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# Personal Inspiration and Inspirations of Praise and Pride in Southern Vietnamese Novels in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

**Truong Thi Linh**

Faculty of Education, Thu Dau Mot University, Vietnam

**ABSTRACT:** The article analyzes and affirms that personal inspiration and inspirational feelings of praise and pride are two dominant modes of inspiration in Southern Vietnamese novels in the first half of the twentieth century. Although these forms of inspiration have been mentioned sporadically in literary studies, they have not yet been examined systematically in their interactive relationship, especially within Southern Vietnamese novels of the early twentieth-century transitional period. From this gap, the article aims to identify the specific manifestations and roles of these two types of inspiration in reflecting social life and individual consciousness of people of the time.

The article employs methods of analysis and synthesis based on the examination of several representative novels of Southern Vietnamese literature in the first half of the twentieth century. The study shows that personal inspiration is primarily expressed through the individual's journey to seek the self in a context of profound social changes, and is clearly manifested in conceptions of love, marriage, and family. This becomes a space in which individuals become aware of themselves and affirm their own values within the constraints of both tradition and modernity.

In addition, inspiration of praise and pride is expressed through the celebration of the positive values of individuals, life, and the community. These works not only praise moral qualities and chivalric spirit, but also express pride in the people and the land of Southern Vietnam in the process of formation and development.

From these analyses, the article affirms that alongside social inspiration, personal inspiration and inspirational feelings of praise and pride also play an important role in Southern Vietnamese novels in the first half of the twentieth century, contributing to a multidimensional reflection of the spiritual life and social consciousness of people in this particular historical period.

**KEYWORDS:** inspiration, personal inspiration, inspirations of praise and pride, Southern Vietnamese novel, psychological-social novel

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Inspiration is often understood as a special psychological state of the author during the creation of a literary work. However, this understanding limits the conceptual scope of the term. Therefore, beyond being a special and momentary psychological state, inspiration is also the author's passion to affirm a belief of a more enduring nature. That is, inspiration is not merely an individual psychological impulse at a given moment, but an ideology that the author adheres to throughout the process of artistic creation. In other words, inspiration can be regarded as an "internal logic" that governs the way the author selects topics, themes, characters, and language in creative practice.

Personal inspiration is a type of literary inspiration that directs attention to the inner world and the personal life of human beings. While thế sự inspiration focuses on reflecting broader social issues, personal inspiration delves into private experiences, thoughts, emotions, and individual aspirations. Here, human beings are not only viewed as members of a community but also as subjects with independent spiritual lives, with the need for self-awareness and self-affirmation.

Personal inspiration is often expressed through aspects such as the journey of seeking the self, concerns about love, marriage, and family, as well as conflicts between the individual and social norms. Through the exploration of inner life, literature not only reflects changes in individual consciousness but also reveals the movement of cultural and social values in specific historical periods.

In the context of Vietnamese literature in the early twentieth century, personal inspiration becomes prominent as individuals begin to be more aware of their position and value in the face of changes in modern society. This marks a shift from a community-

oriented perspective to a greater focus on individual life, contributing to enriching the literary landscape and opening up new approaches to exploring human beings.

Inspirations of praise and pride are a type of literary inspiration that aim to honor the positive values of human beings, the community, and social life. While personal inspiration delves into the inner world of the individual, inspirations of praise and pride expand to the communal level, expressing an attitude of appreciation and elevation of good qualities such as morality, affection, chivalric spirit, and a sense of attachment to homeland and country.

This type of inspiration is often expressed through the construction of characters with ideal qualities, the praise of beautiful actions and humanistic values, and the affirmation of belief in human beings and life. In addition, the sense of pride is also reflected in the awareness of cultural identity, tradition, and the development of the community, thereby contributing to strengthening solidarity and national consciousness.

In the context of Southern Vietnamese literature in the first half of the twentieth century, inspirations of praise and pride are not only a continuation of national literary tradition but also carry distinct characteristics associated with the people and the land of Southern Vietnam—a place that embodies openness, affection, and a strong will to rise. This contributes to creating a literary landscape that is both rich in realism and imbued with humanistic and optimistic spirit.

## 2. RESEARCH CONTENT

### 2.1. Personal inspiration

#### *2.1.1. The journey of seeking the self*

First, the value of individual personality is expressed in the way a person dares to go against the opinions and viewpoints of the majority. They freely choose their own path, different from that of most people in society. That path may be right or wrong, sometimes leading to happiness, but at other times requiring the price of one's own life. Nevertheless, this demonstrates the individual spirit and the resistance of the character.

