



WAR-RELATED METAPHORS IN LITERARY WORKS OF VIETNAMESE AUTHORS FROM 1975 TO PRESENT: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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Abstract

The end of combat in 1975 did not end the war's psychological weight in Vietnam. This systematic review synthesizes twelve studies by Vietnamese authors to track how war metaphors have evolved from state-sanctioned heroism to personal witnessing. We identify a profound "humanistic turn", where idealized revolutionary icons are replaced by trauma-stricken individuals. A central finding is the dominance of the WAR IS A WILD BEAST mapping, which strips away ideology to reveal the "moral blindness" and instinctual violence of conflict. Furthermore, the use of "metaphysical experiences" - framing war as a ghost or parasite - serves as "narrative therapy" for survivors dealing with fragmented memories. The analysis shows that the "war" domain remains a foundational cognitive mind map in modern Vietnam, used to conceptualize everything from sports competition and political tension to commercial advertising. These shifts reflect a transition from rigid national narratives toward a nuanced, therapeutic reckoning with history. Ultimately, these metaphors allow a culture to "think through" the complexities of a past that remains a living part of the present.

Keywords: Vietnamese literature; conceptual metaphor; trauma; narrative therapy; post-1975 prose; collective memory

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1. Introduction

For any country that has gone through decades of conflict, the end of the shooting is seldom the end of the war. Vietnam in 1975, a political conclusion. For the writers that lived through it, the real struggle - the struggle to make sense of the carnage - began. Literature was the place where the unspeakable was finally spoken. For the last fifty years Vietnamese writers have been forsaking the rigid heroic language of the past, discovering a new vocabulary for pain. Metaphor is not a literary flourish for them, but a means of survival. This article examines how these metaphors have shifted from visions of national glory to the intimate, at times terrifying, discourse of trauma and "moral blindness" [1] since 1975.

The prose of the years immediately following the war in Vietnam was largely inspired by socialist realism, where the soldier was an unshakeable icon of revolutionary virtue. But with the country's liberalisation in the Doi Moi reforms of the late 1980s, the "heroic journey" was replaced by a much more complex, humanistic rendering of the veteran [2]. Authors such as

Chu Lai, Bao Ninh, began to write about a world in which the soldier was not a statue but rather a person haunted by “metaphysical experiences” and the weight of the dead [3]. This is a radical change in how the war is remembered; it is no longer just a victory to be celebrated, but a “sorrow” to be borne [2], [3].

A particularly striking pattern in this literary evolution is the conceptualisation of WAR AS A WILD BEAST. In works that explore the psychological toll of combat, war is often stripped of its political justification and depicted as a predatory, amoral force that devours the human spirit [1]. This metaphor conveys a sense of “moral blindness” in which the survival instinct transcends all ethical constraints [1], [4]. It is a far cry from the “sacred duty” of yesteryear; in this case, the conflict is a “ferocious beast” that permanently scars both the victor and the vanquished [1].

This sense of ruin extends beyond the human mind to the very earth itself. The “defoliation” of the landscape is often translated into the “defoliation of the mind” in Vietnamese literature [5]. The destruction of the forests by the chemical agents becomes a metaphor for the erasure of memory and identity. Scholars have noted that the “ecological ruin” acts as a bridge between the physical reality of the war and the “fragmented memory” of the survivors [6], [7]. For many characters in post-1975 fiction, the war is a “ghost” or a “parasite” that will not leave, engendering a sense of “war without end” where the past continually invades the present through flashbacks and psychic breaks [3], [7].

There are many individual masterpieces in this period, but we still lack a bird’s-eye view of how these metaphors work together throughout the entire body of Vietnamese literature. Most of the academic work has been on single famous novels or specific linguistic theories without connecting the dots [8], [9]. If we look at this fifty-year stretch through the lens of a systematic review, we can see a clear direction. The discourse of the state has been replaced by the discourse of the soul. We are moving toward a better understanding of how metaphors function as “narrative therapy” to assist a culture in reconstructing a history that was too fragmented to tell earlier [3]. This review follows that journey, from the roar of the battlefield to the quiet, persistent metaphors of reconciliation and healing.

