

## Conceptual Metaphor and Eco-temporality in Bảo-Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*

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### Abstract

The focus on human suffering and trauma that characterises war literature has led to a characterisation of the genre as anthropocentric, often relegating nature to a mere backdrop or collateral damage. The overarching goal of this paper is to unearth an ecocentric dimension within one war novel, Bảo-Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*, aligning with Lawrence Buell's criteria for an eco-conscious work that the text elucidates ecological crises and co-implicates human history in natural history. To this end, the paper employs the theory of conceptual metaphor to unveil the dynamic role of natural metaphor in constructing a reimagined reality, where anthropocentric elements are infused with the unique attributes of the natural world. While previous research has explored the interconnections between humans and nature based on the content of *The Sorrow of War*, this paper utilises both a figurative and narratological approach to dissect the form of the text. This paper concludes that the very structure of the text itself holds an ecological significance, in that the parallel undercurrents of geologic versus human time serve to establish nature as an enduring standard against which human deviation is measured. Ultimately, this paper reimagines the role of nature within a foundational modern Vietnamese novel and makes the case for greater attention to form in ecocritical research.

## Introduction

“He saw his life as a river with himself standing unsteadily at the peak of a tall hill, silently watching his life ebb from him, saying farewell to himself.”<sup>1</sup>

In this quote, rivers do not function as purely geographical entities, but serve a metaphorical function that reveals a spiritual essence of the speaker. The interplay of the natural and personal signifies an intrinsic intertwining between nature and the character’s state of mind, which forms a recurrent theme in Bảo-Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War*, in which the novel’s protagonist Kien recounts the traumatic memories of the Vietnam War while recovering soldiers’ corpses.

*The Sorrow of War* is a renowned war novel by Vietnamese author Bảo-Ninh. It has received 18 translations, seven awards, and nominations in six countries, including a nomination for the Asian Literature Award in 2018. Originally published in 1987, a year after Vietnam embraced the Doi Moi (Renovation) movement during which censorship was loosened, Bảo-Ninh’s work proved pivotal for the development of the modern Vietnamese novel, deviating from the typical war novel approach. While many war novelists before this period were compelled to speak from a more uniform, almost propagandistic, social perspective, constructing characters to embody traits specific to a historical period or context, *The Sorrow of War* was able to speak the bare truth of war, unfolding solely through Kien’s consciousness and his unique perception of time. Whereas war novels aimed to paint *societal* portraits, *The Sorrow of War* offered a more intimate exploration of *human* characters. Consequently, the novel’s inventive content and structure have given it great cultural and literary significance. Despite such significance, an under-examined, essential part of the text remains the role of nature in the text as it relates to the experimental temporality of the work.

Insofar as the text itself seeks to explore the use of natural metaphors to understand human experience, the work is particularly suited to an ecocritical analysis, to guide the exploration of the interplay between nature and human experience. Ecocriticism is the investigation into “the global ecological crisis through the intersection of literature,

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<sup>1</sup> Bảo-Ninh, *Nỗi Buồn Chiến Tranh*, Hà Nội, Nhà Xuất bản Trẻ, 2013, p. 147. All English translations are my own. In instances where some nuance is potentially lost through Vietnamese-English translation, this paper occasionally offers the original Vietnamese text accompanied by a basic English translation.

culture, and the physical environment.”<sup>2</sup> Building from this ecocritical framework, this paper defines “eco-temporality” as a distinct temporal structure shaped by ecological time, as opposed to simply the rhythms of human life. Being long-rooted in agricultural traditions, Vietnamese literature often constructs nature as a character with a voice in itself – with contemporary works like *Xà Nu Forest* (Nguyễn-Ngọc),<sup>3</sup> *The Dream of the Bird Garden Guardian* (Anh-Đức),<sup>4</sup> and *Pampas Grass* (Nguyễn Minh Châu)<sup>5</sup> drawing on this tradition to explore ecological crises. However, this falls short of true eco-consciousness, for nature in these texts is being instrumentalised for human understanding. In this light, this paper suggests that *The Sorrow of War* is an inventive experiment in ecological form, whereby the natural world takes the role of an “author” who actively governs the structure of the narrative, thus constructing, not simply adding to, our understanding of the text.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, this paper builds off previous ecocritical analyses of *The Sorrow of War*, such as that provided by Pranantika Oktaviani.<sup>7</sup> This previous analysis centred on the concepts of ecophobia and ecocide, focusing on the text’s content and historical context – however, this content-based approach does not guarantee that the exploration of “the connection between humans and the physical environment,”<sup>8</sup> as implied by the analysis, is solely elucidated by the text’s components themselves, but can be derived by readers’ subjective interpretations. Consequently, this paper employs a more structured approach, specifically narratology, to dissect

