

MYTHICAL TIME IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAMESE FICTION

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Received:

20 – 09 – 2018

Accepted:

25 – 11 – 2018

<http://jshe.ued.udn.vn/>

Abstract: In contemporary Vietnamese fictional works, mythical time is a special kind of time. It is boldly spiritual, non-linear and multi-aspect. It is also associated with the ritual and collective activities of the community. If a literary work using mythical elements expresses the mythical time, it will make humans become closer to the living time of sanctity. Then, mythical time contributes to the discovery of the depth of the inner world of characters facing the changes of life. And mythical time brings people back to the cosmic experience, to human life, to death, to life, to mortal experiences, to aspirations for eternity. This article investigates mythical time in contemporary Vietnamese fictional works through two kinds of time: temporal time and illusory time.

Key words: time; mythical; contemporary Vietnamese fiction; temporal; illusory.

1. Introduction

Mythical time is a special kind of time. It is boldly spiritual, non-linear and multi- aspect. It is also associated with the ritual and collective activities of the community. If a literary work using mythical elements expresses the mythical time will make humans become closer to the living space of sanctity. Through the investigation into mythical time in contemporary Vietnamese fictional works, it is found out that there are two kinds of time: temporal time and illusory time.

2. Kinds of mythical time in contemporary Vietnamese fiction

2.1. Temporal time

Time in myths is initially time in the past. Fairy tales, mythical works and epics are aimed at the portrayal and re-actualization of the events in the past

time strikes us immediately: by its very nature, sacred time is reversible in the sense that properly speaking, it is a primordial mythical time made present. Every religious festival, any liturgical time, represents the re-actualization of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past, in the beginning" [2, p.69]. Meanwhile, according to M.Meletinsky, due to the unity of mythological thinking, a mythical past is considered the root of phenomena [6, page 226] and primitive mythology is normally the narrative of the past events, while the past is the root of present entities [6, p.230].

In addition to time in the past, the works feature time at present and in future. One of the options of contemporary fiction is to organize the past, present and future timepieces that blend together and appear at the same time. In nature, it is temporal time, which appears a lot in the art of the cinema. The works thus show the multi-aspect view and characters depicted from every angle in a fully real manner. The time structure towards the temporal kind is a modern technical solution in fiction creation, which overcomes the unilateral time with its limits, reaching an open and dialectic view from the past to the future.

This kind of time is used in the fictional works of consciousness, such as *The Sorrow of War* [5] by Bao Ninh, *Nguoi song Me* [1] by Chau Dien. Through the mind, new timelines are set up to express the spiritual and

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through the telling of narrators. It is a past received by readers with respect and admiration. The past is always in company with sanctity and greatness. Mircea Eliade distinguishes between the sacred and profane time. "One essential difference between these two qualities of

psychological world of the characters. In *The Sorrow of War*, readers feel that the time is cut into pieces and then the pieces are assembled into a series of time without any order. Commenting on this, in *Modern Poetics* [3], researcher Do Duc Hieu states that this work has a lot of “seemingly arbitrary” phrases to describe a chaos, a mixture between the present and the past towards the flow of characters’ emotions such as “later, many years later” (về sau, rất nhiều năm về sau), “until now” (cho đến tận bây giờ), “over the past twenty years” (hơn hai mươi năm đã qua), “back then” (hồi đó), “since then, for over twenty years” (từ bấy đến giờ, hai mươi mấy năm trời), “now” (giờ đây), “that year” (năm ấy).

Kien always falls into a state of recollection with obsessions, sufferings and torment of the past. There is a sense of the present and future in this character, but all of them become obscured by the shadow of the past. The past fills up, covers the reality and flows uninterruptedly in Kien’s memory (about Truong Goi Hon, about the forests on the way of operation, the fields where the fellows died, about the afternoon of April 30 at Tan Son Nhat airport....). All the timepieces, the far - near past - present intertwined and stacked together, making up the endless memories. In *Nguoi song Me* by Chau Dien, after the character calling himself I (the student whose name is Khanh) died in the accident, his soul didn’t want to pass the river of the netherworld to forget everything and to be reincarnated, but followed Hoa to talk, confide to her and observe her life. In the previous life, Hoa was Huong, and in the present life, Huong is Hoa, which is told thoroughly by Khanh with a lot of memories and events, happiness and suffering. In that way, the past rushes into and is sometimes intertwined with the present, which makes readers fall into a world beyond time, where it is impossible to determine the specific time. The names of the "parts" in the work are numbered but in fact the contents are not in any order. For instance, the fictional work consists of three parts: virtual life, original life and real life. However, when reading, the readers cannot distinguish between virtual life, original life and real life, as the story drifts along the life of two characters Khanh and Hoa. Virtual life and real life are intertwining - now conversation between Khanh and Hoa, now the telling of Khanh, and at the other time the recollection of Hoa, or the recollection of Khanh. The

phrases of time are also rather ambiguous - now dropping with the three dots “ngày...” [1, p.146-147], now starting with unspecified phrases: thời đó, ngày ấy, vài ngày sau, cũng ngày hôm ấy...(that period, that day, a few days later, on the same day,...).

