Int. j. adv. multidisc. res. stud. 2026; 6(1):1-5

Received: 15-11-2025
Accepted: 25-12-2025

International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies

ISSN: 2583-049X

Types of Threatening Actions in Critical Realist Literature (1930-1945) and Their Evolution in Contemporary Vietnamese Literature

Thi Mai Trinh
Dai Nam University, Hanoi, Vietnam

DOI: https://doi.org/10.62225/2583049X.2026.6.1.5518

Corresponding Author: **Thi Mai Trinh**

Abstract
This study aims to interpret the evolution of threatening actions in Vietnamese literature across two pivotal periods: critical realism (1930-1945) and the contemporary era (post-1986). By employing an interdisciplinary methodology (literary sociology, psychology, economics) to construct a theoretical framework comprising four forms of threat (physical violence, institutional power, economic, and psychological), the paper analyzes and compares representative literary works. The findings reveal a fundamental shift from the tangible, top-down, and externally coercive system of threats in the colonial-feudal society to an intangible, pervasive, and internalized system in the contemporary market society (e.g., competitive pressures, identity crises, loneliness). Theoretically, the study contributes a new, incisive analytical framework for approaching literature. Practically, it offers a profound perspective on how literature reflects core social pressures, helping to understand the anxieties of the Vietnamese people through historical turning points.

Keywords: Threatening Action, Critical Realist Literature, Contemporary Literature, Literary Sociology, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Threatening actions, as an expression of power and a source of tragic conflicts, have become a recurring motif that reflects the suffering and pressures people face during periods of historical upheaval. In Vietnamese literature, two pivotal periods—critical realism from 1930-1945 and the contemporary era (from 1986 to the present)—stand out as distinct social cross-sections where forms of threat are vividly and diversely represented. The 1930-1945 period witnessed the oppressive atmosphere of a semi-feudal colonial society, where people were besieged by high taxes, cruel local authorities, and the dehumanization of life. The contemporary period, in the context of the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) and global integration, has generated new pressures from the market economy, identity crises, and complex social relationships. Deciphering the types of threats and analyzing their evolution across these two periods not only clarifies the dialectical relationship between literature and social reality but also provides a lens for a deeper understanding of the fate and anxieties of the Vietnamese people throughout history.

A review of the scholarly literature shows that studies on these two literary periods have achieved significant accomplishments. For the critical realist literature of 1930-1945, works by Phan Cu De (1974) [15] and Nguyen Dang Manh (1998) [13] have deeply analyzed the realist and humanist values and the characteristic poetics of prominent authors. For contemporary literature, studies by La Khac Hoa (2012) [6] and Nguyen Thi Binh (2017) [14] often focus on themes such as the individual in the market economy, loneliness, and the collapse of traditional values. However, a significant research gap remains: existing works tend to approach oppression and conflict as a backdrop or a theme, rather than systematizing "threatening action" as an independent analytical tool with a clear classification system. No study has yet conducted a systematic, historical comparison of the evolution of these threat types from an interdisciplinary perspective that combines sociology, psychology, and economics.

Addressing this gap, this paper sets a dual objective: first, to build an interdisciplinary theoretical framework for classifying "threatening actions" in literature; second, to survey the operation and evolution of these types by analyzing selected works of Nam Cao, Vu Trong Phung, and Ngo Tat To (1930-1945 period) and Nguyen Huy Thiep, Nguyen Ngoc Tu, and Nguyen Nhat Anh (contemporary period). To achieve these objectives, the study seeks to answer three main questions:

(i) How can a classification system for "threatening actions" in literature be constructed?

(ii) How are these types of threats specifically manifested in the critical realist literature of 1930-1945?
(iii) How have they evolved in contemporary Vietnamese literature, and what socio-economic factors have governed this evolution?
To address these research questions, the paper employs literary sociology as its primary methodology, particularly Lucien Goldmann's (1964) [1] genetic structuralism, to interpret the link between the structure of the work and the structure of society. Additionally, supplementary methods such as interpretive analysis, content analysis, historical-comparative analysis, and a systemic-structural approach will be used to analyze texts and systematize the research findings. This interdisciplinary approach is expected to bring a new, comprehensive, and deeper perspective to one of the most central aspects of social reflection in literature.

