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Themes, Topics, and Structure of Socio-Psychological Novels in Southern Vietnam in the First Half of the 20th Century

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the themes, topics, and structure of socio-psychological novels in Southern Vietnam during the first half of the 20th century. The article uses a combination of statistical-classification and analytical-synthetic methods to develop the research problem. The question posed is: how are the themes and topics of social psychological genres developed, and how is the structure of this type of novel implemented? Through the development of themes, topics, and structures of Southern Vietnamese novels, the aim is to affirm the contributions of Southern Vietnamese writers in the early 20th century to the modernization of national literature in the process of international integration.

KEYWORDS: socio-psychological novels, Southern Vietnamese novels, themes, topics, and novel structure.

I. INTRODUCTION

The first half of the 20th century was a pivotal period for Vietnamese literature. This is the time to move towards modernization and international integration gradually in Vietnam. Writers of this period were increasingly approaching world literature. They were Western-educated young people, exposed to Western literature and culture through Franco-Vietnamese schools in Vietnam or studying abroad. Therefore, episodic novels, romantic novels imported from China, and indigenous verse novels like: Kiều Tales, Phạm Công Cúc Hoa, Phạm Tải Ngọc Hoa, and Truyện Trê Cóc Tales... were no longer suitable or appealing. Consequently, melodramatic love stories, novels exploring human psychology, romantic novels evoking a captivating and thrilling Western world, and realistic novels depicting the functioning and transformation of society were more appealing to local readers. Authors who recognized the needs of the times quickly adopted the styles of Western novelists. They construct stories with plots, characters, dialogue, and everyday language. Furthermore, they arrange the story in a structured order, building a deliberate framework to engage the reader, rather than following the chronological order of episodic novels or a linear timeline.

However, due to the wartime circumstances of the late 19th to late 20th centuries in Vietnam (nearly 100 years of French rule and over 20 years of American aggression until 1975), research on Southern Vietnamese literature remains largely incomplete, especially during the war years. In recent years, research and surveys on Southern Vietnamese journalistic literature have been vigorously pursued, and most research issues have been explored in depth. Major Southern Vietnamese authors are mentioned in several key works (Doan, 2011; Bang, 1974, 1992; Dong, 1970). The characteristics and features of this literary movement have also been fairly assessed in key national works (Le, 2011; Tran et all, 1988; Dong, 1970…). The authors affirm the contributions of early Southern Vietnamese writers to the modernization of Vietnamese literature through their pioneering achievements: "Truong Vinh Ky - a cultural figure, the first writer of Vietnamese-language chronicles; Nguyen Trong Quan - the first novelist in Vietnamese; Truong Minh Ky - the first translator of French literature; Huynh Tinh Cua - a pioneering writer of Vietnameselanguage literature; Tran Chanh Chieu - a reformist writer; Luong Khac Ninh - a reformist poet and journalist; Ho Bieu Chanh - a masterful social and moral novelist; then Truong Duy Toan - a writer of historical and martial arts fiction; Le Hoang Muu - a pioneering and bold novelist; Nguyen Chanh Sat - a renowned martial arts novelist and translator of Chinese stories…". (Doan, 2011, p. 19)

In addition, there are articles, essays, and dissertations that research and survey authors, works, literary movements, or literary trends. However, these works either do not or rarely address the themes, topics, and structure of the socio-psychological novel genre in Southern Vietnam during the first half of the 20th century. This article resolves this problem

II. RESEARCH METHODOLODY

This article primarily uses statistical and classification methods to clearly identify socio-psychological genres. Furthermore, analytical and synthetic methods are used to further clarify the aspects of this genre's contribution to the modernization process of Vietnamese literature.

III. RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1. Concept

Socio-psychological novels are a type of novel that focuses on exploring the inner thoughts and psychology of characters. In particular, this type of novel emphasizes the "internal motives, circumstances, and plot" [according to Wikipedia] that drive the story's development. The Britannica Dictionary defines a psychological novel as:

> "psychological novel: **psychological novel**, work of fiction in which the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of the characters are of equal or greater interest than is the external action of the narrative. In a psychological novel the emotional reactions and internal states of the characters are influenced by and in turn trigger external events in a meaningful symbiosis" (psychologicalnovel, n.d).

Phan Cu De (2006) argues that psychological novels are a type of "autobiographical novel, confessional novel, diary novel, epistolary novel, and variations of analytical novel" (p. 241).

