

The Realistic Perspective on the Social Life of Workers in Southern Vietnam During the Period 1980–1986 in the Work *Đứng Trước Biển*

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ABSTRACT: Summary “Facing the Sea” by Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn is a representative novel that reflects the social reality of Vietnam after the war, in the context of the country's transition to the period of renovation (Đổi Mới). The work offers a profound critique of shortcomings in governance, the economy, and social life, such as bureaucracy, conservatism, and stagnation in the operational system, while also expressing a strong desire for reform and renewal. Through the stories and fates of its characters, the author vividly portrays the struggle between the old and the new, between conservatism and progress, thereby revealing his faith in the vitality of change and his aspiration to build a just and democratic society. With its remarkable literary and thematic value, the novel affirms Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn's position in the stream of modern Vietnamese literature.

KEYWORDS: Post-war Vietnam, Social issues, Bureaucracy, Reform desire, Realism, Democracy, Modern literature, Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn

1. INTRODUCTION

The novel *Đứng Trước Biển* by Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn was born in the post-war context of the country, offering a direct perspective on the turbulent reality of Vietnamese society in the years following the war. This work vividly reflects the transformation of Vietnamese society from the post-war period to the era of reform. Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn not only frankly portrays the signs of social change but also addresses the inadequacies, rigidity, and bureaucracy in the management and production mechanisms of that time. *Đứng Trước Biển* by Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn is a novel of special significance in Vietnamese literature, particularly during the post-war and reform periods. The work not only realistically portrays the turbulent social reality after the war but also highlights profound issues in the nation-building process, from challenges in governance and economic stagnation to social problems such as individualism, conservatism, and the moral decay of certain officials within the leadership system. Though history has moved forward and hardships have passed, the issues Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn addresses in *Đứng Trước Biển* remain relevant and offer valuable insights for contemporary economic development and social governance. Through this novel, we can see the author's deep critical perspective on negative social phenomena, as well as his aspirations for reform and societal progress.

With its remarkable contributions in both content and artistry, *Đứng Trước Biển* is not only valuable for studying Vietnamese post-war literature but also serves as a valuable resource for those seeking a deeper understanding of society, people, and the challenges faced during the country's development. Indeed, *Đứng Trước Biển* not only sheds light on social issues but also helps affirm Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn's unique novelistic style.

Although the work has become a literary phenomenon with lasting appeal, there has yet to be an in-depth study that systematically examines the entirety of *Đứng Trước Biển* in terms of its content, artistry, and significance. This highlights the urgent need for a comprehensive study to clarify the novel's contributions to the flow of modern literature.

Based on such evaluations, we have chosen to study this work for its significant contribution to reflecting the social realities and the mindset of the Vietnamese people during the reform period.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

To achieve the best possible results, we employ the following research methods:

- **Historical-Social Method:** Place *Facing the Sea* in the historical and social context of Vietnam in the 1980s, analyzing the post-war reality and renovation period to highlight its reflection of the era's values.
- **Biographical Method:** Explore Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn's biography to explain the origins of his thoughts, personal viewpoints, and writing style in the work.

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- **Comparative Method:** Compare *Facing the Sea* with other novels of the same period to highlight the artistic characteristics and realistic thinking of Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn.
- **Analysis-Synthesis Method:** Analyze the content (reality, characters) and artistic elements, then synthesize the findings to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the work's value.

3. Overview of the Political, Economic, Social, and Literary Context of Post-War Vietnam

3.1. The Political, Economic, and Social Situation of Post-War Vietnam

The period from 1975 to 1985 was a tumultuous time in Vietnam's history, marking the transition from war to peace and from a centrally planned, subsidized economy to the early stages of reform.

After April 30, 1975, Vietnam was fully unified in terms of territory. On July 2, 1976, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was officially established, uniting the North and South. The new government began building a political system based on the socialist model under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam.

After 1975, Vietnam faced numerous challenges in international relations. Choosing a socialist development model, the country closely aligned itself with the Soviet Union and Eastern European nations while facing economic sanctions from the United States and Western countries. Amid post-war hardships, Vietnam also had to allocate resources to assist Cambodia in escaping the Khmer Rouge genocide in 1978 and to defend its northern border against China's attack in 1979.