2. Theoretical Framework: Constructing a Paradigm of "Threatening Actions"

2.1 Defining the Analytical Concept of "Threatening Action"

Within the scope of this study, a "threatening action" is defined as any behavior, speech, or structural imposition from a subject (individual, group, institution) intended to influence, control, limit the freedom of, or cause harm (physical, mental, economic) to another subject, forcing them to act or not act against their will. The essence of a threatening action lies in the communication of a potential negative consequence, created by an asymmetry of power.
It is necessary to distinguish "threatening action" from two related concepts: "conflict" and "violence." Conflict is a confrontation of interests, values, or goals, which can occur between parties of relatively equal standing. In contrast, a threatening action always implies an asymmetrical power relation, where one party imposes its will on another. On the other hand, violence is the direct physical infliction of harm. A threatening action can exist without violence, as its power lies in the ability to induce fear of a future violent act or adverse consequence. Thus, a threat is a tool of control and coercion that operates through the psychological mechanism of fear and the threatened subject's awareness of their weaker position.

2.2 Proposing and Justifying a Four-Part Typology

Based on the above definition and a synthesis of interdisciplinary theories, this study proposes a paradigm consisting of four main types of threats. In literary reality, these types often intertwine, but separating them helps to more clearly identify the power mechanisms at play.
(i) **Threats of Physical Violence:** This is the most basic and primitive form of threat, directly targeting a person's bodily integrity and biological existence. It includes acts such as threatening to beat, torture, imprison, or kill. Its mechanism is to activate the most primal fear: the fear of pain, injury, and death. In conflict theory, this is an expression of "direct violence" (Galtung, 1969) [3], the most tangible and recognizable form of attack. This threat strips away the basic sense of security, forcing individuals to comply to preserve their life and body.
(ii) **Threats of Institutional Power:** This form is more sophisticated, operating through legitimized social structures such as laws, administrative machinery, village regulations, or cultural and religious institutions. Pierre Bourdieu (1998) [1] calls this "symbolic violence," a soft, invisible type of violence accepted by the dominated subjects as self-evident. Power does not come from a specific individual but from an abstract system cloaked in legitimacy. In his work on disciplinary power, Michel Foucault (1975) [2] also showed that institutions like prisons, schools, and hospitals create norms and impose compliance through mechanisms of constant surveillance and punishment. The threat here is not a punch, but the risk of legal punishment, administrative obstruction, or community ostracism based on institutionalized conventions.
(iii) **Economic Threats:** This type uses control over material and financial resources to dominate others. It includes actions such as threatening to cut wages, fire from a job, call in debts, expropriate means of production, or create an economically precarious living environment. Marxist theory has clearly shown that in capitalist society, the bourgeoisie owns the means of production and uses that economic power to force the proletariat to sell their labor under unfavorable conditions (Marx, 1867) [7]. The threat here is the risk of poverty and the loss of existential security. Broadening this, according to Amartya Sen's (1999) [16] capability approach, an economic threat is the deprivation of a person's basic "capabilities," meaning the deprivation of the substantive freedom to choose a life they have reason to value.
(iv) **Psychological Threats:** This is a subtle but deeply damaging form of threat that directly impacts a person's mental and emotional life, self-esteem, and dignity. It manifests through acts of insult, humiliation, degradation, emotional manipulation, guilt-tripping, or social isolation. Unlike physical violence, the harm caused by psychological threats is often invisible but can lead to long-lasting psychological trauma. According to Judith Herman (1992) [5], being subjected to chronic psychological control and threat can cause complex post-traumatic disorders, eroding the victim's identity and ability to form healthy relationships. This threat attacks the very notion of a person's self-worth, causing them to doubt themselves and gradually accept external imposition.