Based on these credible conceptions, we define a concept for psychological novels: socio-psychological novels are novels that explore the inner feelings and psychological development of characters in specific circumstances. The inner feelings and psychological development of these characters are influenced by their environment and living circumstances, and vice versa.

The living circumstances of characters in psychological novels strongly influence their fate. In addition, social factors are also indispensable when characters choose their own path.

When defining the concept of socio-psychological novels as described above, we assert that Southern Vietnamese novels of the early 20th century contained a form of novel called psychological novel (or possibly socio-psychological novel) in the works of Southern Vietnamese writers of this period, such as Nguyen Chanh Sat, Le Hoang Muu, Ho Bieu Chanh, Buu Dinh, Nguyen Y Buu… This completely contradicts the view of some earlier researchers who argued that Vietnamese psychological novels only appeared with Tố Tâm (as in the view of researcher Dao Duc Doan, 2016, p. 23).

The themes of socio-psychological novels in Southern Vietnam during this period focused on exploring aspects of personal life, internal conflicts, and the conflict between old and new concepts within the same family, between the individual and the social community in a semi-feudal colonial society. These themes could focus on choosing a lover or a lifestyle.

Starting from the concept of theme as the "realistic scope" that the work aims for (Le, 2003, p. 116), we define the themes of psychological novels during this period as focusing on the lives of the people of Southern Vietnam in the early 20th century. This is a large thematic area encompassing all aspects of the lives of the people of Southern Vietnam. Each work focuses on exploring different aspects of the larger theme (above), but all address the fate of the people of a colonial country in the novels of Nguyen Chanh Sat, Ho Bieu Chanh, Buu Dinh, Nguyen Y Buu, Tran Quang Nghiep, etc.

From that perspective, we attempt to list (not exhaustively) some themes in novels of this period based on the subject matter and content reflected.

Based on the subject matter, there are three main types of themes:

Firstly, the themes revolve around the poor, the impoverished intellectuals in rural or urban areas struggling with daily necessities like food, clothing, and shelter. For them, simply surviving is an arduous task. We can find examples of this in works such as: "Cay đắng mùi đời," "Tỉnh mộng," "Con nhà giàu," "Con nhà nghèo," "Người thất chí" (Ho Bieu Chanh); "Cô Ba Trah" (Nguyen Y Buu); "Chén cơm nguội của người thất nghiệp" (Son Vuong); "Biển cả thuyền con" (Tran Quang Nghiep)...

They might be impoverished urban intellectuals during a time of scarcity, sometimes exhibiting feelings of despair and a desire to give up, like Phung (Người thất chí - Ho Bieu Chanh). Phung was a bright student, the son of a district official, but his father died, leaving him without money to continue his studies, so he had to drop out to find work. However, in a time of hardship and scarcity, Phung couldn't find work, had no food, and had to live with a friend. Due to family circumstances, Phung's younger sister was to be married off as a concubine to a wealthy man in the village, which disheartened Phung. "To let my sister ruin her youth and endure lifelong humiliation to save the family, I cannot bear it. I will vehemently oppose it." (Ho, 1938c, p. 10). Linh Chi (Chén cơm lạt của người thất nghiệp - Son Vuong) lost his job, his wife and children were destitute, and he considered suicide. "Oh God! If I die! Surely my wife and children will die with me! Even I, a man, am powerless to do anything." They resigned themselves to it "(…), but I cannot continue living, one must die, two must die anyway." (Son, 2007, p. 204). The situation for the impoverished

intellectual class in the city, lacking means of livelihood, was truly tragic. The poor in the countryside were no better. Because of poverty, their human dignity was also lacking. They were forced to bow down to those with money and power. Mr. Cai Tuan Buoi (from a poor family) dared not resist when bullied and oppressed by landlords, and had to tell himself, "Since we are poor, we must endure it, what else can we do?" (Ho, 1930, p. 27). The burden of debt weighed them down. Even when a daughter was raped by a rich man, she dared not report it to the authorities because "I'm afraid he'll get angry and throw money at us, and then we'll lose the lawsuit and be harmed even more." (Ho, 1930, p. 3).