It can be seen in contemporary prose, temporal time is especially favored by writers because it is appropriate to explore the depths of the inner world of characters facing the changes in life. And for the fictional works using mythical elements, this kind of time plays a particularly important role as it contributes to the indeterminacy and chaos in the unconscious life of characters.

2.2. Illusory time

As mentioned, myths bear the shadow of the ancient stories, so the time throughout the whole work is in the past. And the flow of the past time has always been adorned with the illusory time kind. Therefore, the mythical time seems endless and limitless. It often refers to the time of eternity, ambiguity, and uncertainty.

The illusory nature of the mythical time is first expressed through the indeterminacy. In addition to the use of temporal time, in contemporary Vietnamese fictional works, the writers include the indeterminacy of the future as a way to create the mythical dimension of the works. Sometimes, the time is specified by the year and month, but then again dominated by other adverbs (*cuối năm ấy, một lần, một dạo, một buổi*) (at the end of that year, once, at a time). Thus, time expressions become symbolic after all. Accordingly, the specificity and the determination of time are also stripped away, and the indeterminate time which is found in myths and fairy tales is used instead. However, if the time in fairy tales is in the past, the time reflected through the narration in fictional works is in progress. It contains the smooth flow of the past, and a reality that is seemingly possible to be reached. The relative conception of time, once again, is revived on the pages. Time is pushed up to be limitless at one time and encapsulated in a blink of an eye at the other time. Then, every event seems to quickly move to its end. In the fictional work on *The Buddha, Savitri and I* by Ho Anh Thai, the writer focuses on creating a unique artistic time. Initially, it is the indeterminacy of timepieces. Time in the work is not

consistent and does not follow any process. The whole story takes place in the chaos of timepieces. Like space organization in the work, the time here is also expressed through pieces in no order. There is not a clear divide between the timepieces, now present time with the story of the character calling himself I and Savitri, the life of the Buddha, and the relics of the Buddha's journey, now the past time with the story of Prince Siddhattha and Princess Savitri, and then suddenly back to the present. In that way, it is the present time at this time, and at the other time, Savitri telling the story comes back to her previous life in the past and then returns to the present to continue the story. The story goes on in the unclear division of time. However, that does not diminish the order of the story. Readers can easily grasp the story from the beginning to end without any confusion. This is the talent of Ho Anh Thai. Deliberately creating the indeterminacy of the timepieces, the writer can easily refer to what happens at present in the most natural way and create closeness for the work. The stories of thousands of years seem to be taking place in real life in the eyes of the readers. At a time, readers have the feeling that the past and the present coincide without any gap.

Behind the Red Mist [10] by Ho Anh Thai also features the similar artistic time organization. The timepieces are indeterminate. The past time in Tan's recollection is not his living time. At the present time of 1987, Tan is electrocuted and drifted back to the past of 20 years before, in 1967. Then, Tan met his grandmother, father, mother and acquaintances and knew the true facts in the past. Meanwhile, the past time of Savitri in *The Buddha, Savitri and I* [11] is controlled and mastered. It is a part of her present life. It is not strange, but very familiar for her. Savitri lived and experienced her past, thereby reconciling the life and emotions in the past as well as in the present. However, whatever method used and however characters are built, or time is organized, it can be seen that the writer uses his rich imagination to look through the mist of the past to be able to have a more accurate view of history and its mysteries. The breakdown of linear time in works does not mean retreating into a timeless world but in essence it seeks new expressions.

In addition, illusory time is also reflected in the inconsistency of time in the work, not following any

order. The whole story takes place in the chaos of timepieces. Like space organization in the work, the time here is also expressed through pieces in no order. There is not a clear divide between the timepieces. Deliberately creating the indeterminacy of the timepieces, the writer can easily refer to what happens at present in the most natural way and create closeness for the work. The writer creates a movement of time from the present to the past; real time and the time in the recollection through stories about the far past. *The Old-Dead Children* [8] by Nguyen Binh Phuong features two alternate parts: The Void part on the netherworld and the other part on this world. The story of the netherworld is based on the ghosts in Phan village, strange deaths, the corpses finding their way back to the love and the journey of the carts keeping going down on the long stretch of road with the dialogue having no start and end by secret people. The world is noisy with a series of events superimposed on each other with daily life conversations around Truong's and Mr. Trinh's families. It seems that they are separate stories, but indeed they are relevant or in other words, they fit perfectly. The story on the families of Truong, Mr. Liem and Trinh is at the present time while the story on the cart with the recollections of character "ông" ("he") is in the previous incarnation. "Ông" ("He") makes readers think of Hai's previous life, at one time and Mr. Trinh at the other time. Throughout the whole work, the intertwining stories lead the readers to search for their connection. In particular, the timepieces within each story are in chaos and not in any order. The indeterminacy and interruption are also present, stimulating the readers' imagination and ability to associate and link the events together. At the end of the work, when the hills were excavated to find out the treasure, the image of the cart appeared. "At the same time the three tombs glowed and flickered. The dashing green light created the scary and thrilling atmosphere. Then there was a shrill laugh. Through the flash of light, people saw a cart with four shades sitting still silently slide into the sky. The cart quickly became thin smoke dissolving into sparkling air" [10, p.278] with the saying "I arrive or return" which is both like the recognition and like the meeting, merging the two stories, two worlds of reality and illusion, past and present, previous life and after life.

