

VIETNAMESE MODERN SHORT STORIES: INNOVATION IN CATEGORIES

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Together with poems and novels, Vietnamese short stories have played an important role in the formation of Vietnamese modern literature with many changes since 1986. Talking about the breakthrough step of short stories after renewal, Nguyễn Ngọc said that readers could feel the heaviness of the short story this time (Nguyễn Ngọc, 1992). The heaviness here is the synchronization of many new aspects. It could be the creative and deep feeling of reflecting the reality, or the changes of writing styles which were described in a general concept: Innovation in categories.

By doing survey on the modern short stories, we have figured out how the innovation in categories is reflected through the following aspects:

I. Innovation in categories and acceptance

1. An open system

All renewals, especially in literature creation, always start from a new thought of the creator. It is normally influenced by two factors: requirements

of author and demand of readers. Today, these changes have become naturally inevitable so that they can meet demands of a multi - dimensional world by various delivery methods and in many approach ways about the reality.

Regarding authors' aspect, it is time for them to realize that they cannot "write in old styles", and, they should write as "a behavior" toward art, human and life. For experienced authors, they are silently seeking and creating for themselves a new "spiritual appearance" by "showing" a different writing style. Nguyễn Minh Châu, for example, has shown his new appearance through his short stories as *Bức tranh (The Painting)*, *Người đàn bà trên chuyến tàu tốc hành (The woman on express train)*, *Phiên chợ Giát (Giat fair)*. Readers still can find some familiar features through the topics chosen and the old reality. However, the new things here are the capability to analyze and describe the potential and multi - dimensional ability

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of human and life. Young writers declared their thoughts as “What we care is how to write it, rather than what to write” and “literature is actually an intangible game” (Phạm Thị Hoài). Nguyễn Vĩnh Nguyên and Nhật Chiêu, who are impressive writers in recent time, also admitted that writing is a hide and seek game for them. Do these thought reflect of a concept in which “playing” is a “fundamental rule of art”, quoted by Han Georg Gadamer in his book “*Truth and Method.*” The important thing for authors is how to write rather than what to write, and it means that they do really care about the writing style. Hoàng Ngọc Hiến has confirmed that “writing a concept rather than telling it”.

The changes in writing style were reflected through the publish of many short stories which seem to be against to the traditional style, including Nguyễn Minh Châu, Ma Văn Kháng đến Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Hòa Vang, Nhật Chiêu, Tạ Duy Anh, Suong Nguyệt Minh, Hồ Anh Thái, Phạm Ngọc Tiến, Lưu Sơn Minh, Phan Thị Vàng Anh, Nguyễn Thị Thu Huệ, Nguyễn Thị Ám, Y Ban, Võ Thị Hảo, Nguyễn Ngọc Tư, Phạm Duy Nghĩa, Di Ly, Đặng Thiều Quang... Readers could learn that short stories are not simply *a short document telling a story of a person which has a perfect format with introduction, the progress in body and ending part*, but also an open system. Both readers and writers join in the creation; use their imagination to make “a document” become “an art of work” through short stories. And after finishing the book, we have something

called “hidden readers”. The story “*Vàng lửa*” (*Fired Gold*) by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp has offered for readers three optional endings while Phạm Ngọc Tiến has only “rewritten the story as a way of respecting the truth” and “comment or evaluation is readers’ rights” (*They have become men*). Nguyễn Thị Thu Huệ’s *Hậu thiên đường* (*Post-Paradise*) has an ending with some short messages about the accidents of the mother but her fate will be decided by readers. In *Người sót lại của rừng cười* (*The Survivor of Smiling Wood*) of Võ Thị Hảo, the wondering about Thao is also transferred to readers by author... These kinds of suggestion show the role of writers as only raising ideas and creating characters while public will have the rights to make a choice. Readers can either choose endings that made by authors or have their own way of ending the story. As a result, “The trust is made by readers so it will solve the self-defense or wrong prejudice of story tellers” (Lại Nguyên Ân, 1998, page 40).