2. Methodology

This systematic review adheres to a structured methodology for a rigorous and transparent analysis of the changing language of war in Vietnamese literature. The interest was in the studies that relate literary criticism and cognitive linguistics, especially the ones that apply Conceptual Metaphor Theory or Critical Metaphor Analysis to explain the experience after 1975 [8], [9].

Search Strategy

An extensive search of academic databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar and the digital repository of the Vietnam National Library was performed. The aim was to incorporate both Vietnamese domestic scholarship and international perspectives on Vietnamese war prose.

Table 1: *Boolean Search Strategy and Logic*

Database	Search Query	Interpretation / Justification
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Primary Databases	("Vietnamese literature" OR "Vietnamese fiction") AND ("war" OR "conflict") AND ("metaphor" OR "symbolism")	To capture the core intersection of literary works and linguistic devices.
Linguistic Repositories	("Conceptual Metaphor Theory" OR "Critical Metaphor Analysis") AND ("Vietnam War" OR "Resistance War")	To find studies that use specific theoretical frameworks to analyze war imagery
Thematic Searches	("trauma" OR "memory") AND "Vietnamese prose" AND "post-1975"	To find works discussing the psychological shift from heroic to humanistic metaphors

Selection Criteria

The aim of the selection process was to exclude general military histories or mere political critiques and to focus on the "mapping" of war onto other areas of human experience.

Table 2: *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Timeframe	Works published or analyzing literature from 1975 to the present.	Pre-1975 literature (unless used as a baseline for comparison).
Focus	Identification of specific conceptual metaphors (e.g., WAR IS A BEAST)	Purely descriptive accounts of military tactics or plot summaries.
Authorship	Literary works by Vietnamese authors (domestic or diaspora).	Works focusing exclusively on non-Vietnamese perspectives of the war.
Type of Text	Peer-reviewed articles, monographs, and doctoral theses.	Newspaper editorials or unverified blog posts.

Data Extraction & Synthesis

The relevant studies and extracted data were collected according to the "Source" and "Target" domains of the metaphors used. For example, in the structural metaphor WAR IS A FEROCIOUS BEAST, the "Source" (Wild Animal/Beast) is mapped onto the "Target" to highlight qualities such as predation, instinctual violence, and moral blindness [1], [4].

The findings were incorporated into three major thematic changes identified in the literature:

1. Transition from Ideological to Humanistic: Transition from the "heroic journey" to "metaphysical experiences" and "narrative therapy" [2], [3].
2. Psychological to Ecological. The metaphors of "defoliation" and "ecological ruin" as representing scarring of the landscape and the mind [5], [6].
3. Linear to Fragmented: Transition from "victory" narratives to "fragmented memory" and "flashbacks" of ongoing trauma [7].

Quality Assessment

Each study included was rated for depth of textual evidence and theoretical consistency. The research we privileged was that which could be supported by specific citations from primary texts (such as those by Bao Ninh, Chu Lai, or Nguyen Huy Thiep) that substantiated their metaphorical claims. The studies were assessed against:

- Methodological Rigour: Did the study use an established framework such as CMA or CMT as intended [9]?
- Evidence-Based Analysis: Are there clear linguistic mappings between the source and target domains [1]?
- Contextual Depth: Did the study consider the socio-political changes in Vietnam, especially the effect of the Doi Moi reforms on literary expression [2]?

Based on these criteria, we screened the research to make sure the review reflects the most reliable and deeply analysed trends in the evolution of Vietnamese war metaphors.

3. Results

PRISMA Selection Process

The selection process was designed to identify quality research that utilises cognitive and linguistic frameworks on Vietnamese war prose. The shift from an initial search that was relatively broad to the final 12 studies ensures that the review is focused on mapping war to complex human experiences.

