. Explaining the birth of mass literature in the early nineteenth century, Dwight Mc Donald said that it is the result of the formation of a democratic society, a universal education that broke the monopoly of the aristocrats, advances in technology increasing the ability to meet the needs of the cultural market; and they exist “parasitically” on elite literature (Dwight Mc Donald, 1978, p. 168). In the rigorous view of scholarly circles, popular culture is regarded as the embodiment of alienation, turning all into goods and promoting Kitsch, turning the Kistch into something in the name of art. The role of the cultural industry and the cultural market in cloning and transmitting popular culture products is huge. Therefore, in the work of Culture Theory and Popular Culture, John Storey considers mass literature associated with consumer culture, mass production and mass consumption as the characteristics of the consumer age (Storey J, 2005).

Because of being “parasitic” on elite literature, mass literature takes the patterns of elite literature to “rewrite” to serve the general audience. And despite the skepticism of academic researchers, the strong development of mass literature has been an undeniable fact. However, it is not so that we equate the elite literature and mass literature as the difference between them is also a reality. Compared to elite literature, the plot of mass literature is often simple, characters are not too complicated, familiar topics, colloquial language, gentle, easy to spread emotions (see Nguyen Dang Diep, 2017, 2019). For mass literature, the readers do not take too much time to think but they find the satisfaction of the psychological mechanism immediately and the pressure is released in a moment. Because mass literature is often associated with ephemerally artistic time, readers rarely read and re-read a book many times; but for elite literature, there are books that can follow their entire lives. Explaining for the development of mass literature on the basis of a survey on E. Poe's work, critic John G. Cawelti said that the mass literature attracts many people because it can relieve pressure through activating and satisfying physical and mental fantasies, helping readers to escape their inner obsessions and the suffocations of the real life (John G. Cawelti Adventure, Mystery, and Romance, 1976).

To conquer the majority, most mass literature publications often revolve around romantic, dramatic and novel topics. Romance can soothe or promote the feelings of sublimation, especially love novels; dramatic create suspense, strong feeling, especially in detective stories, swordplays...; novelty stimulates adventure fantasy, most clearly in sci-fi stories, ghost stories... Evenly, in many cases, these topics are present, intertwined in a work to bring the readers from one emotional state to another, leading them into dreams, paranoid states, thereby, help the readers temporarily forget the heavy pressure of life and the restrictness of time.

To create immediate effects, mass art consciously builds its own symbols, many of which are taken from superhuman characters in myths, legends, and fairy tales, or builds new images that have outstanding abilities, consider all difficulties and obstacles as small affairs, helping the reader to incarnate into the character, experience dramatic and tragic situations, and realize their capacity of transcending every situation. To relieve the mental illusions, the writer can create mazes, unreasonable structures on an intertextual basis, combine or remove the genre boundary without the need for standards or requirements. must profoundly describe the the spiritual method like that in elite literature. Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone by J. K. Rowling (screenwriter: Steve Kloves) is a typical case. Thus, towards the purpose of satisfying emotional impulses, mitigating injuries, creating a

fantasy world, unreasonable and extraordinary stories that do not require too deep thoughts or connections, contriving to clone and conquer readers with the power of modern mass and cultural industry is the way to create the power of mass literature and popular culture. This can be seen as a vivid expression of economy in culture and culture in economy of mass literature in modern consumer society, when all transactions can be done via the internet.

## 2. The explosion of mass literature in Contemporary Vietnam

The seeds of mass literature in Vietnam were found around the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century when the initial conditions for forming colloquial/ mass literature appeared as a market economy, East West cultural exchange, press and publications, and National language and new artistic public<sup>1</sup>. After that, it was maintained in South Vietnam from 1954 to 1975 under the name of market literature<sup>2</sup>. However, it was not until after 1986, when Vietnam officially joined the process of globalization that mass literature really exploded. This is also the time when mass culture and modern media becomes a power that really affects all areas of life, even gets into the sleep of each person. This boom also has an exogenous push as the influence of popular culture from many countries around the world pouring into Vietnam, creating globally cultural circulations and resonances. It is not too difficult to recognize hits like Hollywood movies and European American best-seller books, Korean love movies and K-pop, historical movies/ stories, Chinese swordplays and love stories, Japanese comics, then detective, autobiography, fiction... Having said that, all genres of mass literature are present in Vietnam in both methods: traditional publishing (books, newspapers), and modern (internet, mobile phones, ebook...) entailing the overwhelming response of the receiving community, especially the youth and the middle class. Mass literature writers know how to draw readers' attention in many forms: shocking language, sensitive topics, dramatic creation, superhuman image building, happy ending, etc. At the beginning stage, Trang Ha disturbed the receiving public when releasing the translation of *I'm sorry for being a slut* by Tao Dinh<sup>3</sup>. This phenomenon has quickly entailed the trend of online writing. Over time, the team of popular literature writers in Vietnam is increasingly quickly, including some typical writers such as Trang Ha, Nguyen The Hoang Linh, Phan Hon Nhien, Gao, Anh Khang, Ha Kin, Hamlet Truong, Iris Cao, Nguyen Phong Viet, Nguyen Ngoc Thach... Many popular literary works attract young people with romantic titles: *New York Love Story*, *Cocktail for Love*, *Passing through Memory*, *Lipstick diary*, *Let me be with you a little*