Secondly, besides the lives of the poor intellectuals mentioned above, there is also the theme of political commentary. This theme depicts the wealthy, prosperous, and powerful lives of rural landlords and local officials in both rural and urban areas in novels such as: "Chúa tàu Kim Quy", "Tỉnh mộng", "Tiền bạc, bạc tiền", "Cha con nghĩa nặng" (Ho Bieu Chanh); "Bèo mây tan hiệp" (Pham Minh Kien)... The living conditions of landlords and local officials are in complete contrast to the living conditions of the poor, who do not own a single plot of land. The majority of poor people in the countryside live in shacks like "A few thatched houses scattered about, with rickety doors and tattered walls..." (Ho, 1930, p. 1). Or "At the end of the village, towards the setting sun, there is a small and low thatched house; to enter the house through the door, one must bend down." (Ho, 1923a, p. 1). While local officials' houses and gardens resembled castles.

> "Huynh Tu Phan recently built a multi-story house near the Bac Lieu citadel, with its entrance facing the road to Soc Trang. The house was built in a beautiful style, with a high foundation, wide doors, sturdy walls, a sloping staircase, and windows on all four sides to let light in. Both floors were tiled for easy cleaning, the roof was covered with bright red tiles, and the windows were painted with glossy gray oil paint." (Ho, 1926, p. 1).

Besides the grandeur displayed by their houses, their power and influence were immense; they could control everything and turn black into white. Mrs. Cai Hieu (*Con nhà nghèo* - Ho Bieu Chanh) could have someone imprisoned for just a few thousand silver coins. The Phu couple (*Nhơn tình ấm lạnh* - Ho Bieu Chanh) could ensure that anyone who displeased them would never be able to rise again in their lifetime. They "thought of themselves as gods, believing that anyone with delicious food or precious goods had to bring them to them; they thought that the people's silver, gold, land, and fields were their own, and that whenever they wanted, the people would share them with them." (Ho, 1926, p. 4).

Thirdly, the themes of the unfortunate, orphaned… those on the margins of the social power arena are present in some novels such as: "Thầy Lazarô Phiền" (Nguyen Trong Quan); "Tỉnh mộng" (Ho Bieu Chanh); "Một đôi hiệp khách" (Nguyen Chanh Sat)… Mr. Phien spent his childhood hiding and living in constant fear of death, so his state of mind is negative. "The suffering I have endured is beyond my comprehension." (Nguyen, 1999, p. 22). The people at that time, both religious and non-religious, were filled with fear: "Some feared the French would kill them, others feared the Annamite officials would burn them before the French arrived." (Nguyen, 1999, p. 23). Witnessing prisoners being "burned to ashes" by the soldiers, "there were 300 people in the prison, but only 10 remained." (Nguyen, 1999, p. 24). Therefore, Mr. Phien's mood is one of pessimism and despair; he finds no joy in life: "I decided to go up the mountain and risk my life to be eaten by wild animals." (Nguyen, 1999, p. 24). Chang Ca Mum (Nghĩa Hiệp Kỳ Duyên - Nguyen Chanh Sat) is a girl who was separated from her family, oppressed in every way by her adoptive family, treated like a pet: "They shoved her, that girl, and pointed to..." (Nguyen, 2002, p. 41).

Based on the content reflected, there are three main types of themes:

Firstly, themes about people whose moral character has been corrupted: "Thầy Lazarô Phiền" (Nguyen Trong Quan); "Hà Hương phong nguyệt" (Le Hoang Muu); "Tỉnh mộng", "Người thất chí" (Ho Bieu Chanh); "Châu về hiệp phố", "Tôi có tội" (Phu Duc); "Ai kén chồng" (Son Vuong)... Although the corruption here is still vague, not reached the level of Chí Phèo (Nam Cao). The limitation of writers of this period when describing corrupted characters is that this corruption is not described fundamentally, from the character's own perspective, but is mostly accidental and coincidental... This corruption: sometimes originates from the nature of the person, as in Ha Huong, Nghia Huu (Hà Hương phong nguyệt - Le Hoang Muu); Sometimes, people are influenced by their living circumstances, lifestyle, and worldview, as seen in works like: Ho Canh Tien (Oan kia theo mãi: Ba mươi hai đêm Hồ Cảnh Tiên tự thuật - Le Hoang Muu, 1923); Hung Minh (Tôi có tội - Phu Duc, 1935); Phung (Người thất chí - Ho Bieu Chanh, 1938)...