Regarding the readers’ aspects, they have to accept the new writing style with a new emotion. Readers now have to join in the world of adventures and make the explanation or figure out the possibility themselves. This is proved by the perfect application of the Reception Theory^(*) made by Vietnamese writers.

^(*) This theory was built by Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser in 1960s of the 20th century. They considered stories as result of the meeting between documents and readers. And it has created many big changes in the thought of people who were doing art in Western countries.

Short stories of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Phạm Thị Hoài, Hồ Anh Thái, Nguyễn Vĩnh Nguyên, Di Ly, Nhật Chiêu, Vũ Đình Giang have a strange structure. It seems like a mirror house or a multi - colorful rubik with many color blocks and cubes which ask readers to forget old standards and use new things learnt through listening and reading when accessing stories. The proof is the book series including *Kiểm sắc (Sharpened sword)*, *Phẩm tiết (Dignity and virginity)*, *Vàng lửa (Fired Gold)* by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. The birth of these three stories raised many arguments about reading literature or reading history, and which part is the real history and which one is the fiction. The truth is widely replaced by the fiction. The history in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's view is a history perceived by each individuals so every readers have to choose and be ready to adapt to a "historical choice" of himself. It is a way for them to discover the story in a new aspect.

2. The combination of categories

According to Bakhtin, history of literature is the history of how it was formed, developed and interacted between categories. The reality also showed that the more the literature develops, the better the border of categories can be crossed over, and the higher categories interacted with each other. This is useful for changing the format of categories.

Surveys on Vietnamese short stories in new period, we have realized two developing directions:

First direction: Short stories are fictionalized

This is the trend of extending the length of stories together with creating the pressure so that readers will feel like reading a novel. Nguyễn Kiên, who is an experienced writer of short stories, has realized the challenge that short stories always have to face during its development: how to make its space and weight cross over the small frame created by art (Nguyễn Kiên, 1992). He also commented that short stories have been looking at novel then got encouraged by novels.

Vietnamese modern literature has published many short stories which are written as a summarized novel or, at least, feel like novel. They are *Phiên chợ Giát (Giat Fair)* (Nguyễn Minh Châu), *Thương nhớ đồng quê (Missing Hometown)*, *Con gái thủy thần (Neptune's daughter)* (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp), *Nhân sứ (The messenger)* (Hòa Vang), *Bi kịch nhỏ (Little tragedy)* (Lê Minh Khuê), *Cánh đồng bất tận (The endless field)* (Nguyễn Ngọc Tư), *Những buổi chiều ngang qua cuộc đời (Afternoons acrossing my life)* (Đỗ Bích Thúy)... Actually, this type of short stories was used in some works in the past period, for example, *Chí Phèo* by Nam Cao. It, however, has developed and had its own characteristics only after the renewal period. Stories have a structure of novels with the combination of many layers of reality and having more than one small story to be told. In *Phiên chợ Giát* of Nguyễn Minh Châu, there is not only the story of Mr. Khúng,

but also stories of the cow named Khoang and President Bời. Thương nhớ đồng quê of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp is another example. He left space for describing not only story of the main character - Nhân but also telling about the teacher Quý, monk Thiều or the boss Phụng. *Bi kịch nhỏ (Little tragedy)* by Lê Minh Khuê was written with many small stories inside. It started with the journey of "I" for his article in the present then went back to the past with the life story of Mr. Tuyên. The wedding of the cousin brought readers back to present which revealed a tragedy of Quang and Cay. They felt in love with each other but they are blood brother and sister and the story ended with the death of Quang. *Cánh đồng bất tận (The endless field)* of Nguyễn Ngọc Tư could be a particular example for the type of combining many small stories inside, opening social tragedies happening around a rural family who were looking after the ducks in the Cửu Long delta. The story looks like a novel because it contained many overlapped events of the reality such as love and enmity, poverty and human ethnics, bird flu and bureaucracy... These events of a story showed that short stories' concept today is not only a layer of life reality but it is an overview of the practical life, covering many personal life and fate which have been already known as the characteristics of a novel.

Second direction: An extreme short story - a variation of short story

Different from the fictionalized stories, the mini short story is another vibration.

