



Discursive Transformations in Vietnamese Children's Literature (1975–2024): From Revolutionary Ideals to Postmodern Sensibilities

NGUYEN THANH TAM
*HO HUU NHAT

University of Education, Hue University, 34 Le Loi Street, Hue City 530000, Vietnam

*Corresponding author: hhnhat@hueuni.edu.vn

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Abstract. This article examines discursive transformations in Vietnamese children's literature from 1975 to 2024 and traces the shift from collective, revolutionary ideals to more individualised and postmodern modes of representation. Situated in a post-war context reshaped by the *Doi Moi* reforms and subsequent globalisation, Vietnamese children's literature has operated as a cultural institution for the construction of collective memory, images of childhood and social subjectivity. Drawing on theories of children's literature and post-war memory studies, this study analyses 30 representative texts through literary discourse analysis, content analysis and intertextual analysis. The findings show how evolving modes of expression both reflect and help shape Vietnam's broader sociocultural transformations. By offering a case study grounded in Vietnam's distinctive socialist and reform-oriented context, the article broadens global scholarship on post-war children's literature and makes theoretical as well as practical contributions to research on discourse, cultural memory and post-war childhoods.

Keywords and phrases: Vietnamese children's literature, discursive transformations, revolutionary ideals, postmodern sensibilities, post-war memory

Introduction

Children's literature is not merely a medium for education or entertainment; it is a cultural discourse embedded in ideological structures through which collective memory, social values and conceptions of childhood are constructed, reproduced and institutionalised across historical periods. As Nodelman (2008) notes, most works for children in fact articulate adult discourses about childhood rather than children's own voices, a condition he terms "the hidden

adult". Rose (1984) likewise describes children's literature as an "impossible fiction" because it is always produced from a position of adult power and perception. In the same vein, Nikolajeva (2016/1996) argues that children's literature functions as a space for organising aesthetic and moral codes, within which adults shape affective models and symbolic systems for later generations. This conceptualisation provides a useful lens for examining children's texts in specific historical and socio-cultural contexts such as Vietnam.

From the perspective of cultural memory, Assmann (2011) emphasises that collective memory operates not only at the individual level but also through cultural institutions. Children's literature can therefore be understood as a "memory carrier", particularly effective in transmitting dominant historical models to younger readers. As Caruth (2016) points out, in post-war or otherwise traumatic contexts, memory seldom appears through direct narrative but emerges instead in fragmented symbols, recurring images or non-linear narrative forms. This dynamic is particularly salient in children's literature, where expression is constrained by simplified language and by moral conventions.

In this context, Vietnamese children's literature from 1975 to 2024 offers a paradigmatic case of discursive transformation. It reveals a movement from collective, revolutionary and didactic structures towards more reflective, individualised and even postmodern modes of expression. To clarify this progression, this article provisionally organises Vietnamese children's literature after 1975 into three historically salient phases, each associated with a distinct constellation of discursive features emerging in relation to and alongside major socio-political shifts. This periodisation does not claim to "discover" naturally discrete literary stages; rather, it follows widely recognised political-economic turning points (1975, 1986 and 2001) in order to provide a workable heuristic for reading textual change. The aim is not to argue for rigidly separate literary regimes but to show that, in each moment, particular discursive options become more legible or dominant and thereby co-constitute broader societal transformations.

The period from 1975 to 1985 marked the dominance of a discourse of collectivised memory and revolutionary ideals in Vietnamese children's literature. Following national reunification in 1975, in a post-war context defined by material hardship and the need for ideological reconstruction, Vietnamese children's literature was mobilised as an ideological instrument to strengthen national spirit and to shape collective memory. This mobilisation included a deliberate, state-sponsored effort to circulate revolutionary texts to the southern region of Vietnam, primarily through school systems and state publishers such as Kim Dong Publishing House, in order to foster a unified

national imagination. Representative works from this period typically adopted a formal tone, displayed a strong didactic orientation and expressed reverence for political figures and revolutionary archetypes, including Ho Chi Minh, the soldier, the revolutionary mother and the socialist heroic collective. Children were portrayed as successors to the revolutionary ideal, with little narrative space allocated to personal emotions or interior experiences. Collectivity, mono-perspectival narration and the predominance of an “adult voice” thus emerged as defining characteristics. Consequently, children’s literature functioned less as an aesthetic domain than as a cultural institution for the construction of memory.

Between 1986 and 2000, a shift towards the discourse of individualised memory and transitional tendencies began to shape Vietnamese children’s literature. This shift corresponded with the *Doi Moi* (Renovation) era, which introduced comprehensive reforms in economic, cultural and ideological domains. The year 1986 marked not only the beginning of economic renovation but also the onset of a period of intellectual liberalisation, as articulated in the spirit of the Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam. While state-affiliated publishers remained dominant, this era witnessed the emergence of a commercial book market, with works circulating on the basis of entertainment value rather than solely through school-based dissemination. Literature, including children’s literature, gradually moved away from its role as a vehicle for ideological dissemination and came to be recognised as a form of autonomous creative expression with the capacity to explore human experience, everyday life and the multifaceted dimensions of historical memory. This transformation enabled the appearance of themes linked to personal life, including family, emotional introspection, school life, urbanisation and environmental issues. Literary poetics likewise became more flexible: traditional verse forms such as *lục bát* (six-eight verse form) and *ngũ ngôn* (five-syllable verse) were employed alongside free verse, while children’s short fiction evolved from omniscient narration to more personal, dialogic modes aligned with the lived experiences of young readers. Although war memory remained a central thematic concern, it was no longer treated as sacred or untouchable; instead, it was increasingly approached through individual emotional perspectives, at times marked by scepticism, interrogation or redefinition. In this context, the discourse of individualised memory not only transformed the representation of childhood in children’s literature but also established the groundwork for reflective, intertextual and postmodern strategies in the subsequent literary period.

Since 2001, Vietnamese children’s literature has entered a new phase, reflecting significant transformations shaped by globalisation, the rapid development of digital technologies and the proliferation of multimedia communication.