Nghia Huu (Hà Hương phong nguyệt- Le Hoang Muu) was a rich young man. From childhood to adulthood, he only knew how to indulge in pleasure, never worrying about working hard. Everything at home and outside was handled by his parents, including his two marriages, which he never objected to. He was inherently kind and harmless from a young age. However, this nature was corrupted in old age. For the sake of his inheritance, he heartlessly murdered his servant Thi Hoa and Ai Nhon (the child of Ha Huong and Ai Nghia) to seize the family fortune. This shows that living circumstances have both positive and negative impacts on a person's character. Here, we see how living circumstances negatively impact a person's character. Phung (Người thất chí - Ho

Bieu Chanh) was originally a good, compassionate, gentle, hardworking, and academically gifted person. However, when his gentleness, diligence, goodness, and talent were not satisfied, he became dissatisfied with society. This dissatisfaction led him to plot murder. To avoid responsibility for his actions, he meticulously planned his escape. This moral decay may stem from his living circumstances, his worldview, his way of life, and his deviant and contradictory attitude towards society.

Secondly, the theme of love – the freedom of marriage – among young men and women embracing the new Western education system contrasts with the traditional Eastern marriage system: arranged marriages. We can see this in several prominent works: "*Hà Hương Phong Nguyệt", "Người bán ngọc"* (Le Hoang Muu); *"Dây oan"* (Ho Bieu Chanh, 1935); "*Tôi có tội"* (Phu Duc, 1935)… In "Day oan", Ho Bieu Chanh depicts the tragic love affair between ms Dang and thầy Phan Nhan. However, Ms Dang's family forces her to marry. She marries, but her heart still longs for her lover. According to her, a daughter who is forced into marriage by her parents either commits suicide out of grief or runs away. She cannot do either because, in her opinion, "a daughter who leaves home will ruin herself." (Ho, 1935, p. 5). However, sometimes the author depicts the free love of the new generation of young people: its consequences are that women suffer countless hardships, endure criticism from neighbors like Miss Ba Dung (Chuyến xe trưa - Tran Quang Nghiep); sometimes they are betrayed, abandoned by their parents and have nowhere to turn, like Dinh My Thanh (Trên đường thiên lý - Tran Quang Nghiep, 1932), Xe Xinh Nguyet (Tôi có tội- Phu Duc, 1935); sometimes they are disappointed because they are deceived in love and commit crimes like Miss Tuy (Cư Kỉnh - Ho Bieu Chanh)…

Thirdly, the theme of human desires: greed for money, power, position, lust, and sexual desire… as in some novels: "Tỉnh mộng", "Tiền bạc bạc tiền", "Nhơn tình ấm lạnh" (Ho Bieu Chanh); "Người bán ngọc" (Le Hoang Muu, 1931); "Trên đường thiên lý" (Tran Quang Nghiep, 1932); "Tôi có tội" (Phu Duc, 1935)… Ha Huong (Hà Hương phong nguyệt - Le Hoang Muu, 1912), Mrs. Phu Khanh Long (Tiền bạc bạc tiền- Ho Bieu Chanh, 1925) disregarded public opinion, even willing to kill, accepting being passed between many men with the sole purpose of money and gold. Truong Xuan (Tỉnh mộng - Ho Bieu Chanh, 1923) disregarded all sense of decency, committing adultery with her cousin, impregnating her, and then finding a surrogate husband to escape punishment, so that her family and herself would not be disgraced. The couple Ba Van and Do Thi (Tiền bạc bạc tiền - Ho Bieu Chanh, 1925) do everything to gain power. To Thuong Hau (Người bán ngọc - Lê Hoang Muu, 1931) disregards everything, even his own life, to seduce the wife of a high-ranking court official, simply to satisfy his desire to be close to the beautiful woman…

In addition, psychological novels of this period also have many other sub-themes, such as: family life, the relationship between husband and wife, children, the relationship between farmers, workers, and landlords/capitalists/usurers; the semi-feudal colonial regime in relation to the colonized people… All of this creates a semi-feudal colonial society with diverse personalities and destinies: gentle - wicked; benevolent - inhumane; happy-unhappy, retribution; Accepting fate - not accepting fate… in sociopsychological novels of the first half of the 20th century in Southern Vietnam.

