



## The Phenomenon of Interference in Popular and Artistic Literature: Comparing *Red Summer* by Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and *Goodbye Tsugumi* by Yoshimoto Banana From the Perspective of Japanese Shoujo Manga

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### [ *Abstract* ]

Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto Banana are authors from two different literary movements, cultures, and countries. Their works are all best-sellers and have received many prestigious awards. Comparing their works from the perspective of shoujo manga, we can see that there are many similarities between them. Regarding the concept of composition, they all want to create works that are accessible to the majority of the public. Therefore, they choose topics which are close and attractive to mass readers as well as simple style, characters, literary devices, artistic space and time that are famous in shoujo - a popular art form of Japan. However, the ideological content in the works of both is not explicit and simple, but expresses the eternal feelings and values of humanity such as love for people, love for the homeland, country, reflecting the depths of both the conscious and the subconscious as well as profound aesthetic and philosophical values, profound aesthetic and philosophical values. Their works present the trend of interference between popular culture and elite literature. We

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can draw lessons for young writers, cultural managers and a wide audience from the success of these two writers.

**Keywords:** Nguyễn Nhật Ánh, Yoshimoto Banana, popular literature, shoujo manga

Nguyễn Nhật Ánh is a Vietnamese author specializing in writing for adolescents. He has published nearly 100 works and has long become a well-known author among young readers in Vietnam. In 1995, he was voted as the most beloved writer in 20 years (from 1975 to 1995) through a readers' poll for outstanding young faces in all fields, held by Ho Chi Minh Youth Union and Tuổi Trẻ News. Additionally, he was selected by the Ho Chi Minh City Writers' Association as one of 20 outstanding young authors in 20 years (from 1975 to 1995). In 1998, he was awarded the best-selling writer by Kim Dong Publishing House. In 2019, he received the ASEAN Literature Award. Meanwhile, Banana Yoshimoto (よしもと ばな) is also an author who dedicates most of her writings to young adults. Concerning Japanese literature in the past 20 years, Yoshimoto is one of the most outstanding. Banana's works are famous and influential not only in her home country, but also around the world. She is phenomenal, with her popularity regarded as "Bananamia." Her most remarkable works, namely *Kitchen* キッチン (1988), *Goodbye Tsugumi* つぐみ (1989), *Amrita* アムリタ (1994), etc. have won numerous prestigious awards. Her debut novel, *Kitchen*, sold 2.5 million copies upon its first publication; the book also won 16 prestigious national and international awards. *Goodbye Tsugumi* was adapted into a film, as well as winning the Yamamoto Shugoro Literary Award in 1989.

What is the reason that allows writers like Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto to win prestigious awards while also retaining their "best-seller" status? By viewing *Red Summer* by Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and *Goodbye Tsugumi* by Yoshimoto using the shoujo manga perspective, a unique art form of Japanese popular literature, this article establishes that the evident and persuasive cause of this

phenomenon is the intersection of the values of popular literature and elite/artistic literature in the two authors' works. Both Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto have absorbed the techniques of popular literature, then sublimate the value of popular literature by entrusting the noble themes of humanity, the depth of Eastern aesthetic and philosophical ideas in their interpretations of human being and human life, which raises their works closer to artistic/elite literature.

There are significant differences between Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto in terms of geographical distance, history, language, the cultural sphere in which they grew up and immerse themselves, or their statuses in world literature. With regard to these aspects, it can be said that *Red Summer* by Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and *Goodbye Tsugumi* by Yoshimoto are two "strange" works. In fact, because of this "strangeness," there have been no studies comparing the works. By juxtaposing these two novels, we have recognized that *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* have interesting similarities, namely the elements of shoujo manga - a form of Japanese popular literature. Therefore, our article would focus on comparing the similarities between two aforementioned works from the perspective of shoujo manga concerning various aspects: themes, situations, structures; characterizations; portrayals of nature, etc. with a view to explaining their ability to become widely popular among mass readers; on the other hand, we also research the artistic/elite literary merits that the authors attempt to crystallize in their works, such as the value of moral education, aesthetic training; of profound humane philosophical ideals in order to create sustainable values for their compositions. As a result, this article affirms that the intersection of mass and artistic/elite literature is a critical cause of the widespread appeal and long-lasting impacts of great authors who have established their places on the map of regional and world literature, and this intersection is also an important orientation for

the works of contemporary young writers, as well as proposing new domains for readers and cultural managers.

## **I . Popular literature and artistic/elite literature, manga and shoujo manga**

### **1.1. Popular literature and elite literature**

Popular literature (French: *littérature populaire*), also known as colloquial literature, is “the part of literature that has been printed for entertainment and teaching in large quantities, becoming popular since the nineteenth and especially the twentieth century. *Mass* (from Latin: *massa*) has two meanings: mass production (as in a cultural “product”) and intended for extensive consumption. Therefore, the mass media plays an important role in the consumption of popular literature. In many cases, popular literature could be used as a method of ideological work to fascinate the mass consciousness and entice the masses” (Lê Bá Hán et al. 2004: 407). Mass culture and popular culture are often used interchangeably, but the two terms are actually not synonymous with one another. “Their meanings lie at the intersection of cultural production and consumption in today’s society. The two can be argued to constitute ‘The Culture Industry’ as described by Adorno and Horkheimer in their book, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In general terms, the difference between the two lies in the fact that popular culture is preoccupied with production while mass culture deals with consumption” (Shivanka Gautama 2021: 01). In this article, we use the term “popular culture” because the article discusses issues related to the process of creating literary works of two the authors Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto.

