

DOCTORAL THESIS IN BRIEF

NGUYỄN THỊ KIỀU ANH. *Theory on the novel genre in Vietnamese literature study and criticism in the first half of the 20th century**Major: Theory and history of literature**Code: 5.01.04*

Vietnamese literature in the first half of the 20th century has unique features and holds a very important position in the whole developing process of the national literature. It is the goodbye to specific features of the Oriental traditional literature which has been fixed for many past centuries, and at the same time, the start for a new process - the literature modernization, approach, acceptance and contact with the world modern literature - the very first is the contemporary Western literature.

The novel genre naturally has a very important position, considered as a proof for the development of modern literature. During the movement and development of novel genre, it seems that at any times, the novel is also the matter which the theorist and critic pay much attention to. In that common background, the thesis of *Theory on the novel genre in Vietnamese literature study and criticism in the first half of the 20th century* is a topical work, helping present generations of researchers, critics and writers of the novel genre “look back” the developing process of theoretic thought on the novel genre from the first half of the 20th century up to now, generalizing the achievements and lessons on the novel theory in the past literature study and criticism, and at the same time inferring necessary tasks for developing the genre at the top position in the process of Vietnamese literature modernization, making premise for the development of this genre in the theory and writing as well as the acceptance of modern readers.

Beside the introduction and conclusion, the theory's content is divided into 4 chapters.

Chapter 1: *The social, cultural premises affecting the appearance of the novel written in Vietnamese script* (page 18 - 56).

In the view of history-genre, the author sets up the logical interrelation of the theoretic thought of our country's novels in the background of contemporary cultural-social life; concentrates on analyzing the sources fostering the appearance of the Vietnamese script-written novel - which means the object of self-conscious activity, of theoretic thought on it. That is:

- The development of urban environment has made “the first and the most primary conditions” to create changes, freshness of the enjoyment demand and capacity of literary creation in a modern way.
- Changes in popularizing and promoting the effectiveness of Vietnamese script in the social life of the early 20th century have made the Vietnamese script to be a means contributing to the emergence of a new literary genre - the novel (page 26).
- The appearance and development of press, especially the press written in Vietnamese script, with the advertisement of literary works of all kinds and levels have gradually shaped a new literary language, formed the habit of accepting literature in Vietnamese script and contributed to promote the formation and development of new novel genre in Vietnamese literature in the early 20th century.
- The effect of Chinese novel and Western novel (page 40-48).
- The “appearance of the specific writer categories, unprecedented in the past with their absence in the next periods also has had

a great significance in national literary modernization and contributed a great part to the formation and development of the new novel genre” (page 48).

From the above-analyzed content, the author helps the reader see not only the physiognomy of a historical-social period, but also the relationship between those premises and the formation, movement of new literature in general, and the Vietnamese script-written prose-novel in particular in the early period of the 20th century.

Chapter 2: *The general conception on the novel in Vietnamese literature study and criticism in the first half of the 20th century* (page 57 - 91) concentrates on clarifying the contents of conception on the novel, classifying the novel and authors opinion on the novel.

Investigating the opinion of writers, literary researchers and critics in the early 20th century, the author indicates 2 periods in the understanding way of “novel concept”. The author comments that before 1920, on the basis of contact, receipt from the Chinese novel and Western novel, there were only feelings, but not the logical presentation and theoretic generalization on the novel genre. However, via epilogues, prefaces and introductions, some specific novels appeared in the late 19th century and the early 20th century, the concept on the characteristic of “novels” in this period can be understood that they are works coming from the available reality in life and expressed in peoples daily language (page 60). After the 1920s, with a lot of studies, reviews discussing novels by Phạm Quỳnh, Thiều Sơn, Thạch Lam, Vũ Bằng, etc., the understanding of novel is presented in more detail from different approach directions; many theoretic and technical matters on the genre have been discussed carefully. The theory on novel in the first half of the 20th century specified that the “novel”

is a genre of literature that has just taken form in Vietnam, unlike the Eastern classical novel genre in many respects. That is a narrative genre in first person written in the national language, the product of the creative frictional activity of the writer in order to portray authentically and lively the peoples life. Though only remaining at a starting level, the way of understanding the concept “novel” at this stage marked a turning point in the theoretical thinking of writers, researchers, and critics.

