

# ECOCRITICAL READING OF POSTWAR NARRATIVE: ECOCIDE, TRAUMA, AND NOSTALGIA IN BAO NINH'S VIETNAM WAR NOVEL *THE SORROW OF WAR*

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## ABSTRACT

*The impacts of the Vietnam War are not only massive on human lives but also on nature's sustainability. The relationship between humans and nature is seen to be disrupted by the presence of armed conflict. As an anthropocentric issue, war is often seen from the perspective of humanity. This paper analyzes how the ecocritical perspective reveals the effects of war and the connection between humans and the physical environment more thoroughly. As qualitative research, the primary data was obtained based on the relevant passages in the novel and examined using the concept of Ecophobia which defines the negative relationship between humans and nature caused by a lack of consideration toward nature sustainability. This research showed how ecocritical reading of war narrative reveals the existence of ecocide as a form of landscape destruction that affects humans' lives, trauma as a result of estrangement from nature, and a sense of nostalgia resulting from the image of idyllic space in harsh postwar reality. Based on the findings, it is stated that Bao Ninh's writing on Vietnam War displays the interconnection between humans and nature, which is revealed in certain angles of conflicts.*

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## A. Introduction

Environmental damage in the twenty-first century is nothing to neglect anymore. Global warming due to farm and plantation industries signifies the biggest form of catastrophe challenged by humans in our time.<sup>1</sup> Beforehand, the rise

of industrialism and political conflicts in the early twentieth century contributes to the biggest modern warfare in history, such as World War I and II. This signifies how human-made and anthropocentric conflicts like wars have been proved to challenge the socio, political and economic stability at the global level.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Gary E. Marchant and Karen Bradshaw, "The Short-Term Temptations and Long-Term Risks of Environmental Catastrophism," *Jurimetrics* 56, no. 4 (2016): 345–66, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26322684>.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael J. Lawrence et al., "The Effects of Modern War and Military Activities on Biodiversity and the

devastating effects of war are immense as warfare technology progresses to invent mass-destruction weapons to achieve more thorough results of casualties. In the discourse of Ecocriticism, anthropocentric views used by human to justify the position of superior species on Earth is challenged in a way that physical environments and its condition need to be considered equally significant.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in the issues related to human-made conflict like wars, the affected subjects are not limited to the anthropocentric scope but also environmental state.

In light of the ecocritical perspective, the existence of ecocide as an aftermath of war is emphasized. Several studies show the hostile relationship between human and nature through ecocide. Ecocide is described as a term that refers to the 'destruction of natural environment,' which became widely used after the Vietnam War.<sup>4</sup> As genocide is often associated with the war's political praxis, ecocide is also taken into concern on how anthropocentric conflict affects the non-human and physical environment. Despite the different references, ecocide concerns not only human integrity but both human and ecology in the context of cultural and biological integrity.<sup>5</sup> Another study shows

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Environment," *Environmental Reviews* 23, no. 4 (2015): 443–60, <https://doi.org/10.1139/er-2015-0039>.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence et al., 444

<sup>4</sup> Sailesh Mehta and Prisca Merz, "Ecocide – a New Crime Against Peace?," *Environmental Law Review* 17, no. 1 (2015): 3–7, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461452914564730>.

<sup>5</sup> Kübra Kalkandelen and Darren O'Byrne, "On Ecocide: Toward a Conceptual Framework," *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 18, no. 3

a significant connection between both terms genocide and ecocide, synthesized that ecocide is a form of genocide that destroys 'vital socioecological and cultural' connection between human beings and the physical environment.<sup>6</sup>

Historically, Vietnam gained independence from French colonizers in 1945, and the country consolidated in 1975 after the loss of the South Vietnamese government.<sup>7</sup> As the country was divided into two after its revolution, the North Vietnamese government was supported by China and the Soviet Union, while the South Vietnamese government was backed by the United States, which jumped into the conflict in 1955.<sup>8</sup> The United States' intervention in Vietnam War by providing ground troops and air power contributed to additional human casualties and land destruction. The advanced technology of Western power in Vietnam had dominated the fight between USSR-backed North Vietnam and Americanized South Vietnam forces. The mid-1960s to mid-1970s were marked as the highest peak of warfare contact between the two sides.<sup>9</sup> Also, during this period, human

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(2017): 333–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2017.1331857>.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Lindgren, "Ecocide, Genocide and the Disregard of Alternative Life-Systems," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 22, no. 4 (2018): 525–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2017.1397631>.

<sup>7</sup> John Dumbrell, *Rethinking the Vietnam War* (London: Macmillan Education U.K., 2012), 1-21, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-02182-3>.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Kort, *The Vietnam War Reexamined*, Cambridge Essential Histories (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1–5.

<sup>9</sup> E. A. Martini, "Hearts, Minds, and Herbicides: The Politics of the Chemical War in Vietnam\*,"

casualties were increased as long as the lands were destroyed by mass weapons like napalm strikes and herbicides Agent Orange. These two major causes of environmental damages were perpetrated by American forces in the land.<sup>10</sup> However, the conflicts between humans and the environment are actually more complex. U.S. military members are reported as the subjects who prevalently disclosed the effect of human displacement and estrangement in the new environment. This means the war also affects soldiers and revolutionaries from both sides.