From 1975 to 1985, Vietnam adopted a centrally planned economic model based on the Soviet system. The state controlled all aspects of production, distribution, and consumption. Due to the limitations of this centralized management system, Vietnam's economy fell into a severe crisis during this period, leading to significant hardships for the population.

After the war, Vietnam faced a series of social challenges: millions of people were left disabled or homeless due to the war; infrastructure was severely damaged, especially in the North and bombed areas in the South; and prolonged food shortages persisted. In summary, the period from 1975 to 1985 was a challenging time for Vietnam. The government made efforts to rebuild the country after the war, but the rigid implementation of a centrally planned economy led to significant economic difficulties. However, these hardships set the stage for the reforms of 1986, when Vietnam decided to transition to a socialist-oriented market economy and open up to global integration. This was a pivotal turning point that helped Vietnam overcome the crisis and achieve strong development in the years that followed.

3.2. An Overview of Vietnamese Prose in the Post-War Period

Vietnamese literature, particularly prose, underwent a significant transformation after 1975 toward democratization, marked by the development of various prose genres and the emergence of many remarkable works. Writers focused on exploring the realities of life, depicting the complexities of society and individuals from a multidimensional perspective. The writing style shifted from idealized, ornamental praise to sharp criticism and satire.

Artistic innovation, from delving into inner lives to using everyday language, enriched both the content and form of prose. Realistic works such as *Bến Quê* by Nguyễn Minh Châu, *Mùa Lá Rụng Trong Vườn* by Ma Văn Kháng, and *Cù Lao Tràm* and *Đứng Trước Biển* by Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn introduced new directions for contemporary literature, creating a vibrant literary atmosphere and reshaping the public's attitude toward prose.

During this period, writer Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn made a profound impact, particularly in the novel genre. He began his literary career while serving in the youth volunteer force. After 1975, Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn continued writing and quickly gained attention with works such as *Đứng Trước Biển* and *Cù Lao Tràm*.

In the 1990s, he expanded into television scriptwriting and achieved great success with popular dramas such as *Đồng Tiền Xương Máu*, *Cô Thư Ký Xinh Đẹp*, *Blouse Trắng*, *Công Nghệ Thời Trang*, and *Thái Sư Trần Thủ Độ*, among others. Whether in prose or screenplay writing, his works consistently reflect deep social and humanistic issues, attracting significant public interest. Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn has received numerous awards, including the prestigious *Cánh Diều Vàng* for Best Screenplay, affirming his talent and major contributions to Vietnamese literature and television.

Social reality is one of the key elements deeply reflected in Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn's novels, especially in *Đứng Trước Biển*, a work with a powerful impact and an impressive print run of over 150,000 copies. This figure not only demonstrates the novel's appeal but also affirms the author's ability to understand and meet the needs of his readers.

Since its release, *Đứng Trước Biển* has generated a widespread impact, capturing public attention. Numerous newspapers, radio stations, and media outlets have analyzed the novel, highly praising the ideological and artistic values that Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn brought to his work.

With its blend of social realism, deep psychological exploration of characters, and distinctive storytelling, *Đứng Trước Biển* not only paints a vivid picture of its era but also raises pressing, thought-provoking humanistic issues. The novel's success solidifies Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn's firm position in contemporary Vietnamese literature.

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4. The Core Issues of the Novel *Đứng Trước Biển*

4.1. The Novel *Đứng Trước Biển* – A Perspective on Its Content

4.1.1. Social Realism in the Novel

*** The Portrait of Soldiers' Working Life and the Hardships in Nation-Building After the War**

In *Đứng Trước Biển*, Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn portrays the working life of soldiers after the war, particularly at the Sao Mai fishing enterprise. These returning soldiers carry the pain of war and face numerous challenges in a new society. They struggle not only against poverty but also with the lingering effects of war. Characters like Ba Đức, Lê Tám, and Út Càn endure immense suffering, from family losses to disabilities. However, they continue to work and contribute to society. The novel also reflects the hardships of post-war life, where people grapple with deprivation and social issues.