This period also coincides with structural shifts in the publishing industry, marked by the emergence of experimental works that challenged traditional genre boundaries. These shifts included a marked diversification of publishing structures, from state-sponsored outlets to private publishing houses and joint ventures. Concurrently, a robust consumer book market grew (for example, through bookshops and online platforms), which gradually came to supplant earlier school-based dissemination. The year 2001 serves as a crucial turning point not only because of the symbolic millennial transition but also because shifting cultural policies actively fostered greater diversity in literary production and reception. During this phase, children were no longer portrayed as passive recipients of moral education; instead, they emerged as autonomous cognitive subjects capable of parody, critique and independent interpretation of the world. Children's texts became increasingly experimental, often breaking conventional genre categories and blending elements of autobiography, fiction and the surreal. These hybrid forms generated multi-layered and intertextually rich modes of expression. Themes such as war memory, nature and personal identity were no longer presented as coherent messages but were conveyed through fragmented, ironic or indirect images, reflecting the self-reflexive and discontinuous characteristics of postmodern discourse. Consequently, children's literature in this period evolved into a polyphonic space in which the child is not merely a recipient of meaning but an active participant in its co-construction. This shift gave rise to new discursive models that mirrored broader changes in social perceptions of childhood, memory and identity.

Although children's literature has long been acknowledged as a cultural discourse which plays an essential role in the construction of collective memory and in the social imagination of childhood, Vietnamese children's literature (and, more broadly, that of Southeast Asia) remains largely absent from the global landscape of discourse-oriented research. Most contemporary scholarship continues to centre on Western children's literature, where discourse is analysed as an ideologically mediated semiotic system (Bradford et al. 2008; Nodelman 2008), addressing themes such as gender, power, identity, postcolonialism and posthumanism. Over the past decade, several studies have begun to shift attention to Vietnamese and Southeast Asian children's literature, reading these texts through memory-based, ecocritical and intercultural lenses and thereby adding perspectives from beyond the West and beyond the Cold War frame (Huong and Chi 2024; Thuy 2024; Tam and Nhat 2025; Phan 2025).

Critical approaches including discourse analysis, postmodern narratology and postcolonial criticism have been widely applied to deconstruct "naturalised" representations of childhood embedded in literary texts. In contrast, Vietnamese children's literature, which has developed within a socialist, post-

war and reform-driven context, has not yet been examined systematically through these theoretical frameworks. While children's texts in Vietnam once played a significant role in disseminating revolutionary ideals, constructing communal imaginaries and regulating historical memory, they have mostly been approached through thematic or genre-historical lenses rather than analysed as a complex, intertextually rich and self-reflexive field of discourse.

This article seeks to address both theoretical and regional gaps by analysing the discursive transformation of Vietnamese children's literature from 1975 to 2024, a field that has yet to be fully theorised from an interdisciplinary perspective. By positioning children's literature at the centre of cultural memory analysis and post-war subject formation in Vietnam, the article aims to reposition Vietnamese children's literature within the global research landscape. At the same time, it seeks to extend the applicability of discourse and memory theories to a Southeast Asian context that remains largely overlooked in international scholarship. Drawing on a theoretical framework that integrates children's literature studies, post-war memory theory and intertextual analysis, this article proposes an interdisciplinary approach capable of decoding the linguistic, symbolic and mnemonic strategies embedded in children's literature as a distinctive form of cultural discourse.

To address these gaps, the article pursues three objectives. First, it sketches and analyses the discursive transformation of Vietnamese children's literature from 1975 to 2024, identifying recurrent thematic and formal features clustered around three key historical moments. Second, it examines how shifts in symbolic systems, narrative voice and subject positioning both reflect and shape broader socio-cultural transformations in contemporary Vietnam. Third, it demonstrates how children's literature functions as a vital cultural institution that constructs collective memory, negotiates educational discourses and configures the social imagination of the subject.

By accomplishing these objectives through a close reading of 30 representative texts, the article traces the genre's shifts from collectivist ideals to postmodern sensibilities. The scholarly contribution of this research lies not only in its repositioning of children's literature as a cultural and mnemonic institution but also in its potential to contribute to global discourse studies by offering a concrete case of how children's literature operates and evolves within a post-war, socialist context.

Theoretical Framework

This article approaches Vietnamese children's literature from 1975 to 2024 as a multi-layered cultural discourse in which war memory, post-war trauma and childhood subjectivity intersect within a specific historical trajectory. To analyse this discursive transformation across the shifting contexts of post-war reconstruction, *Doi Moi* and globalisation, the article constructs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework. Central to this framework is the assertion in children's literature theory that the genre is not a natural expression of the child's voice but an ideologically constructed space where adults shape the values and aesthetic models of the next generation (Nodelman 2008; Rose 1984; Nikolajeva 2016/1996). In the post-1975 Vietnamese context, the study draws on post-war memory theory to examine how children's literature functions as a cultural institution that both preserves official collective memory (Assmann 2011) and provides a medium for articulating unspoken historical trauma through fragmented, indirect or metaphorical forms (Caruth 2016). Finally, intertextual theory is employed as an analytical strategy to trace how these symbolic networks are reconfigured over time, creating meaning through dialogic interactions with broader cultural texts, including revolutionary narratives and folk traditions (Kristeva 1980; Genette 1997/1982; Allen 2021).

To operationalise this integrated framework, this article explicitly defines "discursive transformation" as the historical shift in the underlying rules, available motifs and narrative strategies used to represent childhood, memory and the self. The concept is operationalised by tracing transformation across three interrelated textual levels:

1. Dominant symbolic systems (e.g., a shift from the "soldier" and the "leader" as central motifs to figures of personal trauma or ecological crisis).
2. Narrative voice (e.g., a move from omniscient, didactic narration to polyphonic, self-reflexive, or child-centred voices).
3. The positioning of the child subject (e.g., a change from a passive recipient of ideals to an active agent of critique and meaning-making).

The literature in question, referred to in Vietnam as "children's literature", primarily targets readers in middle childhood and early adolescence (roughly ages 6 years old to 15 years old).