The particular issues concerning the relationship between human and environment are seen in the Vietnam war novel *The Sorrow of War*, written by former North Vietnamese soldier Bao Ninh. This novel offers a new dimension to seeing the war by representing the North Vietnamese point of view. However, as much as a promising tenet Bao Ninh offers through his writing, the novel emphasizes human psychology resulting from the war experience. It tells the story of Kien, a commander of the North Vietnamese Army who serves in a Missing in Action Unit and is responsible for gathering comrades' dead bodies. It focuses on his struggle to adjust to his postwar life. By doing so, Kien manages to escape by writing stories that reflect his own past, pre-war, during the war, and post-war situation of himself and important figures around him. The novel discloses

Kien's stories from his childhood, teenage years, conscription in the Army, relationship with women, and his war experiences. The centralizing of human values in the story is not limited to the anthropocentric boundaries as Bao Ninh uses the depiction of Vietnamese jungles and rural landscapes to accentuate the war trauma and nostalgia in his characters.

In relation to Vietnam War and its influence on nature, Vietnamese culture comprises the relationship between human and nature as found in ancient folklore, which is related closely to Vietnamese people's cultural and spiritual identity. Vietnamese spirituality is often marked in its folklore and traditional form of literature. Taoism grows stronger along with Buddhism and Confucianism.<sup>11</sup> The values of these three religions are often found in Vietnamese folklore and classic literature, which highlight fantasy stories focusing on human encounters with fairies, ghosts, and supernatural things. This is also related to folk narratives that emphasize Vietnamese belief in the otherworld existence, which underlines metaphysical experience found in religious legends.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, "Vietnamese Religion, Folklore and Literature: Archetypal Journeys from Folktales to Medieval Fantasy Short Stories," ed. Alex Wade, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 7, no. 1 (2020): 1847769, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2020.1847769>.

<sup>12</sup> Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, Nguyen Thi Thu Hang, and Le Van Trung, "Identity of the Vietnamese Narrative Culture: Archetypal Journeys from Folk Narratives to Fantasy Short Stories," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 8, no. 1 (2021): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-00697-3>.

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*Diplomatic History* 37, no. 1 (2013): 58–84, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhs003>.

<sup>10</sup> Martini., 58.

As metaphysics becomes crucial in Vietnamese spiritualism, its connection to nature and the human-nature relationship is revealed to be significant. Sino-Vietnamese concepts of nature embodied in the religious teaching of the three religions which allow human beings to reach nature through a long process of practice, an opposite to Western conception of nature as a 'given' object that cannot be acquired by experience.<sup>13</sup> This distinct characteristic in Vietnamese philosophy of human-nature relationship signifies how nature is not merely there, but it takes effort to understand its presence and live in balance. These two findings synthesize Vietnamese native spiritual values embodied in the folk narratives and also resonate synonymously with the narrative of the afterlife concept. It also synthesizes the otherworld's belief in the jungle scenes found in Bao Ninh's novel regarding the complex relationship between human nature and the physical environment-metaphysical world.

Several studies have been conducted focused on chemical substances used in the war. Agent orange is mentioned prevalently due to its everlasting impact on Vietnamese soil and perpetuated the possibilities of congenital

disabilities.<sup>14</sup> Intended to cut down the agricultural supplies for North Vietnamese forces, the U.S. administration employed the herbicide to be used along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.<sup>15</sup> The use of napalm strikes also contributes to the destruction of the Vietnamese forest landscape.<sup>16</sup> This mass weapon was used to clear up the surroundings from being a potential refuge for Vietcong guerillas and the North Vietnamese soldiers. These bioweapons have destroyed human inhabitants of the land and the physical environment and animal population. The declining numbers of certain species of animals were massive due to the loss of habitat by bombings and toxic herbicides.<sup>17</sup>

These studies show how human conflict has undoubted destructive effects on non-human creatures and physical environments. Moreover, the development of land during the war as military facilities also shows the existence of land exploitation that reduces the number of green landscapes.<sup>18</sup> Landscape

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<sup>13</sup> Christian Culas, "Nature and Human in Sino-Vietnamese Conceptions and Practices. Articulations between Asian Vernacular 'Analogism' and Western Modern 'Naturalism' Modes of Identification" (Delaware, United States: Vernon Press, 2019), <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-03088629>, 111-129.

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<sup>14</sup> R. Scott Frey, "Agent Orange and America at War in Vietnam and Southeast Asia," *Human Ecology Review* 20, no. 1 (2013): 1–10.

<sup>15</sup> C. Waugh, "'Only You Can Prevent a Forest': Agent Orange, Ecocide, and Environmental Justice," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 17, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 113–32, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isp156>.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Hupy, "The Environmental Footprint of War," *Environment and History* 14, no. 3 (2008): 405–21, <https://doi.org/10.3197/096734008X333581>.

<sup>17</sup> Edwin A. Martini, "World on Fire: The Politics of Napalm in the Global Cold War," *Cold War History* 16, no. 4 (2016): 463–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2015.1080242>.

