

## STAGES OF VIETNAM'S CONTEMPORARY SHORT STORIES

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From around last three decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century until now, short story genre has changed dramatically. This renewing process takes place in terms of both the breadth and the depth, both genre thinking and life approaching with the crowdedness of writers, diversity of work and booming of creative personalities. Over the time, short story writers are increasingly crowded with an abundant number of publications, of which many writers have created their style impression.

Short stories in this period can be divided into three stages: *short stories in 1975 - 1985* with the nature of transition from revolutionary literature to peacetime literature; *short stories in 1986 - 2000* marked the peak of the renewing process; and *short stories in early 21<sup>st</sup> century* with the emergence of young writers born in '70s, '80s showed changes in artistic sense and writing style. Boundaries between stages are not absolute but thereby we can see the transition, historic and era imprints, the movement of short story genre through each stage.

### 1. Short stories in 1975 - 1985

After 1975, the war ended, social life in Vietnam entered peacetime. Vietnamese literature in general and Vietnamese short story in particular changed in the approach and expressed life's problems. In the early time after the war ended, literature still continued as its inertia, echoes of the country's heroic war were still often presented in many works. Besides, there was emergence of works referring to multi-dimensional aspects of life which writers could not refer to during the war, as well as new real life – social and human reality after the war.

One year after liberation, Thái Bá Lợi wrote *Hai người trở lại trung đoàn* (*The two men returned to the regiment*). This short story was printed on the *Journal of Military Literature and Arts* in April 1977. At the time of introduction, *Hai người trở lại trung đoàn* (*The two men returned to the regiment*) brought a new vision of reality, was one of the works marking the expansion of dimensions and life exploration: people were

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recognized and expressed in many dimensions of its diversity and complexity. Being published just two months after the South was liberated, the short story *Ngọn lửa* (*The Flame*) of Đỗ Chu recorded significant moments of a person who just escaped shackles of America - Ngụy's prison. *Một người lính trở về* (*The return of a soldier*) was about a soldier's days when returning to the city as the country entered a period of reconstruction after the war.

Entering the path of life after war, the writers tended to exploit many life's issues which were not mentioned previously. Writers who used to live and write during the war like Nguyễn Minh Châu, Ma Văn Kháng, Xuân Thiều, Nguyễn Khải, Bùi Hiền also changed their writing styles. Nguyễn Minh Châu with collection of stories *Người đàn bà trên chuyến tàu tốc hành* (*The woman on express train*), *Bến quê* (*Hometown's wharf*) revealed the writer's transformation of artistic thinking before new real life. This period noted the role of Nguyễn Minh Châu as the pioneer who had significant contributions to the literature renewal that could be considered the renewal of short story. Short stories such as *Chiếc thuyền ngoài xa* (*Offshore boat*), *Khách ở quê ra* (*Visitor from hometown*), *Người đàn bà trên chuyến tàu tốc hành* (*The woman on express train*), *Bức tranh* (*The painting*)... used to stir up the literary scene. Those were also works which showed the change in Nguyễn Minh Châu's artistic thinking, not only in life approach, inspiration (from being

inspired mainly by heroes, revolutionary romance to being inspired by world affairs, private lives) but also in art of expression, philosophical nature and art of short story writing. The writing of author of *Nằm vạ* (*Lying still*) (Bùi Hiền) showed critical attitudes towards problems of postwar society: the changes of family and social life, the degradation of moral character, relationship between individual and community (*Cái bóng cọc – Shadow of the pole*), the power struggle (*Anh bạn Kinh của tôi – My Kinh*).

The first ten years after the war ended, with the state change of life, the writers showed the shift in expression of reality issues. Along with the expansion of topics and representation of people life in many dimensions was the renovation in writing style, art of expression to effectively convey the reality of life in the new context. Besides works about revolutionary war, there were also works aiming at showing plights, personal statuses, private lives. Those were considered as the years of transition, the hinge of literature and genre renewal. After ten-year journey, life of Vietnam's short story genre entered a period of excitement.