3. Analysis and Survey

3.1 The System of Threats in Critical Realist Literature (1930-1945)

The social context of Vietnam from 1930-1945 was a multi-layered structure of oppression, where the French colonial government colluded closely with the native feudal landlord class to maintain domination and exploitation. In this context, class contradictions became acute, especially between peasants and landlords, and the basic rights of the people, particularly the destitute, were systematically trampled. Critical realist literature captured and authentically portrayed this system of threats, where different types of threats did not exist in isolation but intertwined and resonated, forming a web that cornered people and pushed them to their limits.
The threat of **physical violence** was depicted realistically by writers as a common and overt tool for displaying power. This is a manifestation of the "direct violence" (Galtung, 1969) [3] that the ruling apparatus used to suppress any intention of resistance. In *Tắt đèn* (Lights Out) by Ngo Tat To (1939) [11], the scene where the tax collector and the village chief's men beat, tie up, and drag away Chi Dau is not just a simple act of violence, but the enforcement of state power through brutal agents. The punch, the slap, not

only caused physical pain but was also the most tangible threat to anyone who did not comply with the tax laws. Similarly, in *Chí Phèo* by Nam Cao (1941) [8], physical violence is what transformed a gentle farmer into a vicious monster. The torture in prison and the beatings by Ba Kien's henchmen destroyed Chi's body and humanity. Violence here is not just punishment but a process of "producing" new tools of violence to serve the ruler himself. The openness and frequency of physical violence in these works show it was a normalized method of intimidation in the society of the time.

Alongside physical violence, the threat of **institutional power** was a deeper layer of oppression that legitimized acts of violence and exploitation. This is the "symbolic violence" that Pierre Bourdieu (1998) [1] discussed, where power is disguised under the cloak of law, customs, and institutions. In *Tắt đèn*, the tax burden is not just an economic issue, but primarily an institutional imposition. The "king's law," cited by characters like the village chief, although distorted by "village customs," remained the ultimate tool of intimidation, forcing peasants to accept exploitation as an undeniable duty. In *Giông tố* (The Storm) by Vu Trong Phung (1936) [17], the colonial court system was not a place to seek justice but a tool for Councillor Hach to legitimize his crimes and threaten his victim in return. Institutional power here operated as a system of surveillance and punishment, as Foucault (1975) [2] analyzed, creating a constant fear of legal retribution, even if the law was entirely unjust. This threat is more sophisticated because it forces the victim to submit to an abstract, impersonal system deemed legitimate.

The foundation of this threat system was **economic** control. Economic threats during this period were primarily the risk of losing existential security due to the deprivation of the means of living. The burden of taxes in *Tắt đèn* or *Bước đường cùng* (The Dead End) by Nguyen Cong Hoan (1938) [12] is a typical example. The threat of property confiscation and debt enforcement pushed Chi Dau's family and Anh Pha to the point of selling their most precious possessions, including their children and dignity. This threat, according to Marxist theory, reflects the nature of feudal and capitalist production relations, where the ruling class holds the means of production and uses that power to thoroughly exploit the labor and property of the people (Marx, 1867) [7]. Being pushed into a situation of being unable to support oneself and one's family is the deprivation of the most basic "capability," in Amartya Sen's (1999) [16] terms, causing them to lose freedom and become completely dependent on their oppressors.

Finally, and most devastatingly, were **psychological threats**. They were the inevitable consequence of the three forms above, attacking human dignity and the right to be human. The tragedy of Chi Pheo lies not just in the scars on his face but in the scar on his soul when the entire Vu Dai village denied him the right to be an honest person. Ba Kien's refusal and society's slammed door were the most terrible psychological threats, affirming that Chi would forever have no way back. This is a form of "social death," stripping an individual of their identity and value. For the petty bourgeois intellectuals, psychological threats took a different form. In *Đời thừa* (The Superfluous Life) (1943) [9] and *Sống mòn* (A Wasted Life) (1944) by Nam Cao, the writer Ho and the teacher Thu were not directly beaten or indebted, but they were threatened by the burden of "rice and clothes grinding them to the ground." This threat destroyed their creative ambitions, eroded their ideals, and caused a persistent pain of meaninglessness and a life of "slow death" in spirit. This was an attack on the concept of self-worth, causing the long-lasting psychological trauma that Judith Herman (1992) [5] described.