### **1.2. Manga and Shoujo Manga**

Manga (kanji: 漫画; hiragana: まんが; katakana: マンガ; English:

*/'mæŋgə/* or */'ma:ŋgə/*) is a term referring to Japanese comics, a popular art form that has a large readership and whose main characteristics are humorous or sarcastic. Manga plays a significant role in Japanese culture. This art form appeared in Japan during the 12th century. Nowadays, manga has become a popular form of entertainment not only in Japan but also in most countries around the world. Manga comes in various genres, for example: shounen (for boys and young adults); shoujo (for girls); mahou shounen (similar to mahou shoujo but for men); kodomo (for children); seinen (adult, youth); josei or redikomi (for adults, mostly women); seijin (similar to redikomi but for men); yaoi (gay comics featuring physical intimacy); shoneen-ai (gay comics that do not focus to physical intimacy but only feelings and emotions); yuri (lesbian comics that features physical relationships); shoujo-ai (lesbian comics about feelings and emotions); doujinshi (comics created by fans based on the original works); gekiga (visual novel); horror; martial arts; school life; comedy; ecchi (usually with revealing scenes for amusement, but contains no sex scenes); hentai (story about physical intimacy between people of the opposite sex); fantasy; adventure. Within the aforementioned genres, shoujo manga is one of the four important genres along with shounen, seinen and josei.

Shoujo manga was initially a genre oriented to girls under the age of eighteen; afterwards, the range of readers expanded to all ages and the genre was preferred by male audiences. Shoujo manga is often mentioned in comparison to shounen. While shounen explores aspects such as action, adventure, sports, science and technology, self-improvement, harsh discipline, shoujo manga attracts readers by focusing on the depiction of the female characters, who come across as being gentle, romantic, but also possess a very rich and complex inner lives. The appearance of the female protagonists is often sketched with common features: long legs, a slim body, hair smooth straight or floating in the wind, big

glittering eyes occupying one third of the face, delicate V-shaped chin, etc. All of which are similar to the idealistic *kawaii* beauty of modern Japan. Characters in shoujo manga are often portrayed within their personal development as well as their relationships with others. The plot and dialogue of shoujo manga are usually simple and predictable. Most of the endings are happy, which brings satisfaction to the readers. But shoujo manga are not always sweet dreams; some stories are often termed ‘the price of tears’ by Japanese. Love stories that feature three or four people, interwoven with tragedy, are always explored by female authors. Overall, shoujo manga is rich with fantasy, romance, and adventure elements, giving readers a sense of suspense.

### **1.3 Popular Literature and National Literature**

In Vietnam, elite and popular literature have long interfered with each other. Nguyễn Du's *The Tale of Kieu* is the most quintessential work of Vietnamese poetry; yet it also crystallizes the values that the great poet has absorbed and transformed from folklore. *The Tale of Kieu* is loved and respected by the common people as well as by leading intellectuals since both groups can attain the values they perceive from this work. By the 1940s, revolutionary popular literature appeared, originating from the *Outline of Vietnamese Culture 1943*. This outline, up to now, remains valid, and has become the foundation for the Communist Party's directions and policies throughout the course of revolution. The outline listed three principles of Vietnamese culture: nation, science and mass. “Nationalization means resisting all enslaving and colonial influences and set Vietnamese culture on the course of developing independently; massification means resisting all undertakings and actions that cause the culture to go against or away from the masses; scientification means opposing everything that makes the culture unscientific or anti-progressive” (Nguyễn Minh Hằng 2015: 02). In the context of revolution and resistance, the Party needed to

mobilize a large number of mass forces to participate in the revolutionary work, hence literature was oriented towards massification, towards revolutionary forces, mainly workers, farmers, soldiers. This is a meaningful point of view, completely appropriate and necessary given the special circumstances of the period.

In the context of the nation's historical confrontation with the invading enemy, literature must join forces with arrows and bullets to attack the enemy with a strong belief in the victory of justice. The value of life and happiness of each individual lies in the great happiness of the nation. The value of literature, the value of life, and the value of people at that time were directed to be the revolutionary ideal, and to be the spirit of contributing, fighting and sacrificing for the Fatherland. Revolutionary leaders on the one hand called for massification; yet on the other hand, they also recognized the limitations of popular literature. Therefore, they called for elevating the value of popular literature and thus raising the level of popular reception. As a result, Vietnamese Literature during the two resistance wars against the French and the American also produced significant contemporary works that resonated with the people. Since 1986, the country has undergone renovation, the specific conditions of history—society of the times created important premises for the surge of popular literature. First, the values of contemporary people changed. Perceptions of the world and of other people were broadened and diversified. Literature paid attention to the fate of individuals: “Modern society emphasizes the role of the individual and promotes the awakening of individual consciousness. The rising ego demands proper attention. Fiction returns to man, alters the artistic concept of man, and preserves the value of man against the oblivion of society” (Bích Thu 2013: 01). The advent of the Internet, computers and other technological accomplishments have brought humanity into the flat world, creating diverse, simple and accessible forms of literary publication.

The dramatic increase of short stories, novels, essays posted on blogs, Facebook, etc. has garnered the attention of a large number of readers, especially the young generation. Popular literature is now read by hundreds, if not thousands or even millions. This prompts us to reconsider the concept of values, the concept of literature and aesthetics in modern society.