<sup>18</sup> Lawrence et al., "The Effects of Modern War and Military Activities on Biodiversity and the Environment."

exploitation also becomes a problem in postwar circumstances as it also contributes to the decline of wilderness and green spaces.

Related to the theoretical framework of ecocritical theories toward human conflicts, Simon C. Estok popularizes the term Ecophobia which synthesizes the progress of ecocritical theory in the recent context. Moreover, Ecocriticism's discourse has already moved forward, leaving the sense of hope, naivete, and optimism as in its emergence more than twenty years earlier.<sup>19</sup> The context of ecocritical reading must be connected to the discourse of rising human conflict with terrorism and geopolitics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Ecophobia summarizes the necessity of understanding that history reveals how human and nature have had negative relationships as well as the concern for nature and its sustainability today. In its basic definition, Estok wrote that Ecophobia is a 'uniquely human psychological condition that prompts antipathy toward nature.'<sup>20</sup> This term fits the description of the current context of ecological ignorance towards waste and pollution. In correlating it with the postwar narrative underlining the environmental cost of war, the antipathy trait toward nature is found in the very meaning of the conflict itself. The ignorance and neglect of the war effort against the

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<sup>19</sup> Simon C. Estok, "Ecocriticism in an Age of Terror," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15, no. 1 (2013): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2182>.

<sup>20</sup> Estok, 1.

consequences in physical environments embody through the use of weapons and tactics which lack the consideration of environmental awareness.

Ecocriticism aims to disclose the relationship between humans and nature in the political conflicts embodied within postwar literature. Certain novels under the label of speculative fiction have been engaged with the interplay between the Anthropocene conflict and environmental crisis.<sup>21</sup> The analysis underlines how literary modes are able to encompass the relationship between human and nature in the context of war. In a study by Hieu and Dang, postwar Vietnamese narratives provide a representation of nature. The analysis focuses on the shift of representation of forest and rivers in postwar literature to reveal the new discourse on the environment have been established in contemporary Vietnamese literature. This analysis provides a significant path to reflect on how human conflict and physical environment are connected in literary works.<sup>22</sup> The analysis is conducted to underline the importance of Vietnamese spiritual values that highly respect nature elements.

Furthermore, as wartime trauma is immensely discussed in Bao Ninh's *The*

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<sup>21</sup> A. G. Tait, "Representing Conflict and Environmental Crisis: Fragments from a Speculative Future," *Green Letters* 21, no. 1 (2017): 78–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2016.1234942>.

<sup>22</sup> Tran Ngoc Hieu and Dang Thi Thai Ha, "Listening to Nature, Rethinking the Past: A Reading of the Representation of Forests and Rivers," in *South East Asian Ecocriticism: Theories, Practices, Prospects*, ed. John Charles Ryan (Maryland: Lexington Book, 2017), 205–28.

*Sorrow of War*, a study related to psychological effect of the war connects it to wartime horror.<sup>23</sup> The depiction of the jungle in the novel accentuates the mysterious and gruesome vibes for the reader. The connection between the horror of the war with psychological trauma discussed in the study is limited to the anthropocentric tendency and centralizes on the relation between human beings. Basically, the novel does describe not only war trauma but also a nostalgic sense of memories of the idyllic spaces in a certain form of Vietnamese landscape for the main character. Moreover, environmental reading of literature leaves nature position as the mere background of the story. It explains that environmentally-oriented work uses nature as a framing device and an existing subject that conveys how human history is implicated in natural history.<sup>24</sup> Related to this notion, a study reveals the significance of physical environment influence on human characters is shown with Vietnam War as a background and U.S. soldiers as the subjects.<sup>25</sup> The analysis contains the reading of anthropomorphic literature from an ecocritical perspective. Another study

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<sup>23</sup> John Armstrong, "Gothic Resistances: Flesh, Bones, Ghosts and Time in Vietnamese Postwar Fiction," *ETropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics* 18, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.25120/etropic.18.1.2019.3686>.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination. Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 7–8.

<sup>25</sup> Anouk Aerni, "A Farewell to Anthropocentrism in American Postbellum Prose: A Reconsideration of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*," *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies* 22, no. 1 (2021): 102–22.

underlined the human-nature relationship in war reflected in World War I poetry by Isaac Rosenberg, depicting the destructive consequences of war on the environment as a metaphor for tragic impacts on human lives.<sup>26</sup> This study provides new perspectives to see how human and non-human subjects affect each other's and in the context of Ecocriticism as a theoretical framework. It displays the progress of moving forward from seeing nature as merely the background of the story.

This research aims to reveal the significance of the ecocritical lens in disclosing anthropocentric issues in two ways. First, the analysis is conducted to examine how ecocritical re-reading of war novel can reveal a certain degree of interaction between human and physical environment. Second, it is significant to see how the implication of nature as physical environment affects the psychological traits of the characters.