Evidently, the system of threats in critical realist literature from 1930-1945 comprehensively reflected the power structure of the colonial-feudal society. These forms of threat were direct, tangible, systematic, and operated top-down: institutional power (taxes, laws) created economic threats (impoverishment), which were enforced by physical violence (beatings, imprisonment), and all combined to cause deep psychological trauma by stripping people of their dignity and right to live.

3.2 The Evolution of Threatening Actions in Contemporary Vietnamese Literature

If the system of threats in the 1930-1945 period was tangible and structured vertically from the top down, it has undergone profound evolutions in contemporary Vietnamese literature (since 1986), reflecting the transformation of the social structure. The *Đổi Mới* policy moved the country away from a centrally planned economy and onto the track of a market economy and global integration. This process, alongside economic achievements, also created new pressures and consequences: a widening gap between rich and poor, the rise of consumerism, challenges to and fractures in traditional values, and individuals facing a deep identity crisis. Contemporary literature has captured these changes, depicting a new system of threats where the forms have become more pervasive, invisible, and internalized.

The evolution of threats of **physical violence** is a clear example. Violence is no longer primarily an overt tool of the state or local tyrants for class oppression. Instead, it has transformed into everyday violence, seeping into family and social relationships. In *Cánh đồng bất tận* (The Endless Field) by Nguyen Ngoc Tu (2005), the father's violence towards his wife and children does not stem from the command of an external institution, but from his own jealousy, helplessness, and personal bitterness in a society where traditional bonds are disintegrating. Violence here is personal, impulsive, and an expression of cruelty between people in the harsh struggle for survival. It is still "direct violence" (Galtung, 1969) [3], but its origin has shifted from systematic oppression to the breakdown of micro-social structures and the erosion of individual morality.

Institutional power has also changed form. Instead of "the king's law yields to village customs," contemporary society witnesses the rise of new powers: the power of money and "interest groups." In *Tướng về hưu* (The General Retires) by Nguyen Huy Thiep (1987), the general, a symbol of the old institutional power based on merit and ideals, becomes lost and powerless in his own family. The institution that truly governs the house is not military discipline or state law, but the logic of the market operated by his daughter-in-law. This is a new kind of "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu, 1998) [1], where economic and efficiency values are accepted as self-evident, imposing themselves upon and neutralizing the moral and spiritual values of the previous generation. Furthermore, the threat from the administrative apparatus has morphed from active oppression to bureaucracy and indifference, creating invisible barriers that cause difficulties

and frustration for citizens—a form of threat through systemic apathy.

Economic threats are no longer the burden of taxes or land rent but have transformed into the fierce competitive pressure of the market economy. The fear is no longer of immediate hunger, but of future precarity: the fear of unemployment, the risk of bankruptcy, the pressure to succeed at all costs. In Nguyen Ngoc Tu's works like *Gió lẻ* (The Odd Wind) (2008), characters often struggle in a precarious life, caught in the vortex of making a living without a stable anchor. The economic threat here does not come from a specific creditor or landlord, but from the invisible operation of the market itself. Following Amartya Sen's (1999) [16] approach, this precarity strips people of the "capability" to plan a stable and meaningful life, pushing them into a state of dependence on the fortunes of the economy.

Arguably, the most profound and complex evolution lies in the category of **psychological threats**. In modern society, it has become more sophisticated, diverse, and pervasive than ever, becoming one of the central themes of literature. The loneliness and alienation of individuals in crowded cities is a typical psychological threat, expressed through the tragedy of the general in *Tướng về hưu* as he feels redundant in the new pace of life. The pressure to succeed, the fear of being left behind, of being forgotten in a constantly moving society, is also a common form of psychological threat. Notably, contemporary literature also delves into new spaces of psychological threat, such as the school environment. In *Cho tôi xin một vé đi tuổi thơ* (Give Me a Ticket to Childhood) (2008) or *Thằng quỷ nhỏ* (The Little Devil) (1990) by Nguyen Nhat Anh, the threat comes not from poverty but from the pressure of academic achievement, family expectations, and subtle forms of bullying from peers. These injuries, though invisible, can cause long-lasting trauma, eroding an individual's self-esteem and identity, corresponding to what Judith Herman (1992) [5] described about the impact of chronic psychological control and threat.