## 2. Short stories in 1986 - 2000

In this period, "veteran" writers who had contributed to resistance literature such as Xuân Thiều, Bùi Hiền, Nguyễn Minh Châu, Ma Văn Kháng, Mai Ngũ, Đỗ Chu, Nguyễn Kiên, Nguyễn Quang Sáng still often had works published. Bùi Hiền with *Ngỡ ngẩn mùa xuân* (*Amazed in spring*); Nguyễn Minh Châu with *Cỏ*

*lau (Reed)*; Ma Văn Kháng with *Ngày đẹp trời (Beautiful day)*, *Trăng soi sân nhỏ (The Moon on the small ground)*; Đỗ Chu with *Mảnh vườn xưa hoang vắng (Deserted old garden)*, *Một loài chim trên sóng (The bird on wave)*; Xuân Thiều with *Xin đừng gõ cửa (Please don't knock)*; Nguyễn Kiên with *Những mảnh vỡ (Broken pieces)*, *Đáy nước (Water bottom)*, *Chim khách kêu (Sound of treepie)*; Nguyễn Quang Sáng with *Con mèo Foujita (Foujita cat)*,... Being used to live and write in the war, when returning to the peaceful life, the writers took part in post-war life and changed their writing styles. Their works had the combination of traditional writing style and the renovation in art, in writing style and storytelling method.

Living and writing in the context of post-war social life, the writers had had changes in the artistic sense. As a writer, writer Nguyễn Kiên – author of several collections of short stories written in the war (such as *Trong làng – The village*, *Đồng tháng năm – Field in May*, *Vụ mùa chưa gặt – Unharvested season*) – expressed the need to re-acknowledge the reality of life through today's eyes: “There was time, as a name of Nguyễn Khải's short story called ‘Romantic time’, in which we imposed dreams and illusions on reality. There are still dreams, they are still necessary, but illusions are dispelled by the reality” (Nguyễn Kiên, 1992). It means that nothing but demands of life influenced the writer, “life determines the process of literature and short stories”. In that sense, many writers who

experienced the war have changed in selection of issues and handle of realistic materials. *Cái thời lãng mạn, Một người Hà Nội (A Hanoian)* (Nguyễn Khải), *Cỏ lau (Reed)*, *Phiên chợ Giát (Giat fair)* (Nguyễn Minh Châu), *Con mèo Foujita (Foujita cat)* (Nguyễn Quang Sáng), *Tóc huyền màu bạc trắng (Gray hair)* (Ma Văn Kháng), *Mảnh vườn xưa hoang vắng (Deserted old garden)*, *Mê lộ (Labyrinth)* (Đỗ Chu),... were works showing the spirit of innovation of writers before real life. A romantic time receded to give way for contemplation and realization. In the short story *Cái thời lãng mạn (Romantic time)*, through the character image of a writer – who lived and wrote during and after the war – Nguyễn Khải showed the writer's change in perception of reality and thinking before life. In two moments of history, the writers had basic changes in perception as well as in action and obviously this would impact directly on what they showed on pages.

Many short stories in the story collection *Ngày đẹp trời (Beautiful day)* of Ma Văn Kháng showed people's postwar problems: generational conflict, conflict between the old and the new, difficulties faced by soldiers returning from the war because of their injured shapes and bruised bodies by bombs (*Ngày đẹp trời – Beautiful day*); deviance in conception and lifestyle of young generation – who began to immerse in the postwar life (*Đợi chờ - Waiting*, *Mất điện - Blackout*), alienation of people when finding a way to escape the poor, miserable life (*Tàu đi Thái – The ship to Thailand*),.....

This stage also marked the emergence of names such as: Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Phạm Thị Hoài, Bảo Ninh, Lê Minh Khuê, Tạ Duy Anh, Nguyễn Quang Thiều, Dạ Ngân, Hòa Vang, Y Ban, Võ Thị Xuân Hà, Võ Thị Hào, Nguyễn Thị Thu Huệ, Phạm Ngọc Tiến, Nguyễn Thị Ám, Phạm Hoa, Lưu Sơn Minh, Phạm Thị Minh Thư, Trương Nguyệt Minh, Hồ Anh Thái, Trần Thùy Mai,... This succession of a powerful team of writers made short story picture more colorful with many shades, lines and shapes. Among Vietnamese contemporary short story writers in this stage, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp was the prominent phenomenon. In 1987, short story *Tướng về hưu* (*The Retired General*) was introduced, continued by *Con gái thủy thần* (*Neptune's daughter*), *Không có vua* (*Without the King*), *Những ngọn gió Hua Tát* (*Hua Tat wind*) and especially historic short stories *Vàng lửa* (*Fired Gold*), *Kiểm sắc* (*Sharpened sword*) and *Phẩm tiết* (*Dignity and virginity*). Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's works sparked debates in the literary circles with many different opinions, even opposite opinions on the "right" to invent and fictional level of historical short story writers. Many opinions noted Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's contribution, his new approach to the subject, handle of realistic material and change in writing style in his works. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp with historical short stories *Vàng lửa* (*Fired Gold*), *Kiểm sắc* (*Sharpened sword*) and *Phẩm tiết* (*Dignity and virginity*) made waves in the literature circles and opened a new way of writing

historical topics (Many authors, 1989). Later, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp also wrote other genres but short story was still the genre that marked his success.