<sup>1</sup> The model of mass writers in this period is most clearly the phenomenon of Le Van Truong (1906-1964): having the most published books, collaborating with publishers the most, being the most attacked and welcomed. (see Nguyen Ngu I: A few facts about the career, life and death of writer Le Van Truong, Van magazine, Sai Gon, No. 29, February 25, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> Along with the steps of the massification requirement from the early twentieth century to the present, the appearance of the type of peripheral literature with many different names such as "colloquial literature", "entertainment literature", "market literature", "mass literature"... In this regard, refer to the studies of Nguyen Thi Thanh Xuan, Tran Van Toan, Vo Van Nhon, Nguyen Thi Phuong Thuy, Huynh Nhu Phuong, Nguyen Dang Diep, Tran Le Hoa Tranh, Hoang Phong Tuan, Phan Manh Hung.

<sup>3</sup> This translation attracted 25 million readers on Trang Ha's blog. When published in China, the work was renamed to 'I cook this love into a soup' by the publisher. Because it was not received, the name had to be changed again, to: Who is whose pain. Not only creating a hit in the Vietnamese online community, this work was also licensed by V. Art to adapt to drama. Source: "Sorry, I am just a famous slut in Vietnam", VnExpress.net, Friday, January 15, 2015, 07: 06 GMT + 7, the maker: Luu Ha.

*bit longer, When will you belong to me, To kiss you again, Will you love me forever, Must marry someone like you...* Despite being disparaged as being cheesy, commonplace, many romantic works are able to be big hits because of their ability to touch emotional complexes like a flavorful cocktail. Because of hitting the tastes of general readers, having appropriate PR and communication strategies, many writers become quickly famous with their large publishing volumes, for example, two works by Anh Khang: *The day goes to the old side* (Ngày trôi về phía cũ) (45,000 copies); *How can I let sadness go* (Buồn làm sao buồn) (70,000 copies) were republished and hunted. A miniature of a popular culture carnival can be seen through book launch events with a stage, an MC, speakers (often writers or critics judging and commenting), readers sharing, exchanges and book signing, representatives of publishers at the backstage, filming and photo taking and broadcasting on television or YouTube... This can also be considered as a form of pulling about readers to literature and also a PR form to increase market efficiency.

However, not every bestseller is an once-read book. There are writers who know how to harmonize between the mass nature and elite literature such as the case of Nguyen Xuan Khanh, Nguyen Nhat Anh or Nguyen Ngoc Tu... Their books have been reprinted many times, received by general readers and appreciated by academic circles. Hoang Phong Tuan has initially pointed out the flexibility of Nguyen Nhat Anh when implementing the theme of good - evil which is a familiar topic of fairy to attract young readers (see Hoang Phong Tuan, 2016). But the problem is that not only do children like Nguyen Nhat Anh but many older readers also like this writer's writing style. This problem raises many questions for researchers, including two urgent questions that need to be interpreted: first, whether the strong development of mass literature would undermine the elite literature, or its development is meant as an opposition of elite literature, forcing the elite literature to look back on itself, adjusting itself to the requirements of the new era; Secondly, there should be some solutions for mass literature to continue to operate in its logic, while elite literature still develops and attracts a large audience.

### **3. Young generation with mass literature**

The concept of general readers that we refer to in this article is the readers considering literature as a form of entertainment or sharing simply without setting out the task of seeking superior aesthetic values from artistic works. What is mentioning is that there are a lot of readers of mass literature who are school students and university students. This phenomenon is not uncommon because the young generation are those who update the internet regularly, are sensitive to technology, like and share quickly, are adventurous and looking for novelty, and their hearts are full of love emotions... Therefore, the fact that they are coming to mass literature to experience new emotions like the characters is explainable. In the eyes of the young generation, popular mass literature writers are as attractive as popular art stars<sup>4</sup>. The spread of the crowd psychology that mass literature brings about clearly makes many people anxious about the risk of aesthetic deviation of the young generation, especially when violence, sex, non-rotation... are described excessively.