## B. Method

The data of this qualitative research was obtained from the novel *The Sorrow of War* written by Bao Ninh, translated to English by Phan Thanh Hao. The data for this analysis was divided into two categories; the primary data, which consisted of pertinent passages and dialogues from the novels, and the secondary data, which included the

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<sup>26</sup> Erica Maggioni, "Earth! Have They Gone into You? An Ecocritical Reading of the Relationship Between Man, Nature, and War in Isaac Rosenberg's Poems," *L'analisi Linguistica E Letteraria* 24, no. 2 (2016): 53–62.

definition of scientific sources of theories taken from books, journal articles, and research reports. The data collection process was conducted by reading the novels and taking notes on specific parts in the books that signify the relation to the topic of Ecocriticism and postwar narratives. The main theoretical frameworks for this analysis were mainly from the concept of Ecophobia.

The analysis of texts was done by examining the passage to see its relevance to the context of issues. The text of the novel was described in the discussion, and the points gathered from the description will be addressed with relevant studies. The studies used were related to the issues discussed in the analysis. After the novel's passages were examined under the lens of relevant studies related to Ecocriticism and the environmental impacts of the Vietnam War and warfare, the result is presented to provide answers to research objectives.

### **C. Results**

The discussion findings define the relationship between human and nature based on the ecocritical reading of the novel. The findings were divided into three, including the general depiction of wartime natural landscape and its implication as a result of anthropocentric relations which underlines human superiority and land degradation, the way the nature affected human psychology through the description of related myths and superstition, and how nature defines the main character's sense of nostalgia and expectation of peaceful life.

### **1. Vietnamese Landscape and Ecocide**

Like any other war, Vietnam War has left a legacy of nature destruction due to its use of green landscapes like forests, hills, and valleys as its battlefield. In the particular case of Vietnam, mass weapons were considered a successful tactic to eliminate the enemies in a single strike. The U.S. war effort in Vietnam fell into eliminating forests, which disturbed the Vietnamese natural landscape in three ways involving explosive munitions, herbicides, and land clearing operations using a bulldozer.<sup>27</sup> Napalm bomb, which is a category of explosive munition, was prevalently used during the heights of combats during the war. It was employed by the United States Armed Forces to back South Vietnamese forces in fighting against the North Vietnamese Army and Vietcong guerilla. The use of napalm by the U.S. military forces started in 1943 and was first deployed on a battlefield of Papua New Guinea during World War II, but the substance gained more prominence at the heights of American intervention in Vietnam in the mid-1960s.<sup>28</sup>

Napalm's successful use often affected nearby civilian lands and hurt non-combatant Vietnamese, which made the numbers of civilian casualties unexpectedly higher. In the context of ecological concern, the use of napalm bombing had destroyed Vietnamese vegetation, which also signified the

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<sup>27</sup> Hupy, "The Environmental Footprint of War." 46.

<sup>28</sup> Marine Guillaume, "Napalm in U.S. Bombing Doctrine and Practice, 1942-1975," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 14, no. 23 (2016), <https://apjif.org/2016/23/Guillaume.html>

declining numbers of certain species of animals and plants.

In the novel, the depiction of napalm bombing was mentioned several times, especially during the scenes on the jungle battlefield. Bao Ninh's writing uses land destruction to accentuate the misery of North Vietnamese soldiers and militias as they struggled to find cover from the attack. As much as the bombing was intended to stop the North Vietnamese progress in the war, its effect on ecological damage cannot be ignored. In the earlier passages of the novel, the depiction of napalm bombing can be seen to intensify the effects of war on exhausted North Vietnamese soldiers.

“That was the dry season when the sun burned harshly, the wind blew fiercely, and the enemy sent napalm spraying through the jungle and a sea of fire enveloped them, spreading like the fires of hell.”<sup>29</sup>

The depiction of the dry season shows the condition of high temperatures in tropical areas. This signifies the struggle of humans trapped on the battlefield to fight both the enemies and the hot weather. Furthermore, the napalm sent by the U.S. Air Forces bomber plane was intended to make the scene more unforgivable in a way that the fire spread and destroyed the vegetation in the surrounding. The use of location, the jungle has displayed the area with thick green vegetation and the dropping of napalm bomb destructed the green landscape, which made the North

Vietnamese combatants struggle harder to find a cover from the air attack.

The novel continues to describe the event in

“They (North Vietnamese troops) became disoriented, and threw themselves into nets of bullets, dying in the flaming inferno.”<sup>30</sup>

The particular passage shows that the bombing of the jungle had a significant effect on spreading the fear and disorientation among the attacked soldiers. Their enemies had a tactic to use the fire to disorient them that they would come out and become easier targets to be shot from above. The psychological effect of napalm intensifies fear due to its direct hit which causes death without bleeding but incites internal hemorrhage, suffocation, and severe burns.<sup>31</sup>

The passage mentions the soldiers' disorientation is due to the provoked sense of fear against napalm itself as they tried to escape from the pain caused by the substance. The relationship between nature as the surroundings and human psychology is depicted clearly in the two passages above. Nature in the form of the jungle was seen as a potential area for North Vietnamese troops to move and hide because the trees and high grasses provided protective covering from American troops, which were often mobile by helicopters and planes. With the jungle was seen to be sprayed by napalm fire, the potential covering was gone. It shows

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<sup>29</sup> Ninh Bao, *The Sorrow of War*. Trans. Phan Thanh Mao (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 5.