Overall, subjects of postwar, life of soldier returning from the war, conflict between the old and the new were often the aspects set in Vietnamese short stories in this stage. Many writers wrote about postwar problems of people with different approaches, giving polyphonic voices to literature in this period. With new approaches, the writers showed the conversion of artistic thinking despite of exploring the same subject of postwar life and people (*Bến trần gian – Earth's harbour* - Lưu Sơn Minh with miraculous writing style to explore the spiritual world of people – a rarely mentioned category in literature previously, *Người sót lại của rừng cười – Survivor of the Smiling Wood* - Võ Thị Hào with the ability to express a type of people experiencing the loneliness in the war; *Hai người đàn bà xóm Trại – Two women in Trai village* - Nguyễn Quang Thiều with ability to create situations of character's psychology,...).

Besides, there was exploration of problems of individual, common people in short stories which caught attention of public opinion such as *Vũ điệu của cái bô* (*Dance of the potty*) (Nguyễn Quang Thân), *Nợ trần gian* (*Debt to the world*) (Nguyễn Bản), *Bước qua lời nguyền* (*Stepping over the curse*) (Tạ Duy Anh), *Tướng về hưu* (*The Retired General*) (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp), *Bi kịch nhỏ* (*Little tragedy*), *Đồng đô la vĩ đại* (*The great dollar*) (Lê Minh Khuê), *Đùa của tạo*

*hóa (Joke of the creation)* (Phạm Hoa), *Hậu thiên đàng (Post-paradise)*, *Minu xinh đẹp (Pretty Minu)* (Nguyễn Thị Thu Huệ),... In short stories of Lê Minh Khuê, Võ Thị Hào, Nguyễn Thị Thu Huệ, Y Ban, readers could come across plot-twisted plights, obstacles in love and marriage, conflicts in family life, even problems of instinctive life, problems of sexuality and gender. It also needs to mention the short story phenomenon of female writers in the late '80s, early '90s. This was the flourishing period of female writers' stories with an increase in female writers, with difference writing styles and tones. The emergence of numerous female writers and the effort and awareness to renovate gave readers new looks and feels.

After a 10-year journey of transition (1975 - 1985), life of Vietnamese short stories in the stage 1986 - 2000 entered the peak of renewing process. The main writing force was still "veteran" writers participated in the war, besides, there was emergence of writers of the next generation right after the first stage of the Renovation period. The artistic renovation, changes in writing style were clearly shown in this stage.

### 3. Short stories of early 21<sup>st</sup> century

Entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, social life has changed dramatically. Rapid urbanization and the increase of modern media have impacted on many aspects of social life including literature. Along with the changes of social life, of awareness and the need to renovate artistic thinking was the presence of a large team of young writers, mostly

were born and grew up after the war. In recent years, the number of young writers in term of age and experience has been constantly increasing, their books are increasingly dominating literary book market, at the same time, there is emergence of a need itself which is to "write about my generation".

Observing the literary life today, we can see the large presence of young short story writer. During the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century, '70s born writers such as Đỗ Bích Thúy, Nguyễn Ngọc Thuần, Phạm Duy Nghĩa, Nguyễn Vĩnh Nguyên, Nguyễn Ngọc Tư, Phong Điệp have gone from being relatively new faces in the literary circles to being seniors, they have gradually affirmed their positions and many of them continue to challenge novel genre. Besides, there are '80s born writers (Nguyễn Quỳnh Trang, Phạm Thị Điệp Giang, Nguyễn Thị Cẩm, Ngọc Cẩm Dương,...).

We can see the remarkable phenomenon of short story in the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century mainly belong to outstanding works of young writers such as *Cánh đồng bất tận (Endless field)*, *Bóng đè (Incubus)*, *Truyện ngắn 8X (8X short stories)*.