To link discursive change with subject formation, the article also draws on scholarship on Vietnamese socialist personhood and late-socialist self-making, which shows that cultural and print institutions were central to crafting morally legible citizens in the post-war period (for example, Malarney 2002; Schwenkel 2009). In the *Doi Moi* era, studies of urban consumption and market-socialist governance further demonstrate how “enterprising”, self-managing and affectively flexible subjects were encouraged through media and popular culture (Drummond and Thomas 2003; Leshkovich 2014; Harms 2011). Bringing these perspectives into the analysis of children’s literature complicates any linear assumption that literature merely mirrors political-economic change; instead, it shows how literary texts for children actively train dispositions—collectivist, household-entrepreneurial and later globally oriented—that make such formations liveable.

Grounded in these theoretical pillars and this analytical approach, the article conceptualises Vietnamese children’s literature as a dynamic discursive field. This approach allows for an analysis of its transformation from a vehicle for collectivist idealism to a site of individualised and postmodern expression, reflecting profound shifts in how post-war society constructs memory, subjectivity and childhood.

Methodology

This study employs a methodology that combines literary discourse analysis, qualitative content analysis and intertextual analysis to examine the discursive transformation of Vietnamese children’s literature from 1975 to 2024. This multi-methodological approach was chosen to capture distinct layers of change: discourse analysis reveals shifts in narrative voice, content analysis tracks thematic trajectories from collective heroism to private introspection, and intertextual analysis illuminates how contemporary works dialogically engage with earlier revolutionary archetypes. As operationalised in the theoretical framework, the analytical procedure traces this transformation across three interconnected textual levels:

1. The dominant symbolic systems, for example, shifts in heroic or natural imagery.
2. The evolution of narrative voice, for example, the movement from omniscient, didactic narration to polyphonic or child-centred voices.
3. The changing positioning of the child subject, for example, the move from a passive recipient of ideals to an active, critical agent.

This analysis deconstructs how expressive strategies, narrative structures and linguistic choices construct and negotiate war memory and social subjectivity across historical stages.

The primary corpus consists of 30 representative works selected through a purposive sampling strategy based on three criteria. First, canonical status: the text is widely recognised, frequently anthologised, included in educational curricula or published by reputable state-affiliated publishers such as Kim Dong Publishing House. Second, critical acclaim: the text has received major national literary awards (e.g., the National Book Award) or is consistently cited in Vietnamese literary criticism (e.g., Thanh 2019; Tam 2023) as emblematic of its period. Third, critical-historical linkage: the text is repeatedly identified in Vietnamese literary scholarship as representative of its broader historical moment, often discussed in relation to political-economic turning points, thereby linking the work to its historical context rather than pre-selecting it on the basis of a discursive label; this addresses possible concerns about methodological circularity.

Within this framework, qualitative content analysis is used to identify prominent discursive patterns by comparing imagery and narrative structure. Following trauma narratology (Caruth 2016), linguistic phenomena such as silence and metaphorical substitution are interpreted as indirect modes of articulating historical memory. The analysis is situated within the framework of children's literature as a memory institution (Assmann 2011), treating textual strategies as discursive negotiations between collective history and individual sensibility and as practices embedded in a wider ecology of state-supported print and school media. For this reason, the analysis reads children's literature alongside its main channels of circulation (Kim Dong Publishing House, *Thieu Nien Tien Phong* [Young Pioneers Newspaper] and later televised or illustrated adaptations). Together, these sites form a single discursive apparatus that presupposes and reproduces socialist and market-socialist models of the child. This approach makes visible how print and popular media in Vietnam actively create, rather than merely record, new configurations of childhood and subjectivity.

Findings and Analysis

Children's literature as an ideological apparatus: Idealised discourse in the 1975 to 1985 period

The discourse of revolutionary heroism that defined the 1975 to 1985 period was constructed through a consistent set of symbolic motifs that both inherited and reinforced the tonal register of wartime literature (Tam 2023). As Le

(2015) observes, this “revolutionary lyrical current” was marked by a largely homogeneous impulse to praise the homeland and the revolution.

Through the combined use of literary discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis, distinctive motifs and symbols can be identified in children's poetry of this period. These include the image of *Bac Ho* (Uncle Ho) as a symbol of wisdom and patriotism, the soldier as an embodiment of courage and sacrifice, the mother as a nurturing figure within wartime narratives and the collective—especially the collective of children—as an idealised subject inheriting the revolutionary tradition. For analytical clarity, the 1975 to 1985 corpus in this article is read as three mutually supporting clusters:

1. Leader- and hero-focused poems that stabilise official memory, for example, “Vieng Lang Bac” (At His Mausoleum, 2024), “Anh Bac” (The Image of Uncle Ho, 2017) and “Em Ve Bac Ho” (I Draw Uncle Ho, 2024).
2. Soldier and labour narratives that model socialist virtues, for example, “Chu Bo Doi Hanh Quan Trong Mua” (The Soldier Marches in the Rain, 2024), “Hoa Vua Di Vua No” (The Flower Blooms as It Marches, 1981), “Truoc Mua Mua Bao” (Before the Storm Season, as cited in Tam 2023) and “Con Duong Nho” (The Little Road, 1976).
3. Wartime and evacuation childhood stories that transmit hardship through an ultimately optimistic tone, for example, *Hoi Do O Sa Ky* (Back Then in Sa Ky, 1981), *Nhung Nguy Luu Lac* (Days in Exile, 1981) and *Hoa Co Dang* (Bitter Wildflowers, 1978).

In pre-1975 canonical works, Ho Chi Minh is often represented through reverent and emblematic imagery, serving as a moral and cultural figurehead rather than as the subject of political narrative. In Vietnamese children's literature, he is typically portrayed with gentle solemnity, through motifs such as “long beard, white hair, kind eyes” and through actions associated with guidance and care, such as “offering wise advice” or “smiling in praise of a well-behaved child” (Tam 2023). Poems such as “Anh Bac” (2017), “Em Ve Bac Ho” (2024) and “Bac Ho Cua Em” (My Uncle Ho, 2024c) became poetic templates for constructing an image of the leader that is at once intimate and respectfully distant. This poetic convention persisted in the post-war decade in poems like “Trai Dat Mai Nay Con Lai Tinh Yeu” (May Love Remain on Earth Tomorrow) by Nhu (1985), “Cay Vu Sua Trong Vuon Bac” (The Star Apple Tree in Uncle Ho's Garden) by Tan (2024) and “Vieng Lang Bac” by Phuong (2024a), all of which sought to reinforce a shared cultural memory.