The large number of withdrawals from the Identification stage (n=342) to the final Included stage (n=12) highlights the rigour of this review. Most excluded records (n=170 during screening) were general military histories or works that did not engage with the linguistic structures of the texts.

Most of the 33 studies excluded at the Eligibility stage were filtered out because they focused on thematic summaries rather than conceptual “mappings”. This leaves with 12 studies, focusing on which we foreground research that provides deep insight into how Vietnamese scholars conceptualise the war’s aftermath. This includes the analysis of the transition from revolutionary icons to “trauma-stricken” individuals [2] and the mapping of war as a “ferocious beast” or “ghost” to characterise “moral blindness” and the persistence of memory [1], [3], [4]. The selection is specialised so that the synthesis is based on formal frameworks such as the Critical Metaphor Analysis and Conceptual Metaphor Theory [8], [9].

The synthesised data shows a strong “humanistic turn” in the conceptualisation of conflict by Vietnamese researchers. One of the key findings in a number of studies is the WAR IS A WILD BEAST mapping [1], [4]. This metaphor moves away from political justification and instead depicts war as a predatory force that leads to “irreparable wounding” and “dehumanization” [1].

Moreover, the research points out that war is not simply a historical event in the Vietnamese mind but a recurring cognitive “source domain”. Researchers have demonstrated that war-related ideas are employed to direct modern life, from sports competition [10] to political discourse [11] and advertising [12]. This is illustrated in literature as “war without end” whereby the metaphor of “ghost” or “metaphysical experience” is used to externalise the “silenced truths” of survivors [3]. This collective work by Vietnamese scholars demonstrates that the metaphors of the past fifty years have shifted from the “hollow nationalist discourse” of victory to a sophisticated, therapeutic language of psychological witnessing [3], [13].

4. Discussion

The twelve core studies, systematically reviewed by Vietnamese scholars, reveal a profound transformation of the concept of war in Vietnamese literature and social discourse since 1975. This evolution is a shift from a collective, state-sanctioned ideology of “Resistance War” to an individualistic, humanistic, and often metaphysical exploration of conflict and its psychological aftermath. An analysis of the work of researchers such as Trần Thị Minh Thi, Hang Thu Pham and Nguyễn Thị Kim Ngân reveals a clear trajectory: the language of the state, once characterised by “sacred duty” and revolutionary heroism, has been overtaken by a sophisticated vocabulary of trauma, “moral blindness,” and narrative healing [1], [2], [3].

The Humanistic Turn and the Deconstruction of Heroic Icon

One common theme emerging from this review is the “humanistic turn” after the Doi Moi reforms of 1986. Prior to this, the dominant mode in Vietnamese literature was socialist realism, which employed metaphors to construct the soldier as a “perfect” revolutionary model. Yet, studies by Trần Thị Minh Thi reveal that after 1975, prose started to dismantle this typology and concentrated on the “trauma-stricken” and “repentant” individual [2]. This change permitted the authors to examine the inner life of the veteran and abandon idealised iconography in favour of a more tragic and complex representation of the human condition.

Cao Kim Lan’s work on Bao Ninh’s contributions further elucidates this psychological witnessing. As noted in the study, contemporary Vietnamese literature is concerned with the “futility of war” and the “irreparable wounding” that it causes to the soul [14]. Instead of seeing 1975 as an absolute end point, these authors employ metaphors of lasting grief to describe a “war without end,” where the psychological damage is as significant as the physical damage. Quan Manh Ha supports this, arguing that “traumatic memories” in post-war literature contest one-dimensional national narratives and open the door to a more transnational and nuanced remembrance of the conflict [13].

Animalization as a Route to Moral Clarity

One of the most powerful metaphorical mappings in this review is WAR IS A WILD BEAST or WAR IS A FEROCIOUS BEAST. Through a comparative analysis of literary works, Hang Thu Pham and Thu Hang Pham show that this structural metaphor is used to eliminate the political and ideological justifications of the war [1], [4]. Through the mapping of the “source” domain of predatory animals onto the “target” domain of war, authors like Chu Lai depict conflict as an amoral, instinctual force of “madness,” “screaming,” and “predation” [1].