In fictional works using illusory time, the focus is the agile, fast-paced transformation of time forms in the lives of characters. Mythological thinking, in principle, is "non-historical thinking" (Meletinsky). Then, time is no longer felt as the physical time that it is bent and interwoven between the two worlds: the sacred and profane as M. Eliade states: "sacred time, as appears under the paradoxical aspect of a circular time, reversible and recoverable, a sort of eternal mythical present that is periodically integrated by means of rites" [2, p.71] and "profane temporal duration can be periodically arrested; for certain rituals have the power to interrupt it by periods of sacred time that is nonhistorical (in the sense that it does not belong to the historical present)" [2, p.72]. *Nguoi Di Vang* [7] integrates the stories of the present and the past when the gap between the two ages reaches centuries. The present time is the story of the daily life of people living in the state of loneliness, loss and insecurity: the old man whose name is Dien, Mr Dieu, Sinh, Ky, Son, Thang, Hoan... Somewhere, there are bad habits, the lusts, the lies, the temptations ... which are rife in modern society. The past re-actualizes the times that Doi Can, Lap Nham, Doi Truong, Ca Thau, Hai Vinh, Ba Nho kept their unfulfilled aspirations and ideals and the moments one had to struggle against himself to preserve dignity. In spite of writing about the anti-French insurrection in history, Nguyen Binh Phuong does not intend to exploit the war, but build characters' psychology and qualities based on thoughts of normal life. Therefore, the stories of the past and the present are not interrupted but interwoven and fit perfectly: regardless of whatever age, there is always a gap between people and each person is an extremely lonely universe.

Besides, in fictional works, the time of historical perception still exists, but when refined through personal experience, it no longer holds the sense of objectivity. This shows that the mythical time is dominated by characters' psychology and depends on their mood. At times, a hundred years passes in the blink of an eye, and one day or one hour lasts forever. In *Nguoi Di Vang* by Nguyen Binh Phuong, when talking about the Thai Nguyen insurrection, Nguyen Binh Phuong used determinate historical timelines, even specific to every minute and second such as "tháng 10 năm 1917" (October, 1917) , "10 giờ" (ten o'clock),

"chín giờ sáng" (nine o'clock in the morning), "năm giờ chiều" (five o'clock in the afternoon), "năm rưỡi" (half past five), "tám giờ hai mươi bảy phút" (twenty seven minutes past eight), "đó là ngày 11 tháng 1 năm 2018" (It was the eleventh of January, 2018). And for characters such as Luong Lap Nham, Doi Can and Thai Nguyen soldiers, they are obsessive, stressful, tiring and long because they are the moments when they face the dangers, mishaps, failures and death that lie ahead. Thus, in parallel with the timelines is the complex psychological changes of the characters, making the time be no longer objective but express the subjectivity of the writer.

Illusory time, on the one hand, brings nothingness to the work, and on the other hand is capable of containing many historical - social events. Therefore, the time has been both extended in amplitude, pushed to be limitless, far away and attached to real life. In other words, the time is illusory but never far from reality.

3. Conclusion

Time in the ancient mythical works are not separated from characters' living space. That is because ancient people are those of action, space and habitat movement to maintain their existence. After all, if space is recognized by experience, time is seen as the result of a certain abstraction. And also for that reason, time in mythology is often a blend of the past and present, and at the same time it is illusory. It goes beyond the real time toward a cosmic experience, which is the echo of the supernatural world and the return of mythical and mysterious thinking. In contemporary Vietnamese fictional works, the re-actualization of temporal space and illusory space brings about considerable effects in exploring the unconscious depth of the characters taken back to the realm of ignorance where the human condition becomes a philosophical experience.

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THỜI GIAN HUYỀN THOẠI TRONG MỘT SỐ TIỂU THUYẾT VIỆT NAM ĐƯƠNG ĐẠI

Tóm tắt: Với các nhà văn đương đại thì việc đưa thời gian huyền thoại vào trong tác phẩm là một thể nghiệm mới mẻ và mang tính đột phá. Đây là một kiểu thời gian đặc biệt. Nó mang đậm sắc màu tâm linh, là thời gian không thuần nhất, nhiều chiều kích. Thời gian ấy cũng gắn liền với nghi lễ và sinh hoạt tập thể của cộng đồng. Một tác phẩm văn học có sử dụng yếu tố huyền thoại, nếu tái hiện thời gian huyền thoại sẽ khiến con người trở nên gần gũi hơn với thời gian sống của thần thánh, của cõi thiêng. Bài viết này đi vào khảo sát thời gian huyền thoại trong một số tiểu thuyết Việt Nam đương đại qua hai kiểu thời gian: thời gian đồng hiện và thời gian huyền ảo.

Từ khóa: thời gian; huyền thoại; tiểu thuyết Việt Nam đương đại; đồng hiện; huyền ảo.