The mini short story is an innovation of art with its small content and meet demand of readers in the era of speedy information. In 1993-1994, the New World magazine held a contest for short stories and attracted more than 500 professional and amateur writers and successfully finished. Nguyễn Ngọc had an article which summarized the contest and pointed out the potential of short stories. The contest also found out many new talents as Phạm Sông Hồng, Nguyễn Quang Thân, Thái Sinh, Quốc Dũng, Nguyễn Bán, Phan Thị Vàng Anh, Phan Triều Hải, Lý Thanh Thảo, Nguyễn Quốc Văn... Among of them, Phạm Sông Hồng is a writer who has published 3 short stories as *Vùng lặng (Silent region)*, *Nghĩa cử (Magnanimous deed)* and *Tiếng đáy (Sound from the bottom)*.

The characteristics of mini short stories are small concept, concise and implicitly. Small concept does not mean that the story has only few words because its format is similar to a short story with the content, structure, characters and events. They have an appropriate amount of words but the reality is described inside is highly diversified. Regarding the format, these mini short stories have the following features: 1/ The character is supposed to be most simplified. *Anh Hai (The oldest brother)* of Lý Thanh Thảo has only 4 characters including two kids from a poor family and a mother with her son from a rich family; *Vàng* of Đức Nghĩa has only two characters as the girl and the gold miner; some stories even has only one character talking about his own emotion... 2/ The structure of a mini short story is also simple and

developed on the base of conflicts between events and feeling. *Anh Hai* (The oldest brother) of Lý Thanh Thảo is the paradox of two events. The rich boy was given an ice cream by his mom but he threw it away while two poor kids picked the ice cream up to eat. Another paradox was described in *Sông Lấp* (Lap River) of Nguyễn Bản. It is the love of a woman living with a man who loves her but she only thinks of the guy who betrayed and left her to stay with another woman. 3/ The language used in these mini short stories is highly special: concise, implicit, summarized and highly theoretical as “Apricot flowers are not enough for a Tet” (*Late Flower* - Phan Thị Vàng Anh), “One minute lasts more than 60 seconds” (*The train and kids* - Phạm Sông Hồng); “Different from other kinds of bird, the lark does not sing for good food or scrambling. She only sings when she likes and nothing can stimulate her” (The sound of a lark *Tiếng chim sơn ca* - Nguyễn Văn Hoan)... This kind of language is both to summarize something and suggest something else so that readers will have a better understanding of the human and life.

II. The innovation of story lines

One of the innovations in categories of short stories is in the story lines. These changes, of course, still follow the certain standards but do apply new factors.

1. Follow the traditional story lines

The storyline is a way of telling a story of author and it is the first factor of narrative art. A traditional storyline should contain: *presentation, closing*

point, development, climax and opening point. Vietnamese short stories in the period of 1932 to 1945 had created the standards of a traditional short story through works of two authors as Nam Cao and Nguyễn Công Hoan. The storyline of short stories today does not require all parts but basically writers still follow it. The remarkable achievements included following writers: Ma Văn Kháng (*Trăng soi sân nhỏ* - *The Moon on the small ground*), Nguyễn Huy Thiệp (*Tướng về hưu* - *The Retired General*), Lê Minh Khuê (*Đồng đô la vĩ đại* - *The great dollar*, *Anh lính Tony D* - *Soldier Tony D*), Tạ Duy Anh (*Bước qua lời nguyền* - *Step over the curse*), Nguyễn Thị Thu Huệ (*Cát đợi* - *Waiting Sand*, *Post Paradise* - *Hậu thiên đường*), Phan Thị Vàng Anh (*Khi người ta trẻ* - *When we are young*, *Hoa muộn* - *Late Flower*, *Phục thiện* - *Rehabilitation*)... Their stories showed us the *traditional storyline* which modern writers use and even *develop it to the high peak*. The special point of traditional storyline is writer created various events but not equal. Authors focus on some certain incidents to create the climax for the storyline as well as the attraction to readers. The famous short story - *Tướng về hưu* (*The Retired General*) of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp is an evidence of a system of events but there are four key events as following: At the age of 70, Mr. Thuần retired as a general; he was shocked when finding out his daughter - in - law cooked the dead fetus as food for dog; his wife passed away; and his secret death after coming back the military.