One key element of this mapping is the idea of “moral blindness” [1]. This metaphor brings to mind the point at which the pressures of combat cross ethical lines and the soldier becomes but an instinctual creature, concerned only with survival. This is a far cry from the “purification” metaphors in previous resistance discourse identified by Nguyễn Thị Huyền Trang and Nguyễn Văn Hạnh [8]. While the state once used metaphors of “national cleansing” to justify the war effort, scholars now use Critical Metaphor Analysis to expose the raw, dehumanising violence that occurs when human agency is lost to the “ferocity” of the beast [1], [8].

Narrative Therapy and Spiritual Experiences

Nguyễn Thị Kim Ngân and Nguyễn Thị Thu Hằng's study brings an important idea of "metaphysical experiences" as a primary metaphorical framework for processing trauma [3]. In Bao Ninh's writings, visions of death, ghost encounters, and "wandering souls" are not only stylistic devices but also form of "narrative therapy" [3]. These metaphysical metaphors offer a linguistic bridge for externalising the "silenced truths" of those who lived the conflict.

The metaphor of the war as a "ghost" or "parasitic entity" living in the present is the way the Vietnamese writers express the "fragmented memories" symptomatic of PTSD. This metaphysical approach enables the veteran to reconstruct a sense of self from the "shards" of their wartime experience. Huynh Anh Tuan and Nguyen Thi Trang argue that a "integrated framework" of metaphor analysis is necessary to understand how such complex image schemas and domains work to help a culture process historical trauma that has been too painful to speak of in literal terms [9].

War as a Deeply Embedded Cognitive Schema in Contemporary Vietnam

Perhaps the most striking finding of this systematic review is how much the "war" domain is still the basis of the cognitive mind map of the modern Vietnamese society, far beyond the pages of literature. Research by Phuong Nguyen and Hong Bich Nguyen demonstrates that the "Products are Warriors" metaphor remains a mainstay in Vietnamese advertising, confirming the warrior archetype as a potent means of framing value and competition in a market economy [12].

Similarly, the research of Nguyen Thi Bích Hanh and Hồng Nhung Đào shows how the war metaphors are used to form the way of thinking of the Vietnamese people about sports and politics [10], [11]. Football news, tactics, and matches are imagined as "battle" and "combat." Political headlines translate social tensions to "battlefield weaponry" [10], [11]. These deep-seated cognitive mappings even influence gender perceptions. Giang Pham's analysis of "Women are Plants" metaphors in 20th-century literature demonstrates how cultural thinking about fragility and resilience is often based on the same nature-based metaphors used during the war era [15].

5. Conclusion

The twelve studies synthesised in this review, all authored by Vietnamese scholars, indicate that the metaphorical language of war has transformed from a tool of state mobilisation into a sophisticated instrument of psychological healing and social navigation. From the "ferocious beast" that strips morality to the "metaphysical ghost" that enables narrative therapy, these metaphors allow the Vietnamese to "think through" the complexities of their history. As the country advances, the "war" domain remains the basic vocabulary for comprehending competition, identity, and the enduring impact of history. Further application of the multi-level frameworks presented by scholars such as Huynh Anh Tuan in future research is necessary to examine how these cognitive structures impact Vietnam's continued efforts for national reconciliation and peace.

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Author Contributions

Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing Original Draft, Writing Review & Editing, Supervision.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement

Approval was not required as this study involved the analysis of publicly available documents and published materials. No human participants were recruited, and no personal or confidential information was collected.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or collected in this study. All data analysed were obtained from publicly available published literature, and the corresponding sources are provided in the reference list

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

The author used ChatGPT and Gemini solely to assist in identifying relevant search terms, refining literature search strategies. The AI tools were not used to generate research findings, analyse data, interpret results, or draw conclusion.

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