Parallel to this representation, the motif of the “Uncle Ho soldier” was idealised as a heroic presence. In “Hoa Vua Di Vua No” by Hao (1981), the soldier is depicted as resilient and adaptive in the face of danger. Amid relentless bombardment during the American War, he utilises elements of the natural environment to cross southern rivers. The poem thus evokes a figure that is both heroic and lyrical, sustained by inner vitality and by faith in the future.

In “Chu Bo Doi Hanh Quan Trong Mua” (2024b), the figure of the soldier is embedded in imagery of hardship, persistence and duty (Le 2015, 72):

Rain keeps falling...
His coat may be soaked, yet he walks, he walks.
The road to the front stretches far, still far...

These figures are not presented merely as moral exemplars but serve as encoded memory figures designed to shape ideal citizenship for children born after the war. From the perspective of cultural memory theory, such symbolic representations function as memory figures – durable, transmissible forms closely tied to political institutions (Assmann 2011). At the same time, they reflect the structures of adult authority embedded in children’s literature, in which imagery is strategically employed to guide the emotional and ethical formation of young readers (Nodelman 2008). Children’s literature of this period therefore operates not only as a site of entertainment or moral education but also as a symbolic space that performs the functions of transmitting, preserving and reaffirming historical and ethical values through idealising discourse.

Alongside the soldier motif, a significant thematic strand in Vietnamese children’s literature from 1975 to 1985 centres on the atmosphere and spirit of socialist construction in northern Vietnam. Works such as “Con Duong Nho” by Duong (1976) and “Truoc Mua Mua Bao” (as cited in Tam 2023) depict the socialist ideal through images of collective labour, responsibility and innovation. In “Truoc Mua Mua Bao” (as cited in Tam 2023), Minh portrays a mining community that embodies the socialist model – a cohesive, industrious group united in purpose. The story of three generations in a miner’s family collaborating to construct a water pump before the storm season functions not only as a hymn to labour but also as a symbolic expression of collectivism and national reconstruction. The character of “my grandfather”, a master metalworker, is presented as a representation of the new socialist human being: diligent, experienced and devoted to the collective and a source of inspiration for younger generations. The story is devoid of class antagonism; instead, it is driven by comradely relationships and professional solidarity. This reflects a fundamental tenet of socialist literature, namely the centrality of human beings and the primacy of the collective as a transformative force.

Several texts continue to explore the ideological aspirations of Vietnamese children. In “Ngay Em Vao Doi” (The Day You Became a Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneer, 1982), Quynh articulates the ideal of collective life through the image of the red scarf – a symbol of growth, responsibility and the desire to contribute. Joining the Pioneers marks not only a milestone in childhood but also the beginning of a journey devoted to collective ideals and national service. This ideal is conveyed through expansive metaphors such as blue skies, sails and ships, evoking a vast future in which each child becomes part of the nation's unfolding narrative.

Longing begins anew
From the blaze of a red scarf

(Quynh 1982, 46)

The verses affirm that the aspiration to serve does not end with one generation but is passed on, silently and persistently, like a steady flame. This mode of representation reinforces the univocal tone and the prescriptive orientation of literary reception during this period.

Earlier works from the resistance period often portrayed “premature heroes” – children who willingly sacrificed themselves and served the nation with unwavering loyalty. The child characters in “Luom” (The Little Courier) by Huu (1954), “Phac Kim To, Em Thieu Nu Du Kich Trieu Tien” (Phac Kim To, A Young Korean Guerrilla Girl) by Sanh (1953), “Em Be Ben Bo Song Lai Vu” (The Little Boy by the Lai Vu River) by Cao (1987), “Vu A Dinh” by Hoai (1962), “Kim Dong” by Hoai and Long (2019) and “Doi Du Kich Thieu Nien Dinh Bang” (The Young Guerrilla Unit of Dinh Bang) by Sach (1966) were all constructed around a shared narrative of “revolutionary ideals and patriotic vengeance”, with little differentiation in individual traits or personal voice.

The dominant discourse in children's literature from 1975 to 1985 continued to emphasise collectivism and revolutionary purpose. Children were depicted as being clearly oriented towards goals and ideals: everything for victory and national unification, ready to go wherever the country needs them and carrying out the organisation's assignments. One emblematic figure of this generation is Nguyen, the protagonist of “Mat Troi Be Con Cua Toi” (My Little Sun, as cited in Tam 2023), who embodies a quiet yet noble ideal of civic responsibility. Born into a broken family and lacking affection, Nguyen does not surrender to hardship but instead chooses to live with strength, independence and accountability. When given the choice between state-sponsored art education and military service, Nguyen consciously chooses to enlist, fully aware of his

duty as a citizen. His statement—“I am leaving to make up, even if only a little, for the mistakes of my brothers, so that people may better understand those like me”—reveals an ideal that transcends personal ambition. It arises from a desire to affirm one’s value through positive action, a spirit closely connected to the image of the revolutionary soldier in traditional literature. Nguyen’s capacity to live harmoniously with his fellow soldiers, to embrace life and, ultimately, to die with courage reflects a profoundly humanist ideal: living so that others may live. His sacrifice continues the tradition of devotion and service that has been central to revolutionary literature and he becomes a “little sun” illuminating those around him and serving as a powerful symbol of post-war youth ideals.

However, within this discursive model, children’s literature of the 1975 to 1985 period offered limited space for the representation of “distinct individuals”. Most characters were shaped by the same collective ideal. This univocal tone was not only a reflection of socialist educational ideology but also functioned as a memory-making apparatus, crafting models of ideal citizenship from childhood onwards. Yet the homogenisation of voice and values within these texts resulted in a lack of diversity, with most characters conforming to a single norm and largely devoid of internal conflict or individual differentiation. This contributed to a strong didactic character while also constraining the psychological depth of child protagonists in many works of the time.