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<sup>30</sup> Bao, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Guillaume, "Napalm in U.S. Bombing Doctrine and Practice, 1942-1975," 9.



the vanishing protection of nature for the soldiers.

On the anthropocentric side, the consequences on human bodies are also immense as the effect of napalm hits will damage human psychology as much as physically destroy them. Concerning ecocritical reading, this discloses how human decisions against their own conflict took victims of both human beings and the physical environment, which provided not only human needs but also animals and plants.<sup>32</sup> The novel does not mention how it affects animals in the jungle as the North Vietnamese soldiers are sprayed with napalm, but in reality, napalm bombing and Agent Orange are two major causes of the declining wildlife in Vietnamese tropical forests.

Bao Ninh's concern centralizes more on the effect of napalm bombing on the human figures, but the environmental take on this particular part of the story is still reflected in another passage. The psychological destruction in the troops after they are attacked by napalm bomb becomes more visible through the description of how the bombing affects the physical environment around them.

“The diamond shaped grass clearing was piled high with bodies killed by helicopter gunships. Broken bodies, bodies blown apart, bodies vaporized. No jungle grew again in this clearing no grass, no plants.”<sup>33</sup>

As the napalm bombing has scattered the North Vietnamese troops, their disorientation and hysteria become

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<sup>32</sup> Hupy, “The Environmental Footprint of War,” 416.

<sup>33</sup> Bao, *The Sorrow of War*, 5.

the reason they get gunned down by American helicopters in the particular combat mentioned in the novel. The passage reflects the aftermath of the firefight between NVA regulars and American troops. It shows the 'clearing' as the area in the jungle that was first destroyed by the fire from napalm bombs. The tactic used by the Americans was to clear up the area before shooting down the visible targets.

Moreover, the environmental effect of the napalm is reflected in how jungle or vegetation no longer grow in the cleared areas. American effort to deforest Vietnamese wilderness is related to the opposite values of nature for North Vietnamese Communists. They desire an environment consisting of thick vegetation that can provide food, home, and tactical advantage.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the Communists treated nature as their ally during the war. By this argument, the different side of the war between Communist North Vietnam and the interfering United States Forces signifies the main perpetrator of environmental damage in the Vietnamese landscape.

In addition, the interrelation between humans and nature and how it is shattered by mass destruction weapons like napalm is rooted in its problematic employment, which affects people, places, and nature and the cultural, political, and

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<sup>34</sup> Neil S. Oatsvall, “Trees Versus Lives: Reckoning Military Success and the Ecological Effects of Chemical Defoliation During the Vietnam War,” *Environment and History* 19, no. 4 (2013): 427–58, <https://doi.org/10.3197/096734013X13769033133666>.

cultural consequences of such effects.<sup>35</sup> This particular statement shows how the physical environment is damaged through the sense of exploitation of natural environment which rooted from anthropocentric arrogance through the rejection of human-nature interdependence and affirmation of power above other forms of life.<sup>36</sup> The connection between the nature of war and physical nature is cut down by the anthropocentric philosophy that undermines the status of nature as human provider and ally.

Moreover, in the novel depiction, the area was once full of grass and plants suddenly turned blank and dried. There is no consideration for environmental stability in wars as geopolitical conflict aims to display the sense of power relation.<sup>37</sup> In many battles, not only in Vietnam War, the area that once became a firefight spot and pivotal point to be defended or captured was deserted. This happened as military campaigns were always mobile from one place to another, and the former sites of shelling and blast left a trace of disposal.<sup>38</sup> The different option given to the cleared areas is to be established as military infrastructures. This has significant effects on the environment as the natural landscape was turned into artificial buildings, reducing the

number of green spaces in the region.<sup>39</sup> In the novel, the unit's journey across the Central Highland region reveals the number of deserted spots in the jungle that was no longer defended by both sides. This signifies the wasted and damaged landscapes as a result of anthropocentric conflicts.

## 2. The Horror of Nature and Trauma

Trauma becomes Bao Ninh's frequent topic to discuss in the novel. The depiction of the jungle is his way of expressing the horror of war. It is done through the description of the natural landscape along with elements from nature that surrounds Kien's unit as they move along the Central Highland wilderness. The horror embodied in the mythical stories about ghosts lingering in the forest accentuates the psychological trauma of the soldiers who experienced days, months, and even years in such places.<sup>40</sup> The connection between psychological trauma and Ecophobia is underlined in the nature which surrounded these soldiers. Nature is considered as a cause of fear in their minds.

"The stream moans, a desperate complaint mixing with distant faint jungle sounds, like an echo from another world. The eerie sounds come from somewhere in remote past, arriving softly like feather weight leaves falling on the grass of times long, long ago."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Martini, "World on Fire." 465.

<sup>36</sup> Simon C. Estok, *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 37.

<sup>37</sup> Estok, 36.

<sup>38</sup> Lawrence et al., "The Effects of Modern War and Military Activities on Biodiversity and the Environment," 454.

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<sup>39</sup> Lawrence et al., 448.

<sup>40</sup> Armstrong, "Gothic Resistances." 42.