3.3. Theme

The theme is the central issue, the main issue that the work addresses (Le, 2003, p. 123). Gorki (1958), in his collected works, volume 27, published by the Soviet Academy of Sciences, stated:

> "The theme is the nascent idea in the author's experience, evoked by life, nesting in his storehouse of impressions, but not yet formed and demanding to be expressed as an image, awakening the writer, calling him to work to create its form" (as quoted in Phuong Luu (editor) et all, 1997, p. 262).

We observe that the themes of psychological novels in this period in Southern Vietnam address all aspects of life.

Firstly, the theme of antagonistic conflict between the peasant class and officials in the countryside; between the poor intellectual and the capitalist boss in the city; Between Vietnamese people and foreigners (typically Chinese, Javanese, Indians, French, etc.). This is clearly shown in several novels: "Hà Hương phong nguyệt" (Le Hoang Muu, 1912), "Trường tình bí mật" (Duong Minh Dat, 1929), "Lửa tình" (Tran Quang Nghiep, 1931)... In Trường tình bí mật, Duong Minh Dat focuses on describing the contrast between Vietnamese people and "foreigners" such as Chinese, Javanese, and Cambodians. Here, the economic contrast is the main one: Vietnamese people are exploited both in terms of labor and material wealth by capitalist owners (supported by the French colonialists). Not only are they exploited in terms of labor and money, but they are also treated by these capitalist owners/ruling class as tools for their desires (Lửa Tình - Tran Quang Nghiep), making the value of human life cheap.

Secondly, the theme of generational conflict within the family, between parents and children, between husband and wife: differences in lifestyles, life philosophies, and ways of living. We can see this in several novels: "Hà Hương phong nguyệt", "Đầu tóc mượn" (Le Hoang Muu); "Ai làm được", "Bỏ vợ", "Bỏ chồng"… (Ho Bieu Chanh); "Trên đường thiên lý", "Biển cả thuyền con" (Tran Quang Nghiep)… In "Bỏ chồng" (Ho Bieu Chanh), Oanh, being beautiful and fond of extravagance, pleasure, and dressing up, heartlessly abandons her husband and children to follow her lover, even though she has a husband and children. She considers her children a burden, a "hanging rope," and her husband a nemesis. "A daughter is a sin of retribution! When I was young, I was

foolish to marry. Now I regret it so much. Being alone like you is truly wonderful, beyond measure." (Ho, 1938a, p. 25). And she abandoned her poor husband and left her daughter to follow her rich lover. "Oh! It's better to end it once and for all, to avoid further annoyance and increasing suffering." (Ho, 1938a, p. 28). Teacher Rua (Bỏ vợ - Ho Bieu Chanh) criticized his wife for being poor and not elegant, so he reluctantly abandoned her and their child to follow a wealthy woman. He held a different view of fame, career, and wealth. "I was born into a world of money, yet I do good deeds; that is truly contradictory." (Ho, 1938b, p. 5):

> "This world is the world of money, not the world of good deeds… Therefore, no matter what you do, you must focus on money, because only with a lot of money will people respect, admire, and praise you." (Ho, 1938b, p. 4).

Thirdly, the theme of freedom of love and freedom of marriage: "Nghĩa hiệp kỳ duyên" (Nguyen, 1920); "Lửa lòng" (Phu Duc, 1927); "Miss Ba Trah" (Nguyen Y Buu, 1927); "Trên đường thiên lý" (Tran Quang Nghiep, 1932); "Tôi có tội" (Phu Duc, 1935); "Dây oan" (Ho Bieu Chanh, 1935); "Cư kỉnh" (Ho Bieu Chanh, 1941)... Besides a few couples who left home, engaged in premarital sex, and found happiness like Bach Tuyet and Chi Dai in "Ai làm được" (Ho Bieu Chanh, 1922), the majority faced misfortune, abandoned by their lovers in dire circumstances, such as Dinh My Thanh and her child being left by their lover Tran Ngoc Minh for another woman in "On the Thousand-Mile Road" (Tran Quang Nghiep, 1932). The author warns:

> "If you harm someone, causing them to lose their honor, to be scolded and driven away by their father, to suffer pain and sorrow, then you must help them in some way! Are you going to abandon them to die, stand by and watch them die, or even kill them?" (Tran, 2012, p. 403).