As for novel classification, the author presents and provides comments on the four typical classifications based on the viewpoints of Phạm Quỳnh, Vũ Bằng, Thạch Lam, Vũ Ngọc Phan. Phạm Quỳnh's classification based on the significance (historical novel, about philosophy, about society, about psychology); based on formal features (narration in first person, by letter, by diary, realistic, ideal, allegory, remembrance, or alternate); based on nature (romantic novel, realistic, legend); based on size of work (saga, novelette). Thạch Lam, though not referring to specific names, differentiated novel genres according to the settlement of moral and ethical issues, subject to the effects of prosody of folk narrative genre in first person, unlike the novel genre that depicts reality closely connected with the moving, evolving objective reality. Vũ Bằng opined that novels are concentrating on two genres: fantastic, horror and those are close and practical to life. Vũ Ngọc Phan divided novels into nine genres: tradition and custom, treatise, moral and ethical, legend, love story, and detective. The author of the thesis also compares, collates with foreign novel classifications and provides specific comments (pages 74, 75).

In addition, the author systemizes the opinions of researchers on such issues as “talent and personality” of the writer, the hallmark left by the author in his or her works, particularly the

ability to observe and inspiration for creation of the writer.

Chapter 3: *The Issue of Reality and the Art of Writing Novel* (pages 93-150)

In this Chapter, the author concentrates on studying, clarifying the relations between novel and the practical life (pages 94-112). Proceeding from the “conception that novel originated from the inherent truths in the life at the beginning of 20th century, the conception of reality of the authors of novels of the romantic and realistic trends, throughout the two controversies “art for art” or “art for life” and “sensual or not sensual”, so that from the predomination of the realistic school, observations of the advances of novel thinking way in the first half of 20th century to “get closer and closer to the modern theoretical thinking way in the issue of reflecting reality” (page 115).

As for the art of writing novel, the thesis author studies the conceptions on creating novel characters (rejecting representatives of the traditional novel; placing emphasis on the relation between personal characters and circumstances; portraying and representing the inner world of characters respecting the inner logics of characters); as for novel plot arrangement (beside the comments by Phạm Quỳnh, Vũ Ngọc Phan attaching much importance to the plot as being the thread to connect the events), Thạch Lam, Vũ Bằng, Trường Chinh, etc. believed that novels need no plots but the psychology of characters; as for novel structure (closely linked with fictional and work organizational skills of the writer, the more later on the more the conception got closer to the modern theoretical thinking way); as for novel language (there were many opinions on the authenticity, artistry, and profusion of words; began to refer to use of words, expressions, narrative styles, etc.).

Chapter 4. *The Issue of Novel Readers and*

Critics (pages 152-190).

According to the author, these are the areas that reflect the evolution of the theoretical conception on novel. Notwithstanding their simplistic and unsystematic nature, the comments by Phạm Quỳnh, Thạch Lam, Vũ Bằng, etc. were concerned with the role and activities of “novel readers” towards the existence of works. Unlike in the stages prior to the first half of 20th century, criticism or writing activities in the form of articles, or the collected ones to make up books, but most of them overcame the summarized criticizing style of the medieval times, to become more methodical and “more professionally skilled”. Critic trends during this stage were given due attention to identify right from the contemporary time (Kiều Thanh for example) as well as during subsequent researches.

Basing on a number of criteria for defining the specific contents, forms, the author of the thesis summarizes into four trends of novel criticism: criticism according to traditional trend; criticism in tendency towards artistic styles; criticism according to book notice trend; criticism in tendency towards creation and criticism in the polemical style.

In the end of the Chapter, the author presents the “contingent of novel criticisms” (pages 180-190) throughout stages: by the beginning of 20th century-1930 and between 1930-1945 (involving such groups of scholars as Thiều Sơn, Hải Triều, Trường Chinh, Vũ Ngọc Phan, Kiều Thanh Quế, Lê Thanh and groups of creators, composers; meanwhile, Vũ Trọng Phụng, Thạch Lam, Vũ Bằng, Trường Chinh, Lan Khai, Mộng Sơn wrote critical works).

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Introduced by

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