<sup>41</sup> Bao, *The Sorrow of War*. Trans. Phan Thanh Mao, 4.

The mixture of natural elements and psychologically invoking horror of war is seen clearly in the passage above. It highlights the connection between physical environments and human minds. The description of a nature-like stream is delivered in human-like characteristics. The stream 'moans' to make everyone who hears the sound associates it with ghosts and superstition regarding the places they visited.

Asian culture in general, and the Indochina region in particular, has largely been associated with folklore and myths related to the stories of human creation, which signify the importance of nature and its elements in the establishment of human civilization.<sup>42</sup> With the war went on in the places known to be associated closely with nature, the superstition which Vietnamese people heard lingers in the minds of these soldiers. They remembered the forest was once considered a sacred and terrible place that connected the world of the living and the dead.

Especially as the story was told based on the perspective of Kien, whose unit serves to search for missing in action soldiers' bodies, his duty affects the way he perceives his surroundings. With other soldiers mentioning ghost stories during their journey, his mind connects the surrounding nature with human characteristics like the sound of the stream which is like human moans coming from the unseen world, filled with horror.

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<sup>42</sup> Hieu and Ha, "Listening to Nature, Rethinking the Past: A Reading of the Representation of Forests and Rivers," 221.

The grotesque depiction of nature is even more accentuated as Bao Ninh uses the words 'vaporized,' 'liquidized,' and 'reduced to mud' to describe the condition of corpses Kien's unit found during their duty.<sup>43</sup> Indochina tropical jungle soil, which bears the quality of high humidity and is filled with numerous species of decomposers, contributed to the rapid human corpse decomposition process.

Nature, in this sense, affects humans, both the living and the dead. The anthropocentric view of human conflict does not highlight how physical environment is able to influence human subject. However, in an ecocritical reading, nature, which is seen as a passive framing device, turns out to be actively affecting human lives and continues to contribute after they were dead. In short, the trauma invoked by the memories of dead bodies and ghost stories lingers in the war survivor even after they leave the natural landscape where the tragedy took place. It seems that nature in this particular context has retaliated against human beings after the abuses it had endured through the war.<sup>44</sup> Thus, it explains why nature is seen as a horrific and grotesque place closely associated with a negative experience.

On another occasion, the experience of staying along the Central Highlands jungle emerges as supernatural and mythical. The depiction of the death of soldiers who lost against American and

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<sup>43</sup> Armstrong, "Gothic Resistances," 33.

<sup>44</sup> Hieu and Ha, "Listening to Nature, Rethinking the Past: A Reading of the Representation of Forests and Rivers," 213.

South Vietnamese troops earlier on is synthesized as a traumatic experience for the Missing in Action unit, who gather their bodies across the area. The death is not only seen as visually disturbing for the unit and adds a traumatic effect on their mind. They also see the dead bodies and associate them with ghost stories they used to hear somewhere else.

“After that battle no one mentioned the 27th Battalion any more, though numerous souls of ghosts and devils were born in that deadly defeat. They were still loose, wandering in every corner and bush in the jungle, drifting along the stream, refusing to depart for the Other World. From the on it was called the Jungle of Screaming Souls.”<sup>45</sup>

The aftermath of the battle is haunting for the unit which takes responsibility to take care of the bodies later on. As is remembered clearly by Kien, who once fought in a combat unit back in 1969, he recalls that only ten men survived from the battle.<sup>46</sup> As he returns to the same area years later, he thinks that the soldiers who were dead back then are still lingering in the area known as the Jungle of Screaming Souls. Here the natural landscape is closely associated with the anthropocentric concept of death and the afterlife.<sup>47</sup>

Not only the jungle, as a representation of the physical environment was set as the background of

the story in ecocritical reading, but the jungle itself is also what brought the horror atmosphere into human's psychological state. Bao Ninh depicts the jungle and every natural process and element related to human fear and trauma through the thoughts of ghosts and devils that appear from the spirits of dead soldiers who cannot rest properly in the jungle. The novel mentions the task of Kien's unit to gather the remains of dead soldiers. It is related to the Vietnamese communist government's interest in the postwar era to commemorate and repatriate war casualties.<sup>48</sup> This task which profits the reputation of the postwar Vietnamese government, takes victims of psychologically traumatized soldiers who were forced to finish the duty.

The fear of nature or Ecophobia results in the minds of North Vietnamese soldiers as they feel trapped between the sense of survival and guilt from taking part in the conflict, which turns out to be devastating not only for humanity but also for the environment. The representation of the jungle in the story highlights the sense of fear which ended up being certain traumatic experience, especially for Kien. Another passage mentioned, "*not a place for the timid. Living here one could go mad or be frightened to death.*"<sup>49</sup> The myth and superstition about ghosts have turned nature through its sounds and appearance into horror stories of the war associated with uneasy spirit of the dead wandering looking for a way out to the

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<sup>45</sup> Bao, *The Sorrow of War*. Trans. Phan Thanh Mao, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Bao, 5.

<sup>47</sup> Hieu and Ha, "Listening to Nature, Rethinking the Past: A Reading of the Representation of Forests and Rivers," 211.

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<sup>48</sup> Armstrong, "Gothic Resistances," 32.