*Cánh đồng bất tận (Endless field)* was printed for the first time on *Literature and Arts* magazine in 2005 and was awarded by Vietnam Writers' Association in 2006. Since its introduction, this story has received many positive comments from readers. Despite of having several collections of short stories before that, with *Cánh đồng*

*bất tận* (*Endless field*), Nguyễn Ngọc Tu has had spectacular breakthrough with bold writing style. Generally, public opinions have highly rated *Cánh đồng bất tận* (*Endless field*), in which the pains, misfortunes of people, real-life situations were exploited maximally, pushed to the end by Nguyễn Ngọc Tu but the work was imbued with humanitarian spirit. Besides, there were successes in narrative art such as changes in writing style and tone, structural art and language of the work.

In 2005, the collection *Bóng đê* (*Incubus*) of Đỗ Hoàng Diệu was published and received mix public opinions. The comments focused on the short story *Bóng đê* (*Incubus*) – the work taken as the name of the whole collection. Some readers highly rated this short story, saying this was a good work in both content and writing style. Other part of readers said this work was quite vulgar, despoiled the past and needed to be criticized for the ideology. At the time of introduction, *Bóng đê* (*Incubus*) attracted the attention of not only researchers, critics but also of numerous readers.

The introduction of collections *Truyện ngắn 8X* (*8X short stories*) and *Vũ điệu thân gầy* (*Dance of a skinny body*) sparked debates in the literary circles. In fact, works of these writers had different, new things compared to previous generation. Those '80s born writers almost lived in the new world when the country no longer had gunfire and social life transformed in many aspects. So the ways they occupied and

portrayed life were different. Besides recognizing the effort of new writers, there were also many criticisms, frankly pointing out the limitations of short stories of writers of this generation. Nonetheless, works of these short story collections should be considered as experimental first works of a generation who were “trying to find ways of writing”, then either they no longer appeared in the literary circles or they will be more resilient in their literary career by new works.

*In short*, just over three decades, literary life has changed dramatically, which must mention the presence and succession of a generation of young writers. In the polyphonic choir of today's writers, young writers have created a “personal stream from the joint source”, brought new perspectives to literary life – perspectives of young people. In these young writers, the awareness of renovation of writing style is somewhat stronger, they do not agree with the concept “short story should have a coherent plot under traditional concepts”, they often focus on writing style, towards the search of new possibilities for literature by experiences, defamiliarization. They do not only search previous rarely-mentioned and new, tough topics but also experiment new way of writing by narrative techniques, methods different from the tradition.

It can be seen that Vietnamese contemporary short story is a non-stop relay race between writer generations, from *the generation who experienced*

*the war* such as Xuân Thiều, Bùi Hiền, Nguyễn Kiên, Nguyễn Quang Sáng, Nguyễn Minh Châu, Ma Văn Kháng,... to *writers who appeared in the Renovation* (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Tạ Duy Anh, Phạm Thị Hoài, Dạ Ngân, Nguyễn Thị Thu Huệ, Y Ban, Võ Thị Xuân Hà, Hồ Anh Thái, Suong Nguyệt Minh, Phạm Ngọc Tiến, Trần Thùy Mai, Phan Thị Vàng Anh,...) and *young writers who were born and grew up after the war* (Nguyễn Ngọc Tư, Đỗ Bích Thúy, Nguyễn Vĩnh Nguyên, Nguyễn Danh Lam, Phong Điệp,...) and '80s, even '90s *writers*. Despite of living and writing together after the war with the awareness of renovation and concern about writing style, each writer generation has peculiarities in the approach and convey of life problems. It may be a war in the multiple perspectives with considerations, torments about the reality, it may also be concerns about the condition, today's life, hidden corners of people's lives and souls. For young writers, besides basic writers who continue to inherit the traditional art form, there are writers who notice the renovation of writing style. It can be considered that Vietnamese contemporary short story is a master score with many parts which have diverse shades and styles. This is not merely a succession of generations in terms of age but also shows the stream

of Vietnamese short stories in the literature course.

Along with the literary movement after the war, in the development stages, short story genre has made significant changes before the demands of life and reception of readers. The journeys – the stages of genre life – the “waves” of the renovation at different levels and shades show the companionship and succession of writer generations, in which each journey has representatives who are the historical writing force – are the “incumbent generation”. Vietnamese contemporary short stories show renovation (even with one who have written during each stage), the difference in generation in the relation with previous generations, the awareness of renovating the literature from the creators associated with the formation of new writer generation in the life of Vietnamese contemporary literature □

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