Thus, the forms of threat in contemporary Vietnamese literature have undergone a fundamental shift. They are no longer focused on political-class oppression but are dispersed, spreading into every corner of social and individual life. The threats are more invisible and internalized, reflecting the complex pressures of the market economy and the identity crisis of modern people in a world of constant change.

4. Discussion

4.1 Comparison and Explanation of the Transformation

A comparative analysis across the two periods reveals a fundamental shift in the nature, origin, and operational methods of threat types, as summarized in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Comparison of the Evolution of Threat Types

Threat Type	Main Manifestation (1930-1945 Period)	Contemporary Variation (Contemporary Period)
Physical Violence	Tangible, public, a tool of the government and the ruling class (e.g., whipping, torture, imprisonment).	Widespread, decentralized, transforms into everyday violence, domestic violence, and gang violence.
Institutional Power	Top-down imposition, based on "the king's law," colonial regulations, and village conventions.	Invisible, based on the power of money, "interest groups," bureaucracy, and the indifference of the administrative apparatus.
Economic Threats	Direct, linked to the means of production and basic survival (e.g., taxes, land rent, debt enforcement, land expropriation).	Indirect, linked to the market (e.g., competitive pressure, fear of unemployment, risk of bankruptcy, debt spiral).
Psychological Threats	A consequence of external oppression, an attack on human dignity and rights (e.g., humiliation, rejection).	Becomes central, complex, diverse, and internalized (e.g., loneliness, pressure to succeed, identity crisis).

Source: Author's compilation

This transformation can be explained by its root cause: the shift in Vietnam's social structure from an agricultural, semi-feudal colonial economy to a socialist-oriented market economy with global integration. In the 1930-1945 society, power was centralized and tangible, held by the colonial-feudal administrative apparatus and the landlord class. Consequently, threatening actions were also direct, externally coercive, and operated within a clear hierarchical structure.

Conversely, in contemporary society, power has become more dispersed and invisible. It resides not only in the state apparatus but also in capital, the market, networks of relationships, and social discourses. The logic of the market permeates all relationships, converting spiritual values into exchangeable commodities. This change in the nature of power has transformed the system of threats. Threats are no longer primarily external coercion but have transformed into internalized pressure. Modern individuals are not only threatened by a specific boss or power but also by the invisible fear of failure, of falling behind, or of not meeting the standards of success set by society. In this cycle, people are both victims of systemic pressure and, unintentionally, agents who perpetuate and reproduce that pressure on others and on themselves.

4.2 Continuity and Innovation in the Poetics of Depicting "Threatening Actions"

The transformation in the nature of the threat system inevitably led to changes in artistic methods, clearly showing the continuity and innovation in Vietnamese literature.

The critical realist literature of 1930-1945, to reflect a tangible and external system of threats, made full use of the poetics of realism. Writers like Ngo Tat To and Nam Cao focused on realistic, objective descriptions of external actions, events, and circumstances. Their style was sharp in detailing acts of violence (the beating of Chi Dau), details of abject poverty (Thi No's bowl of onion porridge), or open class conflicts. The narrative voice was often third-person, creating a distance to expose reality as authentically as

possible. This poetics was perfectly suited to capture a world where human tragedy was primarily determined by external factors, by the oppression of the social structure.

Moving to the contemporary period, as threats became invisible, pervasive, and internalized, the poetics of objective realism was no longer sufficient. Contemporary writers inherited the spirit of social criticism from the previous generation but made significant innovations in their methods to explore the "mental landscape" (*tâm cảnh*) rather than just focusing on the "circumstances" (*hoàn cảnh*). Literature delved deep into the stream of consciousness and internal monologue to express fears, anxieties, and psychological pressures that could not be conveyed through external actions. The tragedy of the general in *Tướng về hưu* lies not in his actions but in his internal thoughts and torments. In addition, writers also use fantastical and symbolic elements as a means to make abstract fears tangible. The surreal details in Nguyen Huy Thiep's short stories are not meant to escape reality, but are precisely a way to encode and more deeply reflect the absurdity and crisis of values in contemporary life. In this way, contemporary literature has found a new artistic language compatible with expressing a complex system of threats, where the deepest wounds are the invisible ones in the human soul.