Through this, the author wants women to be more cautious in their future paths: "Because of love, she endured hardship for many years; because of love, she committed the crime of filial impiety; because of love, she brought disgrace upon her ancestors." (Tran, 2012, p. 405).

Furthermore, the influence of Western civilization has led some young men and women to be too unrestrained and too free in their relationships, and when disappointed, they commit sins like Miss Tuy (Cu Kinh - Ho Bieu Chanh). The author stated:

> "Our customs have deteriorated. Nowadays, people value the love between husband and wife, the affection between father and son; they no longer care about morality, integrity, or shame. Because of this decline in customs, people like Chi Cao are welcomed by the world when they write novels." (Ho, 1941, p. 36).

Fourth, the theme of the power of money and authority over the lives of people in Southern Vietnam is clearly and transparently depicted in novels such as Ai làm được, Tiền bạc bạc tiền (Ho Bieu Chanh); Trên đường thiên lý (Tran Quang Nghiep); Trường tình bí mật (Duong Minh Dat)… Ho Bieu Chanh condemns the power of money through Ba Ky's perception of it (Tiền bạc bạc tiền): "Money, money, money is truly wretched. Because of money, people lose their honor, they abandon humanity and righteousness, they forget all shame." (Ho, 1999b, p. 206). When marrying off their children, they look for families that are "very wealthy or have done many honorable deeds" (Ho, 1999b, p. 179) to marry into. They despised the children of poor families and the impoverished: "Hiếu Liêm is poor, but his mother is so despicable; it would be embarrassing for us to become in-laws like that." (Ho, 1999b, p. 179) or "Throughout history, wealthy people have always sought out children of wealthy families to marry; no one has ever dared to marry a child of a poor family." (Ho, 1999b, p. 143). The power of money can transform even a wicked girl into a virtuous one, with people reporting her where she goes and praising her where she comes in, "just yesterday she was selling cosmetics and buying lipstick, but today she's become a district magistrate's wife." (Ho, 1999b, p. 183). Thanks to the wealth she possessed, a girl with a beauty described as "dark-skinned, with a wide mouth, disheveled hair, and thick fingers" (Ho, 1923b, p. 11), "dark-skinned, with a broken nose, protruding teeth, and a receding chin" (Ho, 1923b, p. 14)... was only remembered for her fortune, and people didn't even bother to think about her beauty.

Money can turn black into white, lowering human character and value to the extreme. Cai Tuan Buoi dared not speak up, even though his sister was seduced into becoming pregnant and his family was oppressed and forced to leave their homeland. "If we are poor, we must endure it; what else can we do?" (Ho, 1930a, p. 19). His sister was oppressed, yet all she could do was "shed tears, trudge back home silently, feeling resentful and humiliated, forgetting everything else, even forgetting to use an umbrella in the scorching sun" (Ho, 1930a, p. 8). His philosophy of life was "peace is precious," but this silent endurance did not make his life easier; instead, it only made those with money and power more arrogant. Here, this refers to Mrs. Cai Hieu and the couple, Hai Nghia and his wife.

Besides money, power also plays an extremely important role in determining a person's status and character, whether rich or poor. Because:

> "In this world, you must have a lot of money and a high position to be respected; if you have a lot of money but are just an ordinary citizen, people will look down on you, but if you have a high position but no money, no one will fear you." (Ho, 1923b, p. 16).

Everyone wants to compete for the position of Councilman for: firstly, to hear people praise the Councilman and his wife; secondly, to see it as a lucrative profession because they can secure positions and power for others, earning “at least five or seven thousand… at most five or six hundred” and other miscellaneous things that make them “even richer” (Ho, 1999b, p. 189). Therefore, the reason given by Truong Xuan (Tỉnh mộng - Ho Bieu Chanh) seems reasonable: his wife was cruel and unfaithful, but her family was "very wealthy"; not to mention, his father-in-law, upon retirement, could "arrange for me to immediately take over his position as village chief" (Ho, 1923b, p. 10). Thanks to his power and influence, Ho Quoc Thanh (Người bán ngọc - Le Hoang Muu) killed his wife, murdered his servant, falsely accused his wife's lover, and bribed the judge. However, he was accused by Trang Tu Minh of four crimes: firstly, "the crime of lax household management" (Le, 1999, p. 667) for not strictly managing his family and allowing his wife to have an affair; secondly, the crime of not showing compassion for the people because he heartlessly murdered an innocent woman, Dao Anh (Le, 1999, p. 667); Thirdly, he was charged with the crime of being an "unrighteous husband" (Le, 1999, p. 668) because he used deception to trick and murder his wife; fourthly, he was charged with being an "unjust official" (Le, 1999, p. 668) because he tried to blame others for his actions (blaming To Thuong Hau for murdering his wife) and tried to influence the judge's decision. The copy we have is missing a few final pages, so we don't know how the outcome will be.