They are opening events then developing to the high peak then finally ends as a tragedy of Mr. Thuần - feeling lost and lonely.

The storyline might be same with a story and many detailed events but modern writers have had the great development. They do not only create a single but also focus on the mixed storylines as we have analyzed in the part of fictionalized short story. It showed the ability of extending the limited concept and occupying the reality of short stories today.

2. The psychological storyline is increased

The system of events was the key points in the traditional storyline which make the story structure more connected. The structure of the psychological storyline is not as tied as traditional ones when more focusing on characters inner. Events of story are replaced by the full meandering inner and the story develops with the uncertainty of emotion. .

One of the writers who succeeded with the psychological type in the period of 1932-1945 was Thạch Lam. Modern short stories have paid more attention to describe the psychological storylines and reflect different emotions of human in modern society, who are living with too many uncertainties, by focusing on a person's fate. This style seems to be attractive and a favorite for either writers of the previous generation as Nguyễn Minh Châu, Ma Văn Kháng, Đỗ Chu or current generation's writers as Hồ Anh Thái, Phan Triều Hải, Phạm

Duy Nghĩa... It is the same for especially female authors as Lê, Võ Thị Hảo, Võ Thị Xuân Hà, Nguyễn Thị Thu Huệ, Y Ban, Lý Lan, Nguyễn Thị Âm, Phan Thị Vàng Anh, Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Tư... and even some recent young writers.

The psychological storylines are normally about the feeling and sorrow of human and less actions or big conflicts. Female writers should have advantages when writing this style. Some remarkable stories written in this style are Đoàn Lê's *Trái táo nham nhở* - Bitten Apple, Nguyễn Thị Thu Huệ's *Cát đơi* - *Waiting Sand*, *Đêm dịu dàng* - *Sweet Night*, *Giai nhân*), Y Ban (*Sau chớp là giông bão* - *After the lightning is storm*, *Người đàn bà có ma lực* - *Magical Woman*, *Bức thư gửi mẹ Âu Cơ* - *Letter to Mother Au Co*), Lý Lan (*Biển trong mưa* - *Sea in the rain*), Phan Thị Vàng Anh (*Hoa muộn* - *Late Flower*, *Nhật ký* - *Diary*)... They are all the words describing various emotions, from tormented thoughts to the worry, sometimes frightened, sometimes painful. It could be the conflict of choosing the responsibility and happiness and natural desire. The events and characters of a psychological storyline are dependent on the emotion of story teller as a way of highlighting a situation in the spiritual life of a person. Some examples are stories of young writers as Dương Bình Nguyên (*Sa Pa tuyết trắng* - *White Snow in Sapa*), Nguyễn Vĩnh Nguyên (*Chuyện xảy ra ở quán bờ sông* - *Story in the riverside shop*), Nguyễn Quỳnh Trang (*Còn gì đâu mùa đông* - *What does the winter*

have left), Vũ Đình Giang (*Mười sáu mét vuông - 16 squared metres*). These stories have improvisational way of telling stories and events of a story are normally not linked when only focusing on some certain situations. *Mười sáu mét vuông - 16 squared metres* of Vũ Đình Giang is a story of the feeling of “I” character who living in a 16 squared metres space. It is a small space inside a big city. Such random thoughts actually delivered a sad message: the narrow of living space, the poverty of material life has been killing the happiness and dreams and desiration of a young generation. By developing the psychological storylines, Vietnamese modern short stories do not only reflect the complicated situation of modern people but also it is breakthroughs of art by writing “*dòng ý thức*” and diversified changes in telling a story.