Overall, the discourse of Vietnamese children’s literature from 1975 to 1985 was characterised by a high degree of collectivism and univocality. Heroic motifs—such as those of the leader, the soldier and the child—were presented through an idealising lens, with limited complexity in character psychology. The poetics of this period favoured formulaic descriptions, symbolic stylisation and plain, accessible language designed to convey messages directly to a young audience. The dominant tone was lyrical and celebratory, consistently oriented towards idealisation and painful experiences or inner conflicts were largely absent.

This does not imply, however, that children’s literature entirely avoided depicting hardship. Several works from the late 1970s and early 1980s began to address more painful dimensions of war memory, reflecting loss and sorrow through a tender, nostalgic tone. *Hoa Co Dang* by Trang (1978), for example, offers a candid narrative for children about the experience of wartime – schoolchildren wearing straw helmets, evacuating from cities and growing up amid a shortage of familial and educational care. Yet even these poignant stories of a time of bullets and bombs ultimately return to the celebration of friendship, the teacher-student bond and the resilient optimism of wartime childhood.

As such, it is clear that the children's literature of 1975 to 1985 functioned as a cultural-ideological apparatus. It institutionalised the memory of revolutionary struggle while shaping the model of the "socialist subject" for the post-war generation. Produced and disseminated primarily through state publishers and school-based cultural organisations, these texts trained collectivist dispositions by linking reading to collective rituals, exemplary figures and the moral economy of socialist citizenship. Each text carried a pedagogical mission, transmitting revolutionary moral norms, patriotism, collectivist ethics and socialist optimism to young readers. At the same time, it was precisely from within this collectivist, idealised and univocal discourse that new needs for change gradually emerged in the field of children's literature.

Children's literature as a space of reflection: Memory discourse and individualisation during the 1986 to 2000 period

In a clear departure from the monolithic discourse of the preceding decade, the literature of the *Doi Moi* era (1986 to 2000) was marked by two strong and, at times, divergent currents: a reflective post-war memory discourse and a new focus on individualised, everyday realism. This transition, born of a growing recognition of the distinct consciousness of the peacetime generation, fostered what Thanh (2019) identifies as a successful literary transformation that diversified both thematic content and tonal registers.

A defining feature of this period was the emergence of a post-war memory discourse that re-examined the war through retrospection and individualised trauma rather than through collective heroism. Army writers, drawing on first-hand experience, produced memoiristic narratives that offered more nuanced and psychologically complex portrayals of wartime childhood. Works such as Quan's (1988) *Tuoi Tho Du Doi* (*Fierce Childhood*) and Khan's (1986) *Tuoi Tho Im Lang* (*Silent Childhood*) interrogated the heroic ideal by foregrounding loss, sacrifice and the profound emotional pain of young protagonists, thereby departing from the triumphant narratives of the previous era. This re-evaluation reflects a significant semantic displacement, in which the war was recoded from an epic national struggle into a site of personal tragedy and unresolved memory. As authors from the wartime generation acknowledged, "old stories ... are now retold with different emotions and understandings" (Thanh 2019). This new sensibility also permeated poetry; the sorrowful tone in Vu's (1995) "Nhưng Dua Tre Buon" (*Sad Children*), with its sparse and aching imagery, presents childhood not as a symbol of revolutionary pride but as a fragile human experience. In effect, this discourse shifted attention from collective ideals to the singular inner world of the child, enabling a new generation of readers to engage with history on more personal and humanistic terms.

At this stage, three strands became particularly visible. First, a line of post-war memory narratives re-narrated childhood during and immediately after the war through loss, separation and belated recognition, as in “Tuoi Tho Du Doi” (Quan 1988) and “Tuoi Tho Im Lang” (Khan 1986). Second, a line of everyday and school-based realism foregrounded family, jealousy, friendship and the ethics of growing up, represented by “Buc Tranh Cua Em Gai Toi” (My Younger Sister’s Painting, 1990), *Cho Bi, Doi Luu Lac* (*Bi the Dog, A Wandering Life*, 1993) and the early volumes of *Kinh Van Hoa* (*Kaleidoscope*, 1995). Third, a smaller but significant line of texts on adolescence and identity crises—such as “Chu Be Rac Roi” (The Troublesome Boy, 1996) and *Bo Tron* (*Running Away*, 2005)—registered the emerging sensibility of young readers born after the war. Naming these strands renders more concrete and text-based the transition from the collectivist discourse of 1975 to 1985 to the individualised discourse of 1986 to 2000.

Concurrently, a powerful discourse of individualisation and realism emerged, opening up narratives centred on the everyday lives of post-war children. This marked a decisive break from settings of warfare and collective labour and instead explored ordinary themes of family, school and friendship. In doing so, this new wave of literature validated the child’s interior world as a legitimate subject of artistic inquiry. Anh’s (1990) short story “Buc Tranh Cua Em Gai Toi” is a paradigmatic example. Devoid of war or grand ideals, its narrative energy derives entirely from an intimate psychological conflict—sibling jealousy—and is resolved through a moment of moral awakening prompted by familial love. Its “whispering, confessional” tone signalled a new capacity for depicting intricate emotional states that had been rarely explored before 1986. This trend was amplified by Anh’s (1995) widely popular series *Kinh Van Hoa*. Discursively, its humorous, apolitical narrative voice and its focus on ordinary urban life performed an important function: it positioned the child subject not as a future citizen bearing historical duty but as a leisure reader and paying consumer within an increasingly commercialised print economy, thereby validating a depoliticised mode of childhood realism aligned with *Doi Moi* sensibilities. The enthusiastic reception of such works, alongside others such as Khang’s (1993) *Cho Bi, Doi Luu Lac*, confirmed a decisive shift towards engagement with “the inner lives of children and those who once were children”. Taken together, these texts show that post-1986 children’s literature did not abandon memory; rather, it re-routed memory through domestic, school and animal narratives so that children could recognise their own lifeworlds. This explains why works published in the 1990s repeatedly returned to small, ordinary conflicts—sibling rivalry, the shame of failure, the hurt of being misunderstood—because such conflicts enabled the representation of an individualised and emotionally nuanced child that was largely absent from 1975 to 1985 writing.