In Japan, popular literature arose and progressed since 1920 with the popularity of mass media and mainly aimed at the middle class, which constituted the majority of Japanese society in the age of industrialization. Since popular literature bears the characteristics of being popular and entertaining, the genre itself is very diverse. The most famous works are detective novels by top authors such as Seicho Matsumoto, Ranpo Edogawa, and Keigo Higashino, followed by samurai novels by names like Ryotaro Shiba, and Eiji Yoshikawa; the genre also consists of family novels, humorous novels, science fiction novels, legends. (Hoàng Long 2019: 01)

Within the flow of national and worldwide literature, Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto are inevitably influenced by popular literature. In Nguyễn Nhật Ánh's works, we can observe a harmonious blend between artistry and popularity.

## **II. Features of Popular Literature in *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* from the Perspective of Shoujo Manga**

### **2.1. Themes, Situations, and Structures**

Regarding themes, shoujo manga often reflects the everyday stories, depicts the ordinary people, in addition to presenting issues in the lifestyle typically observed among adolescents and young adults, namely love, friendship, family, death, hurt, healing, etc. These are also common themes in the works of Yoshimoto and Nguyễn Nhật Ánh. Reading Yoshimoto's works, the audience could recognize that



the characters are severely traumatized. Her characters, especially young women, often appear alone in the midst of a tragic life, and are constantly suffering from emotional wounds. *Kitchen* is about a young girl who suddenly lost her only family member, and she is left without her loved ones. *NP* is the story of a young girl who accidentally becomes the lover of her father, then of her brother... Yoshimoto's works are genuinely concerned with expressing the pain and loneliness that the characters face in order to carry on, to find new ways to live. In that way, the character realizes that women are strong. Often the character is hurt, lonely and stuck, which often results from either the death of a family member or a lover, or cracks in marriage and family life. Hurts lead to loss and disorientation.

Similar to the general theme of shoujo manga, both *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* are stories of teenage girls told from the insightful perspective of other characters: Chưong (*Red Summer*) and Maria (*Goodbye Tsugumi*). These are the main characters, who are also the narrators of the two novels. Through the narration of the two characters, the daily life as well as emotional life of adolescent girls and boys are vividly recreated.

The situations of the stories also bear resemblance to the constant rivalry motif, a stereotypical characteristic of romance novels. Chưong (*Red Summer*) is a 9th grader who grows up in the city. After passing the difficult secondary school graduation exam, Chưong is sent to his hometown by his parents to spend the summer at the rural house of his aunt, Sau. In that house live his cousins: Nhạn, 2 years younger and Dế, 4 years younger than Chưong. Nhạn and Dế both have their own distinctive personalities. While Nhạn is gentle and docile, De is clever and mischievous. Through Nhạn and Dế, Chưong gets to know the lovely little friends in Ha Xuyen village such as Thom, Thế, Mr. Thoảng of the Outer hamlet, Út Thê, Dữ and Dữ's group of friends in Miếu hamlet.

After Dữ is shot in the neck by a shotgun shell, Út Thễm, Dữ's sister, takes him to aunt Sau's house for treatment. Thanks to that, Chương gets acquainted with Út Thễm. Chương is enamored by Út Thễm's sweet, gentle beauty, hence he tries his best to befriend her. He also goes to Út Thễm's house to teach her and Dữ how to read and write. The story ends with Chương returning to the city for a new academic year in a sad mood, knowing that Út Thễm is about to get married. Summer days pass, only leaving sadness and regret in the hearts of the characters. *Goodbye Tsugumi* also begins with a similar situation. Little Maria, after finishing her 11th grade school year, spends the summer in her mother's hometown - an idyllic seaside area with a distinctively Japanese landscape. She also stays with her mother's sister, aunt Masako. Aunt Masako has two daughters, Yoko and Tsugumi. Maria is one year younger than Yoko and one year older than Tsugumi. The two girls are both daughters of aunt Masako, but have wildly different personalities. While Yoko is sweet, gentle and generous, Tsugumi is surly and mischievous, always coming up with all sorts of tricks to torment others. When Tsugumi's dog is caught up in a fight with the dog of a new boy living in town, Kyoichi, Tsugumi and Kyoichi get to know each other. Between the two of them blossoms a friendship that later transforms into romantic love. When summer is over, Maria returns to Tokyo for a new school year, her heart filled with unforgettable memories.

In terms of structure, similar to shoujo manga, *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* are both divided into small parts and chapters, yet the two novels in general retain their seamless flow. *Goodbye Tsugumi* is divided into small stories that enable readers to understand and follow them easily as in slow-motion movies while also allowing the audience to go in-depth into the inner world of the character. The 12 chapters are all titled (similar to manga volumes, of which every book has a title). *Red Summer*, on the other

hand, is divided into parts. Though these parts are not assigned with titles as in *Goodbye Tsugumi*, each of them is also a lovely little story in the character's daily life. From our point of view the division of such works (which follow the gentle inner flow of the dreamy protagonist and depict the trivial details of everyday life) into chapters or parts is fairly suitable. This structure would create a highlight for each section, making it easy for readers to follow.

## **2.2. Beauty in *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi***

In terms of physical appearance, female characters in shoujo manga are usually described as having supermodel bodies, smooth or straight hair, big glittering eyes, long eyelashes, V-shaped faces, etc., the ideal beauty of women in modern Japan. Male characters are often strong and firm - for them being the princes of girls' dreams.