Second, writers allow their characters to delve into the essence of life, to know how to enjoy life, and not to be bound by fame, gain, or superficiality. Trần Kế Xương (*Nghĩa hiệp kỳ duyên* - Nguyễn Chánh Sắt, 1920), Bạch Khiếu Nhàn (*Ai làm được* - Hồ Biểu Chánh, 1922) spend their later years wandering, enjoying and savoring life. Trần Đại Nghĩa (*Nghĩa hiệp kỳ duyên* - Nguyễn Chánh Sắt) is not only devoted to work but also goes hunting on weekends, through which he accidentally rescues Chăng Cà Mum. Thanh Tòng (*Nặng gánh cang thường* - Hồ Biểu Chánh, 1930), Anh Phong Hiển (*Tôi có tội* - Phú Đức, 1935)… all abandon everything to follow the call of love.

Third, in the stream of Southern Vietnamese realist literature in the first half of the twentieth century, human beings are represented as dual beings, as multi-possibility beings, even as individuals who are not consistent with themselves, who are in contradiction with themselves. Therefore, human beings in the literature of this period can be considered an indeterminate variable within the complex equation of life, marked by many transformations in a historical moment full of upheavals. When approaching literary works, readers can enter the world of the characters, perceive life from new perspectives, gain new life experiences, and at the same time learn from the characters' experiences. From there, readers can draw profound lessons about life, love, sacrifice, aspiration, and the meaning of existence.

#### *2.1.2. Conceptions of love, marriage, and family*

First, the affirmation of the individual self, distinct from the collective "we" of the community and the nation as seen in revolutionary literature of later periods, enables the literature of this period to focus on exploring aspects of personal life such as conceptions of love, marriage, family, and the choices one must make in continuing one's life path. This contributes to the formation of a type of awakened individual: one who draws lessons, gains experience, and makes more appropriate choices for the future, thereby forming a type of person who attains happiness, often with a happy ending. This type of character can be found in numerous works of the period: Hắc Công Tử (*Hắc Công tử gặp Bạch Công Tử* - Mộng Xuân, 1925); Đoàn Hữu Minh (*Người vợ hiền* - Nguyễn Thời Xuyên, 1929); Trần Văn Sửu (*Cha con nghĩa nặng* - Hồ Biểu Chánh, 1929); Cô giáo Yến Hoa (*Cô giáo Yến Hoa lụy vì tình* - Nguyễn Bửu Mộc, 1931); Phan Đình Phụng (*Biển cả thuyền con* - Trần Quang Nghiệp, 1931); the first-person narrator (*Trên đường thiên lý* - Trần Quang Nghiệp, 1932)…

Second, the inspiration of freedom in love and freedom in marriage cannot avoid addressing the issue of sexuality. Premarital sexuality is mentioned in many works, mainly to convey a moral lesson about preserving chastity for young women. This is because most of the female characters in these stories encounter misfortune. Yến Tuyết is raped by her cousin and becomes pregnant (*Tỉnh mộng* - Hồ Biểu Chánh, 1923) and has to find someone to marry her in name. Lý Ánh Nguyệt (*Ngọn cỏ gió đùa* - Hồ Biểu Chánh, 1926) is forced to entrust her child to an unscrupulous uncle and his wife. Cô Ba Dung (*Chuyến xe trưa* - Trần Quang Nghiệp, 1931) is abandoned by her lover while pregnant. Định Mỹ Thanh and her mother are abandoned by a lover (*Trên đường thiên lý* -

Trần Quang Nghiệp, 1932). Cô Đằng, in order to follow her lover, cruelly kills her husband (*Dây oan* - Hồ Biểu Chánh, 1935). Xê Xinh Nguyệt regrets too late for not listening to her father (*Tôi có tội* - Phú Đức, 1935). Cô Túy, out of disappointment, kills her lover (*Cư kỉnh* - Hồ Biểu Chánh, 1941)… Few people have happy endings in cases of "premarital relations followed by marriage," such as: Trịnh Phương Lang and Trần Trọng Nghĩa (*Nghĩa hiệp kỳ duyên* - Nguyễn Chánh Sắt, 1920); Bạch Tuyết and Chí Đại (*Ai làm được* - Hồ Biểu Chánh, 1922); Yến Tuyết and Lý Kỳ Tâm (*Tỉnh mộng* - Hồ Biểu Chánh, 1923); Di Lệ and Hoàn Ngọc Ẩn (*Châu về hiệp phố* - Phú Đức, 1926); Hiển Vinh and Thu Vân (*Chút phận linh đinh* - Hồ Biểu Chánh, 1928); Thị Lựu and anh Cu (*Con nhà nghèo* - Hồ Biểu Chánh, 1930)…