This discursive transition was reflected in both content and form. Thematically, the scope of literature expanded to include personal histories, complex family dynamics and initial engagements with emergent social issues such as urban alienation and value crises. Formally, authors renewed their narrative techniques to foster greater intimacy and psychological depth. The increased use of first-person narration and the deliberate move away from didactic storytelling towards more artistic and reflective modes of writing signalled a new respect for the emotional and intellectual world of the child reader. For this reason, the 1986 to 2000 corpus in this study is treated as a triadic cluster—memory re-narrations, everyday and school realism and adolescent transitional stories—rather than as a single, thin “transitional” phase.

Nevertheless, this transformation remained uneven and was not without challenges. Many writers continued to look back to the past, which resulted in a relative scarcity of works fully grappling with contemporary realities. By the late 1990s, children's literature was still searching for “new common ideals” for a generation whose social context had moved far beyond the wartime frame of reference. Despite these limitations, the foundation laid during 1986 to 2000 was crucial: it diversified the discursive field, liberated children's literature from its purely propagandist function and paved the way for its entry into the twenty-first century with greater confidence and relevance. As Thanh (2019) observes, by capturing life itself, a literary work can transcend its time. The discursive shifts of the *Doi Moi* period laid the essential groundwork for a new generation of writers to reflect the “new battles” of modern childhood, enabling the genre to assert an independent voice in accompanying children through the complexities of both past and present.

Children's literature and the postmodern turn: Fragmented and self-reflexive discourse (2001 to 2024)

In this analysis, “postmodern sensibilities” are defined not as a totalising genre but as a constellation of textual strategies—including metafictional self-reflexivity, intertextual pastiche, polyphonic narration and genre hybridity—that destabilise the authoritative adult voice and position the child reader as an active interpreter. Within the context of children's literature, however, these strategies are often negotiated against ethical and educational imperatives; consequently, post-2001 Vietnamese works frequently hybridise postmodern play with residual didactic frameworks rather than displacing them entirely. The period from 2001 to 2024 marks a critical juncture in Vietnamese children's literature, characterised by the increasing prevalence of postmodern sensibilities—manifested through polyphony, fragmentation and

self-reflexivity—even as these new modes coexist with traditional narrative forms. In presenting this long and internally diverse period, the article groups the 2001 to 2024 corpus into four recurrent lines:

1. Postmodern and self-reflexive fiction and poetry that foreground polyphony, for example, “Ra Vuon Nhat Nang” (Into the Garden to Pick Sunlight, 2017) and “Con Roi” (The Puppet, 2024a).
2. Autobiographical and memory-based narratives that reopen the post-war and subsidy-era experience from a child’s perspective, for example, *Quan Khu Nam Dong* (The Nam Dong Military Zone, 2015) and *Thang Ngay e a* (The Days of Chanting, 2017).
3. Eco-educational, globally oriented or market-aware books for children and young adults, for example, *Chang Hoang Da – Gau* (Saving Sorya: Chang and the Sun Bear, 2020) and *Hanh Trinh Den Buc Tuong* (The Journey to the Wall, as cited in Tam 2023).
4. Trauma- and disaster-related writing that uses fragmentation to articulate loss, for example, “Tieng Vac Sanh” (The Cry of the Earthenware Heron, 2005) and “Tho Ve Dong Dat Nepal” (Poems on the Nepal Earthquake, 2015).

Read as clusters, these works suggest that the 2001 to 2024 phase is not “thin” but rather expansive, marked by thematic and generic diversification. No longer constrained by the linear, didactic models of previous decades, the literary text emerges as a composite mosaic interconnected with collective memory (Assmann 2011) and diverse cultural intertexts (Kristeva 1980; Allen 2021). This development signals the rise of a multi-dimensional child subject who is actively engaged in the co-construction of meaning and is no longer bound by absolute truths (Nodelman 2008; Nikolajeva 2016/1996; Rose 1984).

A primary characteristic of this phase is the fragmentation of narrative structure and the consolidation of discursive polyphony. Unlike earlier periods in which a dominant ideological or emotional voice prevailed, texts now function as discursive networks where philosophical, innocent, parodic and reflexive voices coexist and at times conflict. This is evident in the linguistic hybridity of poets such as Nguyen The Hoang Linh, who fuses slang, foreign loanwords and prose-poetry forms to subvert traditional genre boundaries. This fragmentation extends to narrative form, where linear structures are increasingly replaced by non-linear and layered compositions. Khau’s (2005) “Tieng Vac Sanh” dismantles conventional storytelling by intertwining an urban intellectual’s present reality with folklore and with the haunting memories of a child, thereby blurring the

boundaries between realism and the spectral. Similarly, Anh's (2008) *Cho Toi Xin Mot Ve Di Tuoi Tho* (*Give Me a Ticket to Childhood*, 2008) goes beyond descriptive fragmentation: it abandons a linear plot in favour of vignettes that juxtapose adult and child worldviews and, crucially, it interrogates its own subject. The scene in which the children organise a "trial" to "judge" adults functions as a powerful repositioning of the child subject – from a passive recipient of adult wisdom to an active agent capable of observing, evaluating and imagining a more equitable world on their own terms. This shift from didacticism to empowerment serves as a primary indicator of the postmodern inflection in contemporary discourse, particularly where adult authority is subverted through metafictional play. Such formal and stylistic shifts create polyphonic, indeterminate and self-reflexive architectures, echoing the postmodern turn from merely "telling stories for children" to "exposing the way stories about childhood are told" (Rose 1984; Nikolajeva 2016/1996).