The characters from *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi*, likewise, share similar traits with the characters of the shoujo manga genre. Tsugumi, the protagonist of *Goodbye Tsugumi*, possesses an unruly personality and has to live with her ailments from a very young age, yet upon looking closely at Tsugumi, Maria notes: "The smirk she wore looked oddly like the savior Maitreya's smile... Tsugumi was beautiful. Long black hair, translucent white skin, and large, very large eyes. Eyelids with thick lines of long eyelashes that cast pale shadows whenever she let her gaze fall. Her arms and legs were long and slim, her veins seemed to lie just beneath the surface of her skin, and her body was small and tight—her physical appearance was so trim and gorgeous you could almost believe she was a doll fashioned that way by some god" (Yoshimoto 2003: 6). Meanwhile, regarding Tsugumi's older sister, it is stated that "whenever you saw Yoko she was smiling brightly. To be, she really seemed like an angel." (Yoshimoto 2003: 18). It is through such descriptions of Buddha-like beauty that we could discover the inner worlds of the characters, since these worlds are often hidden behind their attitudes and courses of action, or their unruly, stubborn

personalities, or their states of weakness or fatigue. This beauty is both a very personal, intangible aura and a very specific fairness, most concentrated in two “signals”: eyes and smile. The character Kyoichi has a slim but strong physique, possesses mental strength, and is capable of protecting the girl he loves: “Kyōichi certainly did make a strange impression on me. He appeared to be about the same age as us. He was tall and slender, but his shoulders and neck were thick and sturdy—a combination that made him look strong in a really cool sort of way... His gaze was strangely deep, and there was a light in them that made it seem as if he knew something huge, something extremely important. Perhaps you could say that, unlike the rest of him, his eyes were old” (Yoshimoto 2003: 63).

Út Thễm in *Red Summer* is also a very beautiful girl. Her physical appearance is similar to that of the girls in shoujo manga, but still speaks of the beauty of Southern Vietnam’s women. She has black eyes, a cute smile with crooked teeth, slender figure wearing a dress of the yellow shade of sponge gourd flowers, long hair tied into two braids that swayed over her shoulders. The boy named Chrong, with his sensitive, dreamy soul and kind heart, is also much adored by the girls.

The characters in *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* possess a beauty that the Japanese label as *kawaii*, or endearing – a significant aesthetic that governs contemporary Japanese society and culture. The *kawaii* aesthetic emphasizes the lovely and fragile beauty of adolescence.

### III. Artistic/elite literary values in *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi*

Even though Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto have borrowed the elements, methods, and means of popular literature to support their works, the underlying values of their compositions are those of

artistic/elite literature, such as the value of moral education, aesthetic training, as well as the profound ideals of Eastern philosophy. Therefore, these works contribute to fostering the soul and personality of children towards truthfulness, compassion, and beauty.

In an article, Trần Thị Trâm argued that Nguyễn Nhật Ánh's story "is a very smooth confluence between the two currents of folk culture and scholarly culture intertwined with high entertainment values... With his own voice, his own style, Nguyễn Nhật Ánh not only creates but also renovates his youthful, delightful and fascinating cultural platform... Thanks to this, his works are rich in benevolence, simple yet wise, gentle yet profound, romantic and realistic, pure yet humorous, artistic and educational, suitable for the young's likings" (Trần Thị Trâm 2021: 09).

### **3.1 Moral lessons**

In an interview, poet Le Minh Quoc, emphasizes the educational value in Nguyễn Nhật. Nguyễn Nhật Ánh is fully consciousness of the significance of literature in the development of the soul and personality for children. "There should be an ideal educator in the writer's soul. Regarding other people, who are self-aware and responsible with their behavior, the writer can provide the original plot for readers to enjoy and choose. But it is not intended for children and teenagers" (Thanh Kiều 2012: 01). According to Nguyễn Nhật Ánh, the role of educator as a writer is adjusting, choosing appropriate content for that group of age to achieve the last accomplishment which is inclining to the good. "If the writer gets bitter about life and throw that pessimistic thought and dreadful plot to his papers, his child will be the first one to incur it and then the readers. This is the main reason why his works receive love from that group of age as well as the parents because they find in them two-in-one aspect: entertainment and education" (Thanh Kiều 2012: 01). That is a rational combination throughout all of his works.

In another interview, Nguyễn Nhật Ánh also mentioned the educational role of literature and children's writers that writers writing for children are inborn educators. "Inborn" means that he did not intentionally preach morality in his work but the process of composing, naturally, he knew what would help the reader to love the Right, the Good, and fear the Wrong, Evil. "Writers are the spiritual support of children", I believe, just as I believe that "silently and persistently building up the soul and personality, which is the root function of literature, especially is literature written for teenagers" (Ngọc Bi 2015: 01).

*Red Summer* by Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and *Goodbye Tsugumi* by Y. Banana deploy a gentle, delicate, romantic writing style about friendship, love, and deep family relationship of young characters who have just gone through the threshold of fragile but fierce teenagers. The emotional world of the characters in the two very works is told through the confidence and narration of Chương and Maria. Through the first narration, through the thought and dream of Chương and Maria, the rich emotional world of girls and boys in their youth is vividly expressed. It is love with friends, with dear family. Those are also common feelings in shoujo mangas. Hence, the works have nurtured human emotions.