Third, within personal inspiration, the depiction of family relationships (husband and wife, parents and children, siblings…) is also thoroughly addressed. Faithful and devoted marital love is portrayed in numerous works: between Chí Đại and Bạch Tuyết (*Ai làm được* - Hồ Biểu Chánh, 1922); between cô Hai and her husband Xích Đầu Tử (*Đêm rốt của người tội tử hình* - Lê Hoằng Mưu, 1925); between the Western wife, Bạch Lan, and her husband (*Tây phương mỹ nhơn* - Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, 1927); Lê Thu Vân and her husband Hiển Vinh (*Chút phận linh đinh* - Hồ Biểu Chánh, 1928); between cô Ba Dung and her husband Đoàn Hữu Minh (*Người vợ hiền* - Nguyễn Thới Xuyên, 1929)… along with many other works showing that marital love is sacred and noble. Such love cannot be replaced overnight, and happiness comes to those who know how to wait and endure. Parental and sibling affection is deeply expressed in: *Cay đắng mùi đời* (1923), *Chúa tàu Kim Quy* (1926), *Ngọn cỏ gió đùa* (1927), *Cha con nghĩa nặng* (1929), *Con nhà nghèo* (1930)… (Hồ Biểu Chánh); *Đầu tóc mượn* (Lê Hoằng Mưu, 1924); the bond among the three brothers Hoàn Ngọc Ẩn, Bách Si Ma, Hồng Sơn (*Lửa lòng* - Phú Đức, 1928); *Mạng nhà nghèo* (Nguyễn Bửu Mộc, 1931)…

### 2.2. Inspirations of praise and pride

#### *2.2.1. Inspiration of praise*

First, the inspiration of praise expresses national pride through the re-creation of historical portraits of national heroes who made great contributions to the country. They are depicted from a personal perspective, with "thoughts, worries, concerns, joys and sorrows, anger, and small personal aspirations" (Bùi Văn Lợi, 2018, p. 95). They may be figures who established a dynasty and opened a new era for the nation, such as: Ngô Quyền in *Nam cực tinh huy* (Hồ Biểu Chánh, 1924); Lê Lợi in *Việt Nam Lê Thái Tổ* (Nguyễn Chánh Sắt, 1929); Emperor Gia Long in the trilogy *Gia Long tẩu quốc* (1930), *Hoàng Tử Cảnh như Tây* (1931), *Gia Long phục quốc* (1932) (Tân Dân Tử); Lý Công Uẩn in *Lê Triều Lý Thị* (Phạm Minh Kiên, 1931)…

They may also be great generals with illustrious achievements, such as: Lý Thường Kiệt in *Việt Nam Lý Thường Kiệt* (or *Việt Nam Lý Trung Hưng* - Phạm Minh Kiên, 1929); Nguyễn Trãi in *Liều thân vì nước* (Nguyễn Ý Bửu, 1930)… They may also be fictional heroes, such as: Võ Đông Sơ in *Giọt máu chung tình* (Tân Dân Tử, 1926), Lý Phụng Tiên in *Việt Nam anh kiệt* (Phạm Minh Kiên, 1928), Thanh Tòng in *Nặng gánh cang thường* [*Nặng gánh cang thường* (Hồ Biểu Chánh) adapted from *Le Cid* by Pierre Corneille] (Hồ Biểu Chánh, 1930)… Although adapted, Thanh Tòng possesses a strong Vietnamese spirit: such as patriotism, pride in family lineage, and especially a deep respect for love. This may be seen as a romantic trait originating from the scholar-gentleman type in medieval Vietnamese literature such as Kim Trọng, Từ Hải, Lục Vân Tiên…

Second, in addition to praising historical heroes who made great contributions to stabilizing the country, this inspiration of praise is also expressed in the celebration of modern youth who possess determination, who compete for success with foreign compradors, and who stand firm against the oppression of landlords and local feudal officials. Moreover, they may be unfortunate orphans, yet their spirit of overcoming hardship is admirable. Lý Kỳ Tâm (*Tỉnh mộng* - Hồ Biểu Chánh, 1923) succeeds in competing commercially with Hoa Kiều compradors. Chí Đại (*Ai làm được* - Hồ Biểu Chánh, 1923) escapes his circumstances to study and engage in business with foreigners. Hà Hương (*Hà Hương phong nguyệt* - Lê Hoằng Mưu), Hồng Hoa (*Đầu tóc mượn* - Lê Hoằng Mưu, 1924) are two women who rely on themselves to establish businesses and achieve significant success. Chăng Cà Mum (*Nghĩa hiệp kì duyên* - Nguyễn Chánh Sắt) overcomes difficult circumstances to find her family. Bé Được (*Cay đắng mùi đời* - Hồ Biểu Chánh), although living in harsh conditions and encountering many rogues, still maintains her innate goodness. Phụng (*Người thất chí* - Hồ Biểu Chánh, 1938), although holding a negative view of life, repents for his wrongdoing for more than twenty years. Thị Tố and Ba Cam dare to confront and punish powerful figures who dominate others (*Con nhà nghèo* - Hồ Biểu Chánh). Lê Thủ Nghĩa (*Chúa tàu Kim Quy* - Hồ Biểu Chánh) stands alone in opposition to local mandarins… To varying degrees, they achieve success, express their voices, demonstrate positive attitudes toward life, and above all affirm their own courage and character.