5. Conclusion

By applying an interdisciplinary theoretical framework of "threatening actions," this study has surveyed and compared two key literary periods, leading to important conclusions. The paper has systematized four core types of threats: (i) threats of physical violence, (ii) threats of institutional power, (iii) economic threats, and (iv) psychological threats.

The analysis shows that in the critical realist literature of 1930-1945, the system of threats reflected a top-down structure of social oppression. The threats were tangible, direct, and systematic, originating from the power of the colonial-feudal apparatus and the landlord class. Institutional power (taxes, laws) legitimized economic threats (impoverishment), which were enforced by overt physical violence (beatings, imprisonment), and together they caused deep psychological trauma by stripping people of their dignity.

Conversely, in contemporary Vietnamese literature, the system of threats has undergone a profound evolution. The threats have become invisible, dispersed, pervasive in all corners of life, and strongly internalized. Physical violence has transformed into everyday violence; institutional power has morphed into the power of money and the indifference of the administrative apparatus; economic threats have become the competitive pressure of the market; and notably, psychological threats have risen to a central position with complex manifestations such as loneliness, identity crisis, and the pressure to succeed. This fundamental shift indicates a transformation from a model of "external coercion" to "internalized pressure," reflecting the consequences of the market economy and the fracture of traditional values.

From these results, the study confirms that it has made new contributions in both theory and practice.

Theoretically, the paper has successfully constructed a new and systematic analytical framework for "threatening actions." By integrating theories from sociology, psychology, and economics, this framework not only systematizes forms of oppression previously treated as background in other studies but also provides a sharp, interdisciplinary perspective to decode the dialectical relationship between social structure and the structure of literary works.

Practically, the study contributes to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of literature's role as a mirror reflecting core social issues. Decoding the evolution of threatening actions helps readers to thoroughly understand the anxieties, pressures, and tragedies of the Vietnamese people through turbulent historical periods. Through this, the study not only highlights the realist value of literature but also affirms its vitality and humanistic significance in empathizing with and sharing in the human condition.

However, within the scope of a single article, the study has certain limitations. The survey focused only on a few representative authors and works and could not cover the full diversity and richness of both literary periods. Future research could apply this theoretical framework to survey other genres such as poetry and drama, or other art forms like film. Furthermore, expanding the scope of research to other literary periods, especially the 1945-1986 period, or delving deeper into a specific type of threat, such as "the evolution of psychological threats in Vietnamese literature in the digital age," would be valuable endeavors.

6. References

1. Bourdieu P. La domination masculine. Seuil, 1998.
2. Foucault M. Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison. Gallimard, 1975.
3. Galtung J. Violence, peace, and peace research. Journal of Peace Research. 1969; 6(3):167-191.
4. Goldmann L. Pour une sociologie du roman. Gallimard, 1964.
5. Herman JL. Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror. Basic Books, 1992.
6. La KH. Vietnamese prose after 1975. Vietnam Education Publishing House, 2012.
7. Marx K. Das Kapital, Kritik der politischen Ökonomie, Buch 1: Der Produktionsprozeß des Kapitals. Verlag von Otto Meissner, 1867.
8. Nam C. Chí Phèo, 1941.
9. Nam C. Đời thừa, 1943.
10. Nam C. Sống mòn, 1944.
11. Ngo TT. Tắt đèn, 1939.
12. Nguyen CH. Bước đường cùng, 1938.
13. Nguyen DM. The writer, ideology, and style. Hanoi National University Press, 1998.
14. Nguyen TB. Contemporary Vietnamese prose: An approach from discourse theory. Social Sciences Publishing House, 2017.
15. Phan CD. Modern Vietnamese novels. University and Professional High School Publishing House, 1974.
16. Sen A. Development as freedom. Oxford University Press, 1999.
17. Vu TP. Giông tố, 1936.