First of all, it can be stated that shoujo mangas are songs about sincere and pure friendship. Just like the girls in shoujo mangas, Maria in *Tsugumi* also cherishes friendship. That sentiment has many different shades and levels, just like the sea has thousands of states. Maria doesn't like *Tsugumi*'s unpleasant personality, but she admires *Tsugumi*'s ability to study. Maria is worried and heartbroken when she sees *Tsugumi* lingering out of her life, the thin border between life and death. When she sees *Tsugumi* walking on the beach with the boys, Maria feels: "Even for me, who ought to have known her true character well enough, those scenes on the beach had an aura of sadness about *Thêm* that struck chords

somewhere deep within me, filling my chest with pain” (Yoshimoto 2003: 7). As she and Yoko walk along the night path woven with white flowers, Maria says to herself: "I didn't say anything to Yoko. She had been crying a lot lately, and I didn't want to make her lonely"(Yoshimoto 2003: 26). Maria's pure heart always beats with the rhythm of love, in which there is always a rhythm of friendship. Appreciating and cherishing her friends, being ready with friends to overcome all difficulties and challenges is a permanent feeling in Maria's heart.

Characters in shoujo mangas not only have sincere friendships but are also rich in familial love. In their mind, family is life, as their family can overcome difficulties to have a more meaningful life. The little Maria in *Goodbye Tsugumi* is that person. She loves her late grandfather. Although he passed away, she always remembers him, remembers the feelings he has for her. He often sends her love letters with a special opening: "Your treasure." Maria is a girl who always desires for complete love of family. Maria's parents love each other very much, but they are not real husband and wife, so they have not been reunited. Her father works in Tokyo, so he still has to go back and forth between Tokyo and the sea - where she and her mother are put up. No one knows how many times does Maria sit on the hot concrete stairs looking forward to meeting her father on the train from Tokyo, then being sad when his father suddenly disappears on early Monday morning every week. To Maria, the happiest feeling is when walking with her parents on a magnificent beach. Maria loves her mother, understands her mother's feelings, so she grows up without going through rebellious puberty. She is happy to see her mother's face brighter and rounder after the day the whole family move to Tokyo with her father. During the days when she is not reunited with her father, Maria and her mother stay at aunt Masako's house, Maria lives in the love and care of her aunt and two cousins. Mother Maria and Aunt Masako love each other

very much. When first reading the shoujo mangas, she thinks they are just dreamy and frivolous stories of young people, but in fact, they contain many messages of life, including the concern of dignifying the importance of friendship and family.

Nguyễn Nhật Ánh's *Red Summer* also leads young readers to experience touching stories about friendship, intimacy between family members, and neighborly love in a tranquil orchard. In just a short summer, Chương makes friends with lovely people in Hà Xuyên village. They all give Chương simple and sincere sentiment. Chương also reciprocates their affection with a sincere heart. Mr. Thoảng teaches Chương martial arts every afternoon. Nhạn and Dế quickly help Chương integrate into rural life. They always take care of Chương from peeling fruit to stand him, inviting him to participate in fascinating games and listening to his thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Chương is surprised to know that Út Thềm and Dữ are illiterate. This secret fact helps Chương understand why the children of Miếu hamlet and the children of other neighborhoods often fight. That is because the children of Miếu hamlet envy the children of other neighborhoods for being able to go to school. So Chương goes to the market to buy two notebooks and a pen and then went across the field to Út Thềm's house to teach her and her sister every day. After knowing the story, Dế also gave the Út Thềm sisters two more half-written notebooks and a pencil. The children of Miếu hamlet are very touched by Chương's kind gesture, so since then, they have stopped fighting with children in the other neighborhood. Hatred is reconciled by sincere love.

At home in the city, Chương lives in the love and care of his parents. Mom takes care of Chương in every meal with nutritious food so that he can be healthy to pass the challenging exam. Noticing his mother's sadness because of his slim body, Chương also feels sad and tries his best to get good results in the exam to make his mother happy. In Chương's small family, the joy and sorrow is



shared among the three members. Returning to his hometown, Chương is once again living in the tender love of Aunt Sáu, Nhạn, and Dế. In Chương's mind, Chương's mother and Aunt Sáu love each other very much. Aunt Sáu often supports the Chương family with rice when they are in poverty. To everyone in the village, Aunt Sáu is a kind and good woman. She cures everyone in the village but never takes any money. In response, everyone expresses their appreciation with a bunch of bananas and chickens in the orchard. Chương is touched by that simple concern: "From the day I returned to my aunt's house until now, I have witnessed many strange and touching scenes, the relationships full of affection in the unicorn village have long been absent from the daily life of urban people" (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2011: 81).

Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto have illustrated profound themes such as praising family affection, love for the homeland, the country's nature, and the appreciation for life. In particular, the works are songs about pure friendship. That is the sincere friendship of four young characters: Maria - Tsugumi - Yoko - Kyoichi in *Goodbye Tsugumi* or Chương - Nhạn - Dế - Út Thêm in *Red Summer*. Together, they experience sweet, peaceful days in a rural, peaceful, rustic but poetic area before entering adulthood. During that summer, the group of friends in *Goodbye Tsugumi* has much once-in-a-lifetime experience. They walked together on the windy and sandy shore with waves which is either gentle or fierce. They enjoy together the exciting festival season, watch the fireworks, dress up in special folk costumes, eat watermelon which is as cool as ice cream in the small garden, and worry about finding Kengoro, the dog. The group of friends in the *Red Summer* also go through beautiful times in the peaceful orchard with much mischief such as stealing fruit in the orchard then being chased by dogs, enjoying the sweet taste of chanh ca mango, papaya, sweet xa li guavas in the orchard, fighting, waiting for each other to walk together on the

road to the market, teaching his friends. Subsequently, feelings of joy, sadness, and confusion still linger in their heart when summer ends. It is during those days that groups of friends experience beautiful, profound emotions about life, giving and receiving, the strength of the spirit, and the boundary of ambiguous feeling. From those daily stories, writers have praised the power of pure friendship, first heart flutter, close family affection, passionate love for the homeland. All these precious feelings not only have the power to help people overcome challenges, reconcile hatreds, give people a good heart and lofty soul, but they also are essential preparation for the future.