Although money, material possessions, and power have unparalleled strength, they are not the measure of life's value or human worth. We will analyze this in detail in the section of the novel discussing customs, ethics, and morality.

Fifthly, the theme concerns the arrogance of a segment of the population when they possess money and power. Through novels such as: “Ai làm được”, “Tiền bạc bạc tiền”, “Bỏ vợ”, “Bỏ chồng” (Ho Bieu Chanh)... The characters disregard everything to acquire money and power. Once they achieve their goals, they turn to despising the poor and humble, considering themselves superior and noble. They enjoy their wealth even if it was obtained through exploitation, harming others, and arrogantly "criticize the world for its stupidity, laugh at the foolishness of human relationships" (Ho, 1999, p. 184).

Besides the main themes above, there are also sub-themes: about the noble character of a gentleman, as seen in works by Ly Ky Tam (Awakening from a Dream - Ho Bieu Chanh), Cao Sy Quy (Miss Ba Trah - Nguyen Y Buu); Regarding the escape from adversity and undesirable circumstances, as exemplified by the story of the scholar Linh Chi (The Unemployed Man's Bland Rice Bowl - Son Vuong)... Unlike the themes in the works of Northern Vietnamese writers before 1945, such as Chi Dau (Ngo Tat To), which focuses on impoverished people; Chi Pheo (Nam Cao), which focuses on human alienation... The themes of the works of Southern Vietnamese writers are those of strong, spirited individuals, escaping from difficult circumstances to achieve great things or fulfill a dream in life. This also shows that Southern Vietnamese writers still have a positive outlook on life. Few of their characters have unhappy endings - they always maintain a positive view of life, even if that life is initially full of hardship, difficulty, and harshness. The fates of the main characters in socio-psychological novels of this period mostly have happy endings: a reunion, a happy and peaceful life, a comfortable existence…

3.4. Structures

The structure of a literary work is the entire dynamic and complex organization of the work. The structure reflects the talent, character, and thoughts of the author through the work. Therefore, the structure of psychological novels during this period mainly remained traditional: chronological structure, circular structure, chapter structure, contrasting structure between ideals, political views, morality, and actions… However, due to learning from Western methods of constructing narrative structures, the sequence of the story also changed somewhat. This reflects the innovation in the art of plot construction by writers of this period. We observe the following structural types:

Firstly, the psychological structure in some stories focuses on describing the psychology of the characters, as in some novels: “Thầy Lazarô Phiền” (Nguyen Trong Quan); “Hà Hương phong nguyệt”, “Đêm rốt của người tội tử hình”, “Người bán ngọc” (Le Hoang Muu); “Người thất chí” (Ho Bieu Chanh); ”Tôi có tội” (Phú Đức)… In these novels, the author focuses on portraying the characters' psychology. For example, the melancholy in the soul of Mr. Phiền; the remorse of Anh Phong Hiển (Tôi có tội); the sleepless nights and calculations disregarding life to achieve goals of Tô Thường Hậu; the calculated revenge in moments of intense internal struggle of Hồ Quốc Thanh (Người bán ngọc - Le Hoang Muu); the melancholy and disappointment of Phụng for not achieving her wish (Người thất chí - Ho Bieu Chanh)

Secondly, there is the nested narrative structure, such as: "Thầy Lazarô Phiền" (Nguyễn Trọng Quản); "Oan kia theo mãi: ba mươi hai đêm Hồ Cảnh Tiên tự thuật"; "Đêm rốt của người tội tử hình" (Le Hoang Muu); "Mảnh trăng thu" (Bửu Đình); "Trên đường thiên lý" (Trần Quang Nghiệp)... This type of structure usually occurs through a chance encounter during a journey (on a boat, ship, or a deserted location...) between the protagonist and the author. The protagonist recounts their life (often tragic) to the author. The author then recounts the conversation, simultaneously retelling the story they heard from the narrator's subjective perspective to the reader through their novel. In this structure, the narrator is outside the story, playing no role in the plot

development and knowing no more than the reader about the story's inner workings. The narrator is outside the main plot of the work. The narrator is merely a catalyst, prompting the character to recount their life story through a chance encounter. Through the story, both the protagonist and the author wish to convey a personal message or a life lesson to the reader.