<sup>49</sup> Bao, 6.

otherworld. For the living, the jungle as a physical environment estranges them from their commonsense and haunts them with fear and anxiety.

The effect of staying in the jungle is intensified with soldiers' testimonies of 'Screaming Souls' peculiar sight in the jungle. The hallucination becomes more prevalent as men in the unit start to smoke a variant of flower *rosa canina* to "ridding themselves of their shared harsh realities."<sup>50</sup> The reality of the jungle creates their own sense of phobia and trauma with the association of dead bodies, their fear of their own death, and the superstition and myth they believe exist in the jungle.

"Others paled in terror as horrible, primitive wild calls echoed inside their skulls in the rainy, dewy mornings, thinking they were the howls of pain from the last group of orangutans said to have lived in former times."<sup>51</sup>

The hallucination makes the soldiers think they see and hear ghosts in the jungle. The effect of war lingers in them through the manifestation of fear and the will to escape the smoking substance to make themselves feel better amidst the bitter wartime reality. However, it turns out that their escape makes them hallucinate in negative ways rather than imagining the peaceful and beautiful life they have dreamed of for the past few years. Also, the primitive wild calls in the jungle are probably a mixture of birds, streams, rains, and winds together to create an

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<sup>50</sup> Bao, *The Sorrow of War*. Trans. Phan Thanh Mao, 13.

<sup>51</sup> Bao, 16.

image of howling they believe belongs to orangutans. Also, the sound of the rain mentioned in the novel, as it happens in the jungle will be perceived differently.

The depiction of nature in this particular part is still seen in horror. With the hallucination, the sound of nature was perceived as mythical creatures trying to frighten them and force them to leave the area. However, as the story goes on, the remaining soldiers realize after their comrades died one by one that the place is cursed and full of evil spirits.<sup>52</sup> This strengthens the idea that nature, which in their basic philosophy provides home and food, also contains fear and terror. The phobia against nature becomes more apparent as they saw physical environments like foreign, dangerous, and threatening subjects.<sup>53</sup> This phobia was incited by the realization in soldiers' minds that they are not in domestic and familiar landscape. Instead, the area was rather trapped by the duty to stay for a long period of time in an unfamiliar place. The fear of myth manifested in their dissent of nature which they believe hiding unseen creatures that try to terrorize them. This contributes to the trauma the soldiers like Kien suffer in their postwar life. In this case, nature in Bao Ninh's writing cannot be perceived mainly as the background of the story. Its influence on human psychology proves the physical environment's significance. Nature is devastated by human conflict. In this

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<sup>52</sup> Hieu and Ha, "Listening to Nature, Rethinking the Past: A Reading of the Representation of Forests and Rivers," 213.

<sup>53</sup> Estok, *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, 122.

particular part, the horror of war the soldiers had experienced becomes nature's way of affecting their psychology through the manifestation of ghosts, spirits, and myths.

### 3. Idyllic Space and Wartime Nostalgia

The war experienced by Kien has brought trauma through numerous incidents. Remembering the jungle as a haunted place which contributed to his hardship in adjusting to his postwar life, Kien's character also shows a sense of being nostalgic for a certain event that happened during the war. It signifies that trauma is not the only thing nature infuses into Kien's character. Nature also affects Kien's nostalgic sense in a way that he sees certain landscapes he visited during the war as an idyllic space.

"There was one rural scene which frequently returned to Kien now. It was a symbol of paradise lost."<sup>54</sup>

The rural area in the novel is depicted as an idyllic space. It is because at a certain point of the war, before American troops infiltrated Vietnamese villages and remote hamlets in a search-and-destroy mission hunting Vietcong guerilla, the earlier phase of the war has not affected some rural scenes in the Highlands. It is an idyllic space as Kien associates the place with peace and freedom. He remembers the days before the war and how a rural scene he visited in wartime brought back memories from the past. Here his sense of nostalgia

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<sup>54</sup> Bao, *The Sorrow of War*. Trans. Phan Thanh Mao, 196.

becomes intense as he considers it as a symbol of 'paradise lost' which intensifies the place which probably no longer exists after American infiltration into remote areas. The rural scene is related closely to nature, in which rural areas consist of human dwellings and natural landscapes. The existence of rural areas or countryside is mapped in-between nature and culture.<sup>55</sup> The countryside belongs to culture for its conceptualization of human establishment and also to nature as it requires plants and trees to coexist in providing human with natural resources.

The paradise loss of this certain landscape is signified by the environmental impact of war which reduces the population of flora and fauna and devastates the species diversity in the affected ecosystem.<sup>56</sup> Despite being left unexplained in the novel, the majority of Vietnamese rural areas by the end of the war have been affected by U.S. explosive munitions and biochemical weapons. Moreover, even though Kien feels close to nature, he does not see the jungle as a natural landscape that provides ideal places for peace and freedom because it symbolizes fear, trauma, and death. As mentioned in the novel, the rural area provides the quality of peaceful and free life which appears as a remedy for the traumatized Kien as he recalls every experience in the war.

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<sup>55</sup> Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 256.

<sup>56</sup> Lawrence et al., "The Effects of Modern War and Military Activities on Biodiversity and the Environment," 453.