### **3.2 Cultivating an Adorable Aesthetic for Young Readers**

Kawaii (かわいい or 可愛い), which means adorable, cute, lovely in English, has origin from Japanese. The word “kawai:” describes something as “cute,” “adorable,” or “pretty” and usually carries a connotation of smallness, shyness, and innocence. For instance, it can be a lovely quote, a manga’s speech, or characters such as Hello Kitty, Pikachu. Kawaii also influences some other cultures. A large number of kawaii products have been exported to some East Asia countries such as China, Taiwan, and South East Asia countries like the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, and Vietnam (Wikipedia 2021: 01). Kawaii culture or kawaii aesthetic has become an outstanding aspect of Japanese pop culture in entertainment, fashion, cuisine, toys, style, or appearance of an individual.

The kawaii aesthetic is remarkably imprinted in the works of Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto in general, as well as *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* in particular. The characters in the two novels have cute looks and personalities like the characters in shoujo mangas. In terms of appearance, the female characters in *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* are usually girls with long legs, slim bodies, thick wavy or silky straight hair, big glittering eyes, long eyelashes, V-line faces, etc. The boys are usually healthy, strong,

dreamy big eyes, pointed chin, cool hairstyle, etc. The world of souls, rich emotions of girls and boys in their prime in shoujo mangas as well as *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* are very sensitive, rich, and very pure with many levels: love, hate, resentment, with a fragile premonition of life. Sometimes, they are down-hearted when their favorite TV show ended: “That night, having wriggled down into my futon all alone, I found myself in the grips of a wrenching sadness. I was only a child, but I knew the feeling that came when you parted with something, and I felt that pain. I lay gazing up at the ceiling, feeling the sleek stiffness of the well-starched sheets against my skin. My distress was a seed that would grow into an understanding of what it means to say goodbye. In contrast to the heavy ache I would come to know later on in life, this was tiny and fresh—a green bud of pain” (Yoshimoto 2003: 67).

This is also a trait of the *kawaii* beauty in the style, appearance as well as inner world of modern Japanese teenagers as well as in the pages of shoujo comics.

*Kawaii* has become popular as an ideal beauty covering modern and contemporary Japanese society. However, the origin of *kawaii* stems from a category that is considered to be the center of Japanese aesthetics: impermanence (*mujo* 無常). Impermanence means “transience,” “evanescence,” “inconstancy.” Impermanence is the common aspect of all conditioned existence, which consists of birth, old age, sickness, and death. From the category of impermanence, the Japanese have created many derivative categories such as illusion (*gensou* 幻想), elegance (*miyabi* みやび), lingering charm (*yojo* 余情), and empathy (*aware* もののあわれ) in ancient times; simple (*wabi* 侘び), quietness (*sabi* 寂び), melancholy (*yugen* 湯源), and the floating world (*ukiyo* 浮世) in Middle Ages; and lovely (*kawaii* 可愛(かわい)い) in the period of pre-modern. Although the categories have different nuances, they all have the

original meaning of fragile, easily faded beauty. Therefore, there should be an attitude of cherishing the beauty and appreciating the present moment of life. In conclusion, by creating an atmosphere which is imbued with kawaii, the writers have contributed to fostering an aesthetic with profound philosophical significance for readers, especially young readers.

### **3.3 Harmonizing with Nature**

The stories about friendship, family love, couple love, patriotism in *Goodbye Tsugumi* or *Red Summer* take place softly in a romantic and poetic site. It is the landscape of the sea, the peaceful countryside, the space of beautiful roads. Each nature picture in the two works has its nuances of each country, but they both have the role of healing and fostering noble emotions for the human soul.

In *Goodbye Tsugumi*, Yoshimoto describes vividly an area near the sea in Japan. There is a strong link between the sea and the people living here. When reading the book, it is easy to imagine the sea appearing as many aspects of life and love with all levels. The sea is sometimes gentle, dropping small waves to kiss the sandy shore, but it is also violent, creating huge waves crashing onto the shore at times. In addition, the seascape in the novel not only serves as a romantic scene to display friendship and love, but it is also a close friend, eternally attached to the people in the town, helping people's souls to become balanced: "I simply couldn't believe that I was about to move to a place where there was no ocean. Somehow it didn't register; it was so strange that just thinking about it made me uneasy. Because the ocean had always been there, in the good times as well as the bad times of my life, when it was sweltering out and the beach was filled with people, and in the dead of winter when the sky was heavy with stars, and when we were heading to the local shrine on New Year's Day ... all I had to do was turn my head and it would be there, the same as always. It didn't

matter if I was a kid or a grown-up. The old woman next door might have just died, the local doctor might have just had a baby, or I might be on my first date or have fallen out of love—none of this made any difference at all to the ocean; it remained just as it was, fanning out around the edge of our town and zooming quietly off into the distance, the tide rising and falling just as it always did, no matter what. On days when the visibility was particularly good, you could easily make out the shore on the far side of the bay. And it seemed to me that even if you weren't actively letting your emotions ride its surface, the ocean still went on giving you something, teaching you some sort of lesson. Perhaps that was why I had never actually considered its existence before—never really thought about the thundering of the waves as they sweep in endlessly toward the shore. But since I was thinking about it, what on earth did people in the city turn to when they felt the need to reckon with "balance"? Maybe the moon? That seemed like the obvious choice. But then the moon was so small and far away, and something about it felt sort of lonely, and it didn't seem like it would really help" (Yoshimoto 2003: 22).