#### *2.2.2. Inspiration of pride*

First, the inspiration that elevates heroic figures who value righteousness and loyalty, with the spirit of "kiến nghĩa bất vi vô dõng dã," appears in detective novels with a chivalric/martial-arts character, such as: Trần Trọng Nghĩa rescuing Chăng Cà Mum in *Nghĩa hiệp kỳ duyên* (Nguyễn Chánh Sắt, 1920); Trần Ngươn Kiệt and Bạch Phi Yến helping people in distress and punishing wrongdoers in *Một đôi hiệp khách* (Nguyễn Chánh Sắt, 1929)… These heroic characters embody a chivalric spirit with the

conception and action of "kiến nghĩa bất vi vô dõng dã," similar to a modern version of Lục Vân Tiên. They are skilled in martial arts, possess extraordinary abilities… and especially uphold a Southern spirit of righteousness, doing good without expecting repayment.

Moreover, praising such chivalric heroes and talented detectives is necessary in a transitional period marked by the ambiguity between old and new values, when traditional moral values are overturned. It also celebrates those who are "physically strong, courageous, persistent, mentally resilient, and calm in all situations" (Nguyễn Thành Khánh, 2016, p. 32). In addition, they possess the trait of "sharp judgment, and the ability to adapt easily to various conditions, environments, and circumstances" (Nguyễn Thành Khánh, 2016, p. 32). They are also individuals who enjoy risk, have decisive personalities, and act independently (Nguyễn Thành Khánh, 2016, p. 32). Most detective characters are quick in judgment and skilled in reasoning… and are largely Western-educated intellectuals who use modern tools in tracking criminals and rely on intellect in confronting cunning offenders. They represent chivalric youth—those who do righteous deeds without concern for fame or wealth.

Second, the inspiration of pride is expressed through the reconstruction of historical figures and events that have had a significant impact on the history of a nation, such as the founding of a dynasty, the development and defense of national borders, territorial expansion, or cultural creation, thereby subtly educating a sense of independence, autonomy, and national self-reliance. This can be seen in numerous historical novels of the period: Ngô Quyền in *Nam Cực tinh huy* (Hồ Biểu Chánh, 1924); Lê Lợi in *Việt Nam Lê Thái Tổ* (Nguyễn Chánh Sắt, 1929); Lý Thường Kiệt (*Việt Nam Lý Thường Kiệt/Lý Trung Hưng* - Phạm Minh Kiên, 1929); Nguyễn Trãi (*Liều thân vì nước* - Nguyễn Ý Bửu, 1930); Gia Long (*Gia Long tẩu quốc* (1930), *Hoàng Tử Cảnh như Tây* (1931), *Gia Long phục quốc* (1932) - Tân Dân Tử); *Lê Triều Lý Thị* (Phạm Minh Kiên, 1931)…

## 3. CONCLUSION

From the examination of personal inspiration and inspirations of praise and pride in Southern Vietnamese novels in the first half of the twentieth century, it can be seen that these are two forms of inspiration that play an important role in reflecting the spiritual life and social consciousness of people during the transitional period. In a context of significant social changes, writers not only direct their pens toward communal issues but also delve into the inner world of individuals, thereby clearly demonstrating the transformation of human consciousness in response to the changes of the time.

Personal inspiration is prominently expressed through the journey of seeking the self, through reflections on love, marriage, and family, showing the awakening of the individual in relation to traditional and modern values. This is an important aspect that contributes to affirming the role and position of the individual in social life.

In addition, inspirations of praise and pride contribute to honoring the positive values of individuals and the community, expressing belief in and appreciation for moral qualities, chivalric spirit, as well as the cultural identity of the Southern region. These expressions not only carry affirming significance but also contribute to strengthening communal consciousness and national spirit within a specific historical context.

From this, it can be affirmed that alongside *thế sự inspiration*, personal inspiration and inspirations of praise and pride are dominant modes of inspiration in Southern Vietnamese novels in the first half of the twentieth century. The interweaving of these forms of inspiration has created a rich and multidimensional literary landscape for Southern Vietnamese literature, while also opening up new approaches to the study of literary and cultural values of this period.

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