Thirdly, the narrative structure consists of letters (or stories about human fate expressed through letters and diaries: "Mảnh trăng thu" (Bửu Đình) (influenced by the writing style of Goethe's novel "The letter of Werther"). In "Mảnh trăng thu" , the story of Kiều Tiên's husband's murder and her tumultuous life is revealed through the pages of her diary.

Fourthly, the autobiographical (confession) structure includes: "Thầy Lazarô Phiền" (Nguyễn Trọng Quản); *"Oan kia theo mãi: Ba mươi hai đêm Hồ Cảnh Tiên tự thuật" (1921), "Đêm rốt của người tội tử hình" (1925) (Le Hoang Muu); "Hà Cảnh Lạc - 5 ngày tự thuật" (Phạm Minh Kiên, 1925); "Biển cả thuyền con" (Trần Quang Nghiệp, 1931)... The characters in these novels either tell their own stories or have someone else write down their stories for deterrence and education. or even simply to describe the fate of a person (Thầy Lazarô Phiền - Nguyen Trong Quan; Hà Cảnh Lạc 5 ngày tự thuật - Pham Minh Kien; Oan kia theo mãi, Đêm rốt của người tội tử hình - Le Hoang Muu)... Usually, the ending of these stories is the death of the main character, or misfortune always follows the characters from beginning to end (Thầy Lazarô Phiền - Nguyen Trong Quan; Oan kia theo mãi - Le Hoang Muu)...

Fifth, the story structure has a reversal in terms of time, such as: "Mảnh trăng thu" (Buu Dinh); "Tôi có tội" (Phu Duc); "Bèo mây tan hiệp" (Pham Minh Kien)... The novel "Mảnh trăng thu" (Buu Dinh) begins with Tran Thanh Trai returning from France to investigate and find the root cause of a case. Here, it is the case of his cousin, Kieu Tien, on her wedding night... The husband was murdered, and his cousin's whereabouts are unknown. "Tôi có tội (Phú Đức) begins with the murder of Hung Minh, before the author recounts the love triangle between Xe Xinh Nguyet, Anh Phong Hien, and Hung Minh. "Floating Clouds and Water Lilies" (Pham Minh Kiên) tells the story of Le Nuong attempting suicide but being rescued by the family of Mrs. Hoi Đong Tien, before revealing her life and the reasons behind her suicide attempt.

Sixth, the interwoven structure between the main characters within each work. We can see this type of structure in the novel "Borrowed Hair" (Le Hoang Muu). Here, the author describes the emotional development and lives of the two main characters: Hồng Anh and Hồng Hoa. "Who Chooses a Husband?" (Son Vuong) describes the lives of Hong Hoa (the mistress, who values money) and Thi Lanh (the maid, who values righteousness): because they belong to different social classes and have different views on life, their choices are different. The future of each character's life is different. However, they ultimately meet at the end of their lives: one commits suicide (Hong Hoa), the other lives happily with her husband and children (Thi Lanh).

The above are six main structural types in psychological novels of this period in Southern Vietnam. However, not every work has only one structural type; the structures of the works are interwoven and mixed. Therefore, there can be many structural types in the same work. In addition, we also see the appearance of other structural types such as: simultaneous structure (influenced by the seventh art, cinema); internal logical structure, causal logical structure, open/closed structure; psychological structure…

IV. CONCLUSIONS

From the above analysis, it is clear that the socio-psychological novel genre was pioneered from the beginning and has achieved significant accomplishments. This significance is confirmed by the number of works, authors, and the quality of reflection within these works. All issues concerning socio-psychological life are explored in a rigorous, systematic, and particularly engaging manner. Furthermore, other aspects of Southern Vietnamese novels in the first half of the 20th century have not yet been thoroughly explored. For example, is it possible to apply ecological criticism, feminist criticism, colonial criticism, etc., to the study of this literary genre? This could be considered fertile ground for researchers to develop other issues in order to complete the contribution of this literary genre to the modernization of Vietnamese literature.

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