The images of the roads are also particularly noticed by Yoshimoto and the manga artists because it is the place, the catalyst of deep emotion in every meeting and farewell... In *Goodbye Tsugumi*, the roads have become a site of intimate friendship and love. Those roads are often woven by pure white flowers, with the image of the bright moon and gentle night breeze that is as beautiful as the souls of people in their youth. The poetic picture of nature is seen through the eyes of a soul-loving life, contributing to create beautiful emotions and connect people: "The gravel path that led to the Yamamoto Inn followed the bank of a river and eventually ran into this big bridge. The sea opened into view on the other side of the bridge, and the river flowed quietly into it. The light of the moon and the street lamps shone brightly on the water and the

railings of the bridge” (Yoshimoto 2003: 26). The pleasant atmosphere makes people open their hearts to the other. “Without even noticing what you’re doing, you open up your heart and just start talking to the person next to you—you talk as if you have no audience but the glittering stars, far overhead” (Yoshimoto 2003: 76). The smell of the breeze, the breath of the mountains, and the breath of the calm sea slowly float over the town in a fine evening, giving us hope for the future.

In *Red Summer*, Nguyễn Nhật Ánh leads us back to the village path of a lovely orchard: “Leading to the village is a winding, endless, picturesque bamboo lane. Standing in the shade at noon or passing through the bamboo lane is still cool. The sunlight was blocked on the curved top of bamboo, only falling spottily some yellow drops on the village road which is full of dry leaves and cow dung. There is no sun but the bamboo alley is filled with birdsong. From morning to afternoon, sparrows, flowerpeckers, stripe-throated bulbul and red-whiskered always sit on the branches swung by the wind and twitter jointly” (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2011: 10). The road leading to the Mieu hamlet is “full of durians, durians fall on the ground” (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2011: 126). And this is the path leading to Út Thê’s house: “The small road leads me to an immense green meadow. Fully covered by chrysopogon. Just walking a short distance, my leg trousers were thickly pinned with tiny purple petals. I didn’t bother to remove it, I just walked across the path, towards the flickering phoenix tree in front of my eyes. On the way, from time to time, I came across a mimosa bush that was full of thorns lying next to the sleeping mose roses” (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2011: 126). The scene is also filled with the characters’ moods. The chrysopogon sticks to the bottom of his pants like a lingering soul, and the mimosa bush is as embarrassed as the mood of Chương when he first visited his girlfriend’s house. Nature in Nguyễn Nhật Ánh’s *Red Summer* and Yoshimoto Banana’s *Goodbye Tsugumi* has

the role of a dearest mother to ease the pain in the characters' souls as well as nurture, foster, and develop warm feelings and emotions in each person's heart like friendship, love, family affection and patriotism. The intimate relationship between nature and people in the works of the two writers presents a philosophical thought of Hinduism in particular and the Eastern people in general since ancient times. Man is not an independent entity. Man is an Atman Individual Soul, small fragment of the Universal Soul Brahman, a microcosm in the great cosmos, a microcosm in the macrocosm, born of the Cosmic Soul, which is protected, preserved by the Universal Soul, and when the body decays, the Individual Soul returns to merge with the Cosmic Soul. Since then, Eastern philosophy has promoted a sense of respect and conservation of the global environment - the home of all species.

### **3.4. Enhancing the Art of Popular Literature**

Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Yoshimoto use the literary devices of pure literature to enrich the art of writing. As to Yoshimoto Banana, in *Goodbye Tsugumi*, she uses artistic techniques such as inner monologue, dream motif, death motif, etc., to reveal the deep and mysterious aspects of people and the world. By using the anxiety and uncertainty on the surface of the tone, the novelist directs readers to the uncertainty and anxiety at the bottom of real life, causing them to think more about what is written (Bich Thu 2013: 01). Little Tsugumi has weak health and is often ill, so she always has a feeling of impending death. That premonition was so strong that it makes everyone enter the vaguely mysterious world of life and death: "Even now the quiet sigh of the rainfall was echoing through the dark. I sensed reality slipping away from me as I was sucked deep into Tsugumi's night. Everything that had happened up to then, death and life, it all seemed to be sliding down into a whirlpool of mystery, a place where a different kind of truth held sway—that was the feeling, the softly uneasy stillness in the room"

(Yoshimoto 2003: 12). She also usually lives in the dream. In particular, she often dreams about her deceased grandfather, which expresses the affection, the bond between her and grandfather as well as the wish to be loved and cared for by him again: "Listen, kid, I'm a hell of a lot closer to death than the rest of you assholes, so I can feel these things. I was in bed earlier, right, and the old guy showed up in my dream. Even after I woke up things felt kind of weird, you know? Sort of like there was something he had wanted to say. When I was a kid he used to buy all sorts of stuff for me too, so you might say I'm kind of indebted to him. The thing is, kiddo, that you were there in the dream too, and the old guy kind of seemed like he wanted to talk with you" (Yoshimoto 2003: 11).