This period also witnesses a move towards a self-reflexive mode of discourse in which the child subject is empowered with agency and actively questions reality. Personal agency is strongly affirmed in poems such as Nhan's (2024a) "Con Roi", which articulates an existential yearning for freedom from a mechanised society and Nhan's (2024b) "Tro Choi" (The Game), which asserts children's capacity to construct their own rules (Tam 2023). This empowerment is further realised through intertextual and parodic strategies that reconfigure cultural memory. In works like Son's (2024) "Me Va Co Tich" (Mother and Fairy Tales) and Nguyen's (2024) "Giac Mo Buoì Sang" (A Morning Dream), familiar folktale motifs and traditional rhymes are not merely repeated but are parodied, questioned and woven into modern contexts with critical inquiry (Tam 2023). Within this framework, children are no longer passive recipients of tradition but emerge as discursive subjects who actively reimagine and challenge established cultural codes, a hallmark of postmodern discourse (Nodelman 2008). This post-2000 diversification becomes clearer when viewed across genres. Autobiographical and memory-based narratives such as *Thang Ngay e a* (2017) and *Quan Khu Nam Dong* (2015) reopen the collective past from ironic, child-centred angles; eco-educational and globally oriented books such as *Chang Hoang Da - Gau* (2020) and the fantasy novel *Hanh Trinh Den Buc Tuong* (as cited in Tam 2023) reposition the child as an empowered, globally connected actor. Read together with experimental poetry such as Linh's (2017) "Ra Vuon Nhat Nang" and Nhan's (2024a) "Con Roi", these works show that the 2001 to 2024 phase is not only formally fragmented but also thematically expanded to include market-facing concerns, including genres and topics amplified through prizes, branding, translation and platform-based circulation, alongside environmental and transnational concerns.

The culmination of these trends is the emergence of a potent trauma discourse, in which language itself becomes fractured to reflect inner turmoil and the lingering impact of collective memory. Unlike the idealised narratives of the past, works from this era incorporate shards of disaster and war directly into their textual fabric. “Tieng Vac Sanh” (2005) serves as a paradigmatic case. Here, trauma is not simply a theme but is embedded in the story’s very form: the eerie cry of the night heron becomes a sonic embodiment of historical loss, while the disfigured face of a soldier stands as visible evidence of the physical destruction of war. The narrative climax is not an external event but a psychological rupture in the observer, Khan – upon witnessing the evidence of another’s loss, he is jolted from indifference into a state of profound empathy. This moment shows how trauma is not contained within the victim but extends outward, altering consciousness and transforming a distant observer into an empathic witness who now carries the “irreparable anguish” of others. This use of fragmented, symbolic and psychologically disruptive narration to articulate historical wounds exemplifies the shift in Vietnamese children’s literature towards a postmodern engagement with its past.

The poetry of Do Nhat Nam also exemplifies this trauma discourse. In a poem written about the Nepal earthquake on the 25th April 2015, the following lines appear:

The earth fell silent...
 Then suddenly
 The earth stirred...
 Cracked
 Split
 Shattered
 Creak
 Crash...

(Translated by the author from Do Nhat Nam’s poem;
 refer Nam 2015)

The fragmented line structure, the disjointed auditory elements and the imagery of physical rupture express the experience of trauma, in which the world becomes discontinuous and deprived of stable anchors. In contemporary children’s literature, this discourse permits engagement with previously taboo subjects such as death, war and loss. Viewed through the lens of cultural memory theory (Assmann 2011) and trauma theory (Caruth 2016), these disruptions in children’s texts are not merely aesthetic strategies but modes of articulating painful memories through emotional language and fragmented symbolism.

These works illustrate the intersection of trauma discourse and postmodern technique in the 2001 to 2024 period, demonstrating how experimental forms are mobilised to represent the inexpressible.

Thus, the discourse of Vietnamese children's literature from 2001 to 2024 unfolds within a postmodern space that is multi-vocal, unstable, self-reflexive and fragmented. These works both continue and diverge from revolutionary and post-war traditions – the revolutionary fervour and contemplative tones of earlier generations give way to the dualities, absurdities and surrealism of contemporary poetry. In this context, the child subject is no longer a passive recipient of meaning but an active constructor of significance. Postmodern children's literature is no longer confined to delivering clear messages or neatly resolved endings; instead, it opens a multi-dimensional semantic field in which young readers are invited to imagine, interpret and complete their own worlds, as earlier articulated by Nodelman (2008) and Nikolajeva (2016/1996).

Discussion: Children's Literature as a Cultural Discourse

Instead of treating children's literature as a supplementary pedagogical tool, this article argues that, in post-war Vietnam, children's literature operated as a distinct cultural discourse in which collective memory, political identity and symbolic power were produced, regulated and negotiated. As Nodelman (2008) notes, children's literature is always “a space in which adult ideas about children are institutionalised through language”. In Vietnam, however, that space was even more closely bound to the institutional mechanisms of national memory, particularly after 1975.

Works such as *Nhung Nguy Luu Lac* (1981) and *Hoi Do O Sa Ky* (1981) were not merely stories intended for young readers; they functioned as political acts of articulation, in which childhood was conscripted as a symbol of revolutionary ideals and of the continuity of national history. In this regard, children's literature became a site for “reconstructing history” through the lens of the child's voice – a discourse that appears innocent yet is deeply imbued with the power to shape collective memory (Assmann 2011).

One of the most significant shifts in the discourse of contemporary Vietnamese children's literature, therefore, lies in the reversal of the child's role – from a “passive recipient of education” to an “active agent of meaning-making”. In earlier texts, children were largely voiceless: moral and historical values were imposed through poetic and narrative forms with little room for the child's

perspective. By the early 21st century, however, child figures began to emerge as independent thinkers, possessing distinct voices and, at times, challenging adult authority.

A particularly notable example is *Quan Khu Nam Dong* by Ca (2015). For the first time, readers encounter a collective of unruly, rebellious children whose emotional complexity is not concealed but presented as a historical outcome. The author acknowledges their resilience, communal spirit and genuine affections, while also showing that some fall behind at school or come into contact with the justice system. These are children whose fathers were at the front and whose mothers struggled with the demands of post-war life, leaving them to bring themselves up. Their mischief and reckless spontaneity reflect not only youthful exuberance but also an instinctive strategy for confronting and adapting to a reality governed by strict rules yet marked by emotional absences.

These characters speak in humorous tones and question the world in a language that is naive yet profoundly existential. This development marks more than a change in character representation; it signals a structural reconfiguration of children's literature as a mode of discourse. Here, children are no longer passive figures within an adult-predefined world but become co-creators of reality itself.