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<sup>4</sup>At the end of 2015, for example, at the book launch 'We will be fine' of Gao and Minh Nhat in Hanoi, the auditorium was crowded with audiences, the authors were so tired of signing the book that they had to take rest before continuing signing. The next day, when Gao appeared at the Thong Nhat Park Book Fair, there were still many people around asking for signatures. Source: tuoitreonline: "Mass literature" is not just a romance book dated August 29, 2016, 20:53 GMT + 7.

That anxiety is even more evident when the popularity of mass literature is a personal story, often happens outside the school education environment. This is a problem related to the teaching of literature, especially when many school students and university students come to mass literature as a response to the boredom and blandness of teaching/ learning literature in schools. This problem should be thoroughly researched to find a satisfactory solution. Therefore, in order to promote a reading culture, while directing the readers to the elite literature and satisfy their demand for the cultural enjoyment in diversity, it is necessary to be aware of some issues related to mass literature as follows:

*Firstly*, the stigma or prohibition of mass literature must be considered as an outdated notion because mass literature is an indispensable product of the new consumer and communication society. It is true that mass literature does not place much emphasis on teaching, nor gives too complicated philosophical or human problems, but that does not mean that any mass literature work is inferior in terms of art. Deeply embedded in the stories of love's circle of resentment, gypsy and swordplay, good and evil... the readers can see the historically cultural context or the contradiction of each era. That is what can be seen through *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell or Kim Dung's novels such as the *Condor Heroes*, *The Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils*... (see Tran Van Trong, 2017). These popular literary works when adapted to movies have created film hits and made people re-read their novels for comparison.

*Secondly*, beside recognizing the contributions of mass literature, it is necessary to point out its negative sides, especially those with violent, voluptuous content that goes against pure customs in order to protect and ensure the diversity of literature, keep the healthy reception tastes. Here, the role of literary critics is very important because as “super readers”, their analysis and evaluation always have some roles in directing public opinions. Once the critic turns himself into a for-profit advertiser, it is also when he abandons his missions, deceiving the readers in flashy languages, not true to the true value of the work.

*Thirdly*, to create a healthy development of literature, on one hand, respect the development of mass literature, and focus on the development of elite literature. In fact, elite literature has never disappeared, it still exists. Unlike mass literature, elite literature cannot be produced massively because it is always precious and rare. Therefore, in order to get the literary peaks as well as create the spread of elite literature, there should be support and shares from many sides, especially from families, schools and society. It is necessary to raise awareness from readers that elite literature is a key factor forming the foundation and long-term standards, while mass literature mainly meets the immediate entertainment needs. When exposing to mass literature, readers are often lazy and passive; and when they come to elite literature, they become active and enthusiastic about going on a journey to discover the endless beauty, and dialoguing with writers about life and art. Only when being aware of that will the reader not be separated from elite literature even though they can still read mass literature as a form of entertainment. It is also a way to create the intellectual and spiritual harmony of the artistic public.

### **Conclusion**

Clearly, the study of mass literature, understanding the relationship between it and the elite literature, analysis of the characteristics and prediction of the development trend of these two literary divisions are essential. In fact, mass literature is dominating the market of elite literature in contemporary literary life. In the modern digital and media era, it seems that mass literature has never lost its transformation, and once expanded its

interaction with other mass art forms, its power in the contemporary cultural discourse will be increasingly clear. Instead of banning or restricting the development of mass literature, it is important to have the right orientations for mass literature to be oriented toward human values without leaning towards “animalization”, “objectification” delights, at the same time, attach much importance to promoting the strong development of elite literature. Once the literature has a healthy and harmonious development between these two literary divisions, it is an opportunity to have a prosperous literature, an ability to meet the diverse cultural enjoyment needs of the current artistic public.

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#### MỘT SỐ VẤN ĐỀ VỀ VĂN HỌC ĐẠI CHÚNG Ở VIỆT NAM ĐƯƠNG ĐẠI

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#### TÓM TẮT

Với tư cách là một bộ phận quan trọng của văn hóa đại chúng (popular culture), văn học đại chúng (mass literature) đã nhanh chóng trở thành hiện tượng mang tính toàn cầu và có tầm ảnh hưởng rộng lớn. Hiểu sâu về văn học đại chúng cũng như nhìn thấy sự khác biệt giữa nó và văn học tinh hoa về điều kiện hình thành, đội ngũ nhà văn, hình thức PR, độc giả... là cách thức để có được những giải pháp hợp lí vì sự phát triển mạnh mẽ, hài hòa của văn học Việt Nam trong bối cảnh toàn cầu hóa và hội nhập quốc tế.

**Từ khóa:** văn hóa đại chúng, văn học đại chúng, tính đại chúng, văn học tinh hoa.