*** The Organization of the Apparatus, Inefficiencies in Management Mechanisms, and Social Administration**

After 1975, Vietnamese society underwent significant transformations, yet the administrative system remained rigid, leading to numerous management shortcomings. In *Đứng Trước Biển*, Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn highlights this reality through the characters at the Sao Mai fishing enterprise, where returning soldiers struggle with ineffective leadership. The character Chín Tâm, the chief accountant, exemplifies the disorder in management, prioritizing personal gain over collective benefit, resulting in stagnation and failure. Meanwhile, capable individuals like Út Càn and Hai Tiến are overlooked, leaving them disillusioned with an ineffective leadership system. The novel exposes flaws in governance and administration, reflecting the social realities of the post-war era.

*** The Relationship Between Leadership and Workers, the Aspiration for Change and Reform**

In *Đứng Trước Biển*, Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn strongly criticizes the localized mindset and individualism in post-war society, where many prioritize personal interests over collective progress. The novel highlights leadership shortcomings and a lack of responsibility through characters like Ba Nhu, who fails to fulfill his duties, and Năm Miên, who seeks only personal gain. Another character, Chín Tâm, constantly exploits loopholes in the system for his own benefit. Issues such as theft within enterprises and on fishing boats further expose weak management. These behaviors erode moral values and hinder societal development. Witnessing this bitter reality, Ba Đức, a true revolutionary, is deeply saddened by the moral decline of certain officials.

4.1.2. Typical Characters and the Aspiration for Reform

In *Đứng Trước Biển*, Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn portrays Ba Đức as a true revolutionary, embodying the aspiration for reform and dedication to national development. As the director of the Sao Mai enterprise, Ba Đức constantly reflects on the role and responsibilities of a revolutionary in a new era: "Rational economic management principles create material wealth for society and ensure workers' livelihoods, which is the strongest bond that keeps people committed to their homeland." (Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn, 2019a, p. 422). Despite numerous challenges, Ba Đức remains unwavering in his determination to reform the enterprise through well-thought-out policies: "At first, because I took a slow and cautious approach, I almost failed against negative forces... But when I became resolute, opportunities quickly opened up." (Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn, 2019a, p. 329). His perseverance and vision for progressive change make him a central figure representing the drive for innovation and national renewal in the post-war period.

Ba Đức serves as a model leader with both vision and integrity, constantly striving for noble ideals and societal progress. Despite facing numerous challenges, he remains steadfast in his commitment to developing the Sao Mai enterprise: "From now on, as the director, I will firmly implement and defend every management principle that I believe to be right." (Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn, 2019a, p. 162). His relentless efforts help the enterprise overcome crises, improve the lives of workers and sailors' families, and transform Sao Mai into a dynamic and inspiring workplace.

Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn's novel *Đứng trước biển* reflects the post-war social reality, particularly the hardships faced by soldiers in their working lives after the war. Through the depiction of the Sao Mai fishing enterprise, the novel paints a picture of soldiers carrying the scars of war while struggling against poverty, social problems, and the challenges of rebuilding the nation. At the same time, Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn critiques the flaws in management structures, the stagnation, and corruption in society, as exemplified by characters like Chín Tâm and Năm Miên, who prioritize personal gain. The novel also highlights the desire for reform through the character of Ba Đức, a determined leader committed to innovation, national development, and overcoming the difficulties caused by outdated and bureaucratic governance.

4.2. The Novel *Đứng trước biển* – An Artistic Perspective

4.2.1. The Art of Character Development

Characters are the key element in plot development, serving as intermediaries in establishing relationships between situations and conflicts within the work. Beyond being artistic figures, characters are also the primary means through which the author conveys messages, reflects social issues, and deeply explores human nature.

In *Đứng trước biển*, Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn constructs a diverse system of characters, each vividly portrayed through their appearance, personality, and psychology. Lê Tám is depicted as a strong, simple man with the qualities of a leader, while Năm Miên, the Deputy Director of Organization, has a rough appearance that reflects his selfish and opportunistic nature. Chín Tâm, the Chief Accountant,

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appears with an attractive look and a resolute personality but harbors deep ambitions. Characters like Ba Đức, Bảy Thu, and Út Cần represent true revolutionaries who strive for reform and development, whereas antagonistic figures such as Chín Tâm, Năm Miên, and Sáu Kinh embody the darker aspects of society, highlighting the contrast between good and evil in the post-war era.