3. Appearance of separated storyline

The appearance of separated storyline is a new feature of today short stories which reflected the thoughts of people in a post - modern society with many uncertainties. *The characteristic of post - modern thoughts is the impossibility to believe in human living in our existing world.*

With a separated storyline, authors do not pay much attention to the role of storyline and the synchronization of events as well as the causal relationship. They focus on how to show the writing style so that the story could be a combination of many separated emotions or a series of broken lives of a

character. As the American researcher on post - modern novel Barry Lewis said that “Storylines were crushed into pieces of events and incidents while characters were separated into groups of intense desire ...” (Quoted by: Đào Tuấn Ảnh, Lại Nguyên Ân, Nguyễn Thị Hoài Thanh, 2003, page 250). The narrative factors were also isolated in the separated storylines. They are independent blocks if we look from outside but they actually have a linkage which are set in writer’s mind as a way to describe a part of reality. By combining these blocks, writers would like to break the time matching, when story happens and when story is told, in order to refresh the traditional art.

We could find out this writing style through works of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Phạm Thị Hoài, Nguyễn Vĩnh Nguyên and Nguyễn Ngọc Tư recently. *Thương cho cả đời bạc* - Sorry for a bad life by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp is a mix of pieces as “Tú Xương’s background”, “The story of losing the umbrella when singing”, “The story of wife and kids were caught and fastened”, “The story of young female singer Thu”, “The ending”. Phạm Thị Hoài’s short stories are also series of isolated reality parts and the combination of characters’ behavior, theories, inferences, the linkage between practice and assumption which has created a multi - dimensional world. And, people living in that maze are just the collection of signals, puppets or ghosts. Each story of Phạm Thị Hoài required the readers to find out the answers by themselves while looking for

the meaning layers of the story hidden in pages. *Cánh đồng bất tận - The endless field* of Nguyễn Ngọc Tư was a phenomenon of Vietnamese short stories in 2005 and an example of separated storyline. The story is mixed with other small stories so its structure is not too close and the events of stories seem like separated memories of "I". The story is divided into 8 parts which show readers the narrative styles of writers. And when these parts are connected, reader will have a completed picture of an existing practice full of bitterness and pains in the story of Nguyễn Ngọc Tư.

III. Renewing the characters' system

Apart from the renovation of styles and storylines, one of the other changes is the renewal of the characters' system with more new types. Writers wanted to create multi - dimensional characters than a perfect one.

The world inside stories is an actual version of reality with the mix of the bad and the good, angels and evils, heroes and ordinary people. *Sang sông - Crossing the river* of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp showed us the hidden things under a person's appearance. He described about a small worlds with many types of people: monks, poets, teachers, thefts, two guys who sell ancient things for living, a couple and a mother and her kid. When the kid's hand was stucked in the ancient vase, the teacher was frightened. Poet only knows to say some theories while two sellers were worried about their financial lost and the monk just could not do anything. Only the theft

had some actions. He broke the vase to save the kid and shouted loudly "Kids are future! Whatever you guys do, please put the kindness on top. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp has changed a habit of people's recognition through an specific event. Other characters in *Chọn chồng - Husband picking*, *Thanh minh trời trong sáng - Clear sky on Pure Brightness Day* (Ma Văn Kháng), *Một phút và nửa đời người - A minute and half life of a person* (Triệu Bôn), *Ánh trăng - Moonlight* (Nguyễn Bản), *Mùa đông ấm áp - Warm Winter* (Nguyễn Thị Thu Huệ), *Cánh đồng bất tận - The endless field* (Nguyễn Ngọc Tư)... are full of sudden changes of the psychological characters and actions which have surprised readers. In order to describe individuals, modern short stories have created new and unique images such as people who do not have any knowledge, some are ways of too weird, some just live in the spiritual life, some are too natural and some are so lonely.

Together with finding out conflicts of new characters, modern short stories also focused on some art solutions to characters creation. It might be erasing the character's name (*Cải ơi - My cabbage*, *Cánh đồng bất tận - The endless field*, *Dòng nhớ - Missing love* - Nguyễn Ngọc Tư) or using signals (Phạm Thị Hoài), job's name, or appearance (Hò Anh Thái), or historical characters (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Hòa Vang, Lê Minh Hà,...) instead.

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