The exact experience is drawn as Kien recalled he once visited a coffee plantation during the war. The memories of the place are captured as he projects it as an idyllic space where human and nature was related harmoniously.

“For the first time in his life he felt truly at home in the country. His heart surged with desire to quit the violence, killing and destruction and settle in the peaceful surrounds of that corner of the Highlands under a calm, peaceful sky. From that point in time he used that pastoral scene both as a measuring-stick for other rural areas and as a symbol of what could have been.”<sup>57</sup>

Kien's sense of nostalgia for the rural scene signifies his dream of normal civilian lives. The description of the countryside as the total opposite of the violence and destruction underlines how the natural landscape functions differently in a peaceful state compared to the jungle of the Screaming Souls. The countryside made Kien feel like he was home and forgot that he took part in the destructive human conflict that devastated the environment. Here nature once again affects human minds in the way it brings their own sense to withdraw from participating in destructive conflicts into a peaceful kind of life.

Moreover, Kien in the postwar era believes that his experience of visiting the plantation with his friends resurrected his youth and friendship memories. At this point, a nostalgic sense of peacetime in Vietnam embodies in the depiction of

nature which was seen as more than the mere background of the setting device. Nature moves as an actor by reaching out to itself.<sup>58</sup> The nature in this particular part takes human psychology into searching idealistic depiction of reality which Kien always expects to have at a certain point. The postwar reality in Kien's life devastates himself as he finds it became difficult to adjust. Meanwhile, it is central for Ecocriticism to decentralize anthropocentrism and its assumption that humans are considered as the apex creation.<sup>59</sup> By recalling the memories of the natural landscape in the rural scene, he aspires to leave his military duty which urges him to use violence and destruction as he prefers to stay close to nature.

Somehow Kien recalls that a political commissar once advised him on the life with nature.

“You'd do better to live close to nature and be closer to ordinary working people. That will ease your suffering and bring you happiness.”<sup>60</sup>

It inspires him to seek through the nostalgia for the ideal life he struggled to find in postwar reality. Through this nostalgic process, Kien tried to find his own idyllic space. The particular memory of the rural area surrounding the coffee plantation is Kien's standard of how another countryside in the area must have been, regardless of how they are probably destroyed by the American napalms strike

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<sup>57</sup> Bao, *The Sorrow of War*. Trans. Phan Thanh Mao, 197.

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<sup>58</sup> Aerni, “A Farewell to Anthropocentrism in American Postbellum Prose: A Reconsideration of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*,” 117.

<sup>59</sup> Aerni, 112.

<sup>60</sup> Bao, *The Sorrow of War*. Trans. Phan Thanh Mao, 196.

later on. Related to Ecophobia as it can be manifested in a sense of fear that incites antagonism to see nature as an opponent.<sup>61</sup> In this case, Kien's Ecophobia embodies in fear that he suffered from experience in the jungle. This Ecophobia was aimed to be erased through his memorization of the rural area which shows not all of his wartime memories were bitter. He also believed his particular experience seeing nature on the plantation symbolizes how ideal life should have been. As this image is then seen as 'paradise lost' Kien understood that it could only exist within his memories, and the only time he can feel the presence of this particular natural landscape is through his wartime nostalgia.

As reflected through Kien's struggles, the anthropocentric tendency of the postwar narrative becomes diminished. It is due to how the physical environment around him and other characters of the story cannot only be perceived as mere background of the story. Nature plays its powerful part in affecting human psychological and emotional states.

By mentioning the centrality of nature as a powerful entity, this research particularly aims to point out the necessity to read anthropocentric conflict from a different angle. In other words, this research particularizes in amplifying the existing research gap of ecocritical study. In the era where geopolitical conflict and natural disaster become prevalent,

connecting these two issues can be considered vital to understanding how the Anthropocene and the environment relate to each other.

#### **D. Conclusion**

Ecocritical analysis of Bao Ninh's novel *The Sorrow of War* using the concept of Ecophobia by Simon C, Estok signifies the environmental impacts of war towards human and nature relationship. The findings disclose the environmental impacts of war towards human and nature relationships. It is shown that nature shows antagonistic traits towards human which highlights its power to influence humanity rather than existing only as a background device of the narrative. In other words, nature is capable to affect the human mind through the projection of fear and superstition. On the other hand, it is also suggested that ecocritical reading can emphasize the fear toward nature is reduced by the sense of nostalgia.

The findings revealed the compatibility of the ecocritical lens to disclose anthropocentric conflicts like warfare. War has been widely analyzed under an anthropocentric perspective due to its major consequences on human lives. Yet ecocritical reading is proven to give insight into how anthropocentric conflicts are impactful to human lives and the physical environment. However, this analysis is limited only to disclosing the effects of war in certain regions in Southeast Asia. Other forms of war and geopolitical conflicts in the different areas may suggest different treatments of the surrounding nature. Thus, for future

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<sup>61</sup> Estok, *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, 1.



researchers who are interested in the same subjects, occupying the gap of this research can be done by providing diverse perspectives on how war as an anthropocentric conflict affects physical environments in other regions in the world.

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