4.2.2. Critical and Philosophical Tone

The artistic tone is the way in which the author uses language to convey emotions, thoughts, and attitudes toward events, characters, and issues in the work. The tone in a literary work plays a crucial role in delivering the author's emotions, ideas, and messages to the reader.

In *Đứng trước biển*, Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn employs a critical tone to highlight the shortcomings of society, expressed through the attitudes and thoughts of the characters. This tone is evident in the dialogue between Ba Đức and the city party secretary, where the latter sarcastically mocks Ba Đức for his lack of revolutionary enthusiasm: "That feeling gradually faded away... The duties of a public official replaced the passionate blood of revolutionary fervor" (Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn, 2019a, p. 7). Through this tone, Ba Đức also criticizes Vinh's lack of courage when he refuses to confront wrongdoing in his work: "You have enough courage to accept the position of deputy minister, yet you lack the courage to stand up against wrongdoing..." (Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn, 2019a, p. 519).

Besides its critical tone, the novel also adopts a philosophical tone, particularly in its perspectives on society and human nature. Through his reflections, Ba Đức expresses his views on responsibility and strictness in work: "Compromising and tolerating negligence in responsibilities is, in fact, a crime and a disgrace..." (Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn, 2019a, p. 234). These statements not only reflect the character's beliefs but also convey the author's principles on the essential values needed to build a better society.

4.2.3. Artistic Space and Time

Artistic space and time are two essential elements in the structure of a literary work, playing a significant role in constructing and enriching the artistic world created by the author.

In *Đứng trước biển*, Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn constructs a unique artistic space and time that vividly reflects the dynamic and shifting realities of life. The primary setting takes place at the Sao Mai enterprise, encompassing offices, fishing boats, the harbor, and workers' homes, creating a lively picture of labor life. The artistic time in the novel is not linear but flexibly depicted, shifting according to the psychological developments of the characters. For instance, the late-night moments with Ba Đức are portrayed with a slow pace, emphasizing his contemplation and concerns about his family. Time is also interwoven with past, present, and future events, adding depth and dramatic appeal to the story. The novel's open-ended conclusion leaves a profound impression on the reader.

Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn's novel *Đứng trước biển* is successful both in terms of content and artistic expression. The author constructs a diverse cast of characters, vividly portraying their appearances, personalities, and psychological depth. From righteous figures like Ba Đức, Bảy Thu, and Út Cần to antagonists such as Chín Tâm and Năm Miên, the novel creates a strong contrast that clearly reflects the post-war social reality. The novel employs a sharp critical tone, particularly evident in character dialogues and inner thoughts, especially in its critique of irresponsibility and lack of courage among leaders. Additionally, Ba Đức's philosophical reflections emphasize key perspectives on responsibility, ethics, and social development.

Artistically, the novel also succeeds in its flexible construction of space and time, reflecting societal changes and transformations. The setting of the Sao Mai enterprise and other locations in the story creates a vivid depiction of labor life, while the temporal shifts align with the psychological development of the characters, adding depth and dramatic appeal. The novel's open-ended conclusion leaves a lasting impression, emphasizing the key messages the author seeks to convey.

CONCLUSION

The novel *Đứng trước biển* by Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn successfully captures the turbulent social realities of post-war Vietnam, a period marked by immense challenges in national reconstruction and development. The work not only vividly portrays the laborious lives of soldiers returning from war but also exposes shortcomings in organization, management, and societal issues such as economic stagnation, individualism, and the moral corruption of certain officials. Through this, Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn conveys the concerns and aspirations of dedicated revolutionaries while shedding light on the darker aspects of post-war society.

From an artistic perspective, *Đứng trước biển* excels in crafting well-defined character portrayals, employing a strong critical tone, and skillfully integrating space and time in its narrative. These elements contribute to a work that is not only compelling in content but also profound in ideology. The novel holds significant value in post-war Vietnamese literature, serving as a powerful reflection of the aspirations for renewal and the relentless efforts of individuals and society to rise above challenges.

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