In the West, scholars such as Nodelman (2008) and Jaques (2015) have argued that post-war children's literature rapidly moved beyond its function as a vehicle for moral instruction to become an aesthetic space in which the child is imagined as a critical subject. A canonical example is White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952), which does not celebrate collective ideals or moral dogma but foregrounds friendship, death and presence – dimensions often deemed “too heavy” for children. Likewise, Nikolajeva (2016/1996) affirms that since the late 20th century, Western children's literature has entered a postmodern phase, characterised by non-linear structures, an ironic tone and the blurring of boundaries between narrator and reader. A paradigmatic case is Scieszka's *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (1992), where the traditional fairy-tale structure is deconstructed, inviting young readers to participate in the creative process and to mock the conventions of storytelling.

In China, the transition became especially visible after the end of the Cultural Revolution, when children's books were no longer required to reproduce the single figure of the “revolutionary successor” and could begin to explore children's ordinary affects and imaginative worlds (Bi 2013). Through the 1980s, China's opening to the outside world revitalised child-centred approaches

in children's literature, with works foregrounding play and entertainment tending to be favoured over texts heavily loaded with didactic messages (You 2022). Within this marketised environment, bestselling authors such as Yang Hongying—whose long-running *Diary of a Smiling Cat* series began in 2006—built narratives around children's loneliness, jealousy, care for animals and desire for recognition, making the child's interior life both visible and saleable. Tesar et al. (2019) read this figure of the child as an “emotional subject” as a product of post-socialist market society: children's literature remains moral, but the morals are negotiated through consumption, aspiration and flexible family values rather than through a single, central political axis. Far from functioning merely as an external backdrop, this market turn constitutes a central mechanism of literary world-making. As post-Doi Moi children's publishing reconfigured itself into a revenue-driven cultural industry, the imperatives to anticipate demand and ensure commercial viability necessitated specific aesthetic strategies – namely readability, serialisation and transmedial circulation. These material conditions helped crystallise new paradigms of childhood defined by the quotidian, the affective and the consumable. In this dialectic, political economy and textual form are co-constitutive – market forces delimit the boundaries of the publishable, while literary discourse cultivates the specific subjectivities required to inhabit the emerging market-socialist lifeworld.

When compared with these models, the Vietnamese trajectory does not emerge as a theoretical exception. Rather, it presents a compelling parallel to the broader post-socialist pattern, particularly that of China, albeit modulated by its own historical conditions. Under the long-lasting influence of war and within the structures of a socialist state, the discourse of Vietnamese children's literature from 1975 to the early 21st century remained committed to a collectivist, moralised and idealised image of childhood. Texts such as *Hoi Do O Sa Ky* by Quoc (1981), *Nhung Nguy Luu Lac* by Chau (1981), *Cat Chay (Burning Sand)* by Que (2005) and *Tuoi Tho Du Doi* by Quan (1988) all constructed the child as a “red seed”, a figure of revolutionary continuity.

A significant discursive shift did not clearly surface until after the Doi Moi reforms and especially in the 21st century, with works such as *Quan Khu Nam Dong* by Ca (2015), *Thang Ngay e a* by Ha (2017) and “Con Roi” by Nhan (2024a). In these texts, elements of irony, absurdity and polysemy began to coalesce into a distinct postmodern sensibility, characterised by metafictional subversions of authority, parodic appropriations of traditional genres (such as folktales and school stories), hybrid forms and a decisive shift from moral closure to interpretive openness. This delayed emergence of the child as a cognitive-reflective self marked a turning point in the conceptual framework of Vietnamese children's literature.

Vietnam thus constitutes a critical case study within the broader post-socialist trajectory. It is largely aligned with the Chinese model, demonstrating a clear shift from narratives centred on collective ideals to market-oriented narratives that reposition the child as an emotional and consuming subject (as seen, for example, in readings of *Kinh Van Hoa* [1995]). However, the Vietnamese case is distinguished not by direction but by its specific modulators – the profound and prolonged legacy of the American War and the subsequent period of severe post-war isolation. This context helps to explain the delayed nature of the shift. The “dual tension” in Vietnam is therefore not merely between ideology and globalisation—a tension also present in China—but between a uniquely persistent, state-sponsored institution of war memory and the encroaching pressures of a market-driven present. This specific modulation, rather than any fundamental distinctiveness, makes the transformation of children’s literary discourse more layered and intricate. Recognising this configuration not only enables a re-mapping of Vietnamese children’s literature within regional research but also refines the theoretical landscape for discourse studies of childhood. With its legacy of protracted warfare and its gradual metamorphosis, Vietnam represents a vivid case of negotiated continuity within a shared post-socialist framework – at once appropriating, resisting and reinventing its literary imagination.

Conclusion

This study has traced the discursive transformation of Vietnamese children’s literature from 1975 to 2024, charting its evolution through three analytically separated yet historically interpenetrating phases – from the univocal and idealised discourse of the post-reunification era (1975 to 1985), through the emergence of individualised memory and everyday realism during the *Doi Moi* period (1986 to 2000), to the polyphonic, fragmented and self-reflexive sensibility of the 21st century (2001 to 2024). This trajectory indicates a fundamental redefinition of the genre – from a directive pedagogical tool to a complex cultural space in which social memory is continually renegotiated. These discursive shifts unfold within a shifting political-economic landscape, marking the transition from a state-subsidised model to a market-oriented publishing environment. Rather than viewing economic factors as the sole determinant, this study illustrates a dynamic of co-constitution, where the changing conditions of literary production under market socialism and the evolving imagination of the child subject dialectically shape one another.

Across the three phases, this linkage is visible in the institutional routes through which texts reached children. From 1975 to 1985, state publishers and school-based distribution tied reading to collectivist civic virtue; in the 1990s, commercially successful serial fiction such as *Kinh van hoa* normalised leisure reading and repeat purchase; and after 2001, books amplified through prizes, translation and digital circulation, for example, *Chang Hoang Da – Gau* (2020), helped naturalise globally oriented and environmentally attuned aspirations. The key contribution of this research is its repositioning of Vietnamese children's literature as a dynamic and theoretically significant field. By functioning as an institution of collective memory within a distinctive post-war socialist context, it offers a compelling case study for global discourse studies. The analysis affirms that it is precisely in texts for children that the intricate mechanisms of memory, trauma and subjectivity in a society undergoing profound metamorphosis are most vividly discerned. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that Vietnamese children's literature is not a peripheral genre but a vital meaning-producing institution in which the nation's past, present and future are continually reimagined and rewritten.

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