*Red Summer* also includes monologues, a dream motif. Chrong, the main character in *Red Summer* enjoys happy summer days with childish games and pranks such as shooting birds, stealing mangoes, swimming in rivers, fishing, learning martial arts, fighting until the head bleeding, lying in a hammock, and looking at the green arches of trees in the orchard... He also experiences the confusion of having no one to confide in, so he can only keep for himself: "When I first met her, my heart was not as complicated as now. Since the day I met Út Thê, my mind suddenly became so wandering. If I confide my feelings to Thom, she will understand why I change. But I dare not. I'm afraid she will be sad. I like Thom, so I want her to be happy all the time. As long as she assured me that "fighting and visiting house are two different things", that's fine. Then she will be happy and so am I. None of us have to be sad" (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2011: 125). The writer describes Chrong's endless thoughts when his love is not requited by Út Thê at many stages: blaming her for being cold-hearted, being sad, and being tired of her silliness. "I don't understand why Út Thê is so heartless. I sat under the bridge and waited for her



to come back from the market. I secretly put the "love letter" in the basket she was holding. Then I had to wade across the vast grassland to teach her at her house every day. Did Út Thễm not understand? The more I think about it, the more I get tired (...). How silly she is. She does not know anything about my intention. She must have had the same thought with Mr Thoả̃ng. She thinks it is just a good person and good deeds. And once I became a teacher, I must not have the feeling for my student. Oh, definitely not, Út! For a long time, I kept struggling in the torments of nothing." (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2011: 154).

Also because Út Thễm does not requite to Chương's love, the image of her enters Chương's dream: "Út Thễm's shiny black eyes, crooked smile, and two naughty braids dangling on her shoulders enter my dream like some familiar images which make me hard to leave" (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2011: 143). Dreams can represent hidden memories and desires that can not be achieved in reality.

*Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* can be said to bring many features of shoujo mangas in terms of themes, story situations, themes, layouts, characters, and nature paintings. Writers have used the forms of popular literature to convey messages that imply moral lessons as well as develop feelings, beautiful aesthetic values, and profound philosophical reflections about humans and life. Living in this world is a blessing and everyone should appreciate life because it is extremely precious. Living in this world "needs a heart," which means giving as receiving in return; respecting people around us who are always with us in difficult times; appreciating precious emotions such as love for family, friends, neighbors, homeland, country. That is the great motivation for helping people face and overcome every sadness or challenge in life. The fact that there are many elements similar to shoujo comics is also one of the reasons for the attractiveness and globalization of the works. Adolescents in any country in the world have the same mentality, interests, and

passions. If the author puts himself in children's shoes to write, his works will be enjoyed immensely by them. On the other hand, in today's "flat world," to spread the works to children in other countries, the works also need to show the unique nuances of each ethnic group and country, just like Nguyễn Nhật Ánh once said at the ASEAN Literature Awards 2019: "Every nation has a bell hanging in front of its door of the soul, writers have a mission to ring those bells with literature" (Huỳnh Kim 2013: 01). It is an effective way of literature to satisfy the strong desire to explore and understand the world of the dreamy ages.

The phenomenon of interference between popular literature and pure/elite literature in *Red Summer* and *Goodbye Tsugumi* has shown an appropriate path for composing in the contemporary period. It is necessary to harmonize the elements of both literary genres so that the writings can reach a large number of readers as well as preserve the value and vitality in the spiritual life of the nation and the world. Hence, each writer needs to be aware of their responsibility with his career and his readers to self-develop, cultivate and improve his capacity to be able to create literary works that meet the needs of his readers as well as the requirements of the times.

Popular readers need to consciously improve their qualifications, tastes, abilities, aesthetics, and knowledge about culture to be able to approach and absorb the values of pure/elite literature.

Regarding cultural managers and those who are interested in literature and culture, aiming for a society of reading, experiencing, and creating culture, elite art, and those who are making efforts, sometimes in silence, to maintain the true values, need to consider vital aspects of strategy such as cultural policy, art management, consciousness, abilities of writers, necessary qualifications as well as the tastes and capacities of the public. In an open globalized society,

a rigid, one-sided prohibition or management will make it difficult to do so. Thus, accepting the simultaneous existence of two literary genres is an inevitable situation. The more feasible solution is to develop the aesthetic taste, train the creative capacity, absorb, appraise and enjoy the art of popular readers. Readers' perceptions of value and their acquisition have a close causal relationship. Consequently, improving the acceptability of the recipients as well as the interest and value can be improved. The concept of contemporary human values is an interwoven story of the transience and the permanence, the present and the future, the individual and the community, the nation - the local and the global, the general and the particular, the particular and the universal... "We respect the temporary needs of secular people. We understand which is the immediate value to the contemporary man. Nevertheless, from the visionary point of view of literature and national culture, it is necessary to name the quintessential value which is well-orientated towards eternity" (Nguyễn Thanh Tâm 2017). Hence, from the movements in the concept of the value of the popular literature public, we can imagine literature and culture that is not necessarily free from mass but creates a mass community that has a higher, more qualitative level for literature, culture, and society.

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