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<sup>2</sup> Gladwin, D, ‘Ecocriticism’, *Oxford Bibliographies*, Oxford University Press, 2017, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0014.xml#backToTop>, accessed 18 October 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Nguyễn-Ngọc, *Rừng Xà Nu* (“Xanu Forest”), in Tran, N. H. and Dang, T. T. H., “Listening to Nature, Rethinking the Past: A Reading of the Representation of Forests and Rivers,” *South East Asian Ecocriticism: Theories, Practices, Prospects*, ed. John Charles Ryan, Lexington Book, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Anh-Đức, *Giấc Mơ Ông Lão Vườn Chim* (“The Dream of the Bird Garden Guardian”), Tran, N. H. and Dang, T. T. H., “Listening to Nature, Rethinking the Past: A Reading of the Representation of Forests and Rivers,” *South East Asian Ecocriticism: Theories, Practices, Prospects*, ed. John Charles Ryan, Lexington Book, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Nguyễn, M. C., *Cỏ Lau* (“Pampas Grass”) in Tran, N. H. and Dang, T. T. H., “Listening to Nature, Rethinking the Past: A Reading of the Representation of Forests and Rivers,” *South East Asian Ecocriticism: Theories, Practices, Prospects*, ed. John Charles Ryan, Lexington Book, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Tran, N. H. and Dang, T. T. H., “Listening to Nature, Rethinking the Past: A Reading of the Representation of Forests and Rivers,” *South East Asian Ecocriticism: Theories, Practices, Prospects*, ed. John Charles Ryan, Lexington Book, 2017

<sup>7</sup> Oktaviani, P., “Ecocritical Reading of Postwar Narrative: Ecocide, Trauma, and Nostalgia in Bao Ninh’s Vietnam War Novel “The Sorrow of War.”” *OKARA: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra*, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

how the form of *The Sorrow of War* reimagines the relationship between humanity and nature.

As a broader roadmap, this paper explores *The Sorrow of War* through Lawrence Buell's assertion that a truly eco-conscious work is one in which "the nonhuman environment is not being a mere framing device but as a presence that suggests how human history is implicated in natural history."<sup>9</sup> In evaluating the extent to which *The Sorrow of War* meets Buell's criteria for an eco-conscious work, this paper proceeds in two sections. The first is a methodological approach guided by theories of metaphor from Zoltan Kövecses, as well as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. The purpose is to examine the role of rivers in the text – particularly the interplay of rivers as a real, environmental entity with rivers as a metaphor for human experience as represented in literature, encapsulated in the notion of stream of consciousness. The second section builds on this analysis, considering whether Bảo-Ninh's inventive blurring of form and content in rivers can be considered ecocentric by Buell's standards, in particular examining the extent to which the temporality of the work is itself constructed through a natural lexicon, an examination that is grounded in Gerald Genette's narratological framework. What emerges is a fresh perspective on the ecological contributions of the story's river elements, encompassing both form and content, as opposed to solely serving human comprehension.

### **The Interplay between Rivers and Stream of Consciousness**

#### *The Significance of Rivers in Vietnamese Literature and The Sorrow of War*

To place rivers in *The Sorrow of War* within its cultural and linguistic context, the Vietnamese oral tradition is permeated with a deep, almost primal, connection with rivers – as compiled by Nguyễn Xuân Kính, 746 water-related proverbs range from natural beauty to societal importance.<sup>10</sup> This deep cultural attachment to rivers also seeps into the nation's literary works: in Cao's and Vũ's extensive research into the symbol "River" in literature of Vietnamese ethnic minorities, the Dâng River in *Đàn Trời* (Cao Duy Sơn),<sup>11</sup> in the mind of Vương and

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<sup>9</sup> Buell, L., *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Nguyễn, X. K., *Thi Pháp Ca Dao*, Đại Học Quốc Gia Hà Nội, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Cao, D. S., *Đàn Trời*, NXB Hội Nhà Văn, 2006, in Cao, H.T.T., and Vũ, D.T.T, 'Giải Mã Biểu Tượng "Sông" Trong Văn Xuôi Dân Tộc Thiểu Số Miền Núi Phía Bắc,' Giáo Dục & Xã Hội, 2021.

<https://sti.vista.gov.vn/tw/Lists/TaiLieuKHCN/Attachments/323418/CVv328S1232021030.pdf>, p. 31.

Diệu, is not a literal body of water, but rather a figurative “stream of memories” of their unfinished love.<sup>12</sup> In *Bến Nước Lành* (Bùi Minh Chức),<sup>13</sup> the co-authors claim that “rivers symbolise a conducive water harbour” that symbolises Ún Rố’s fragmented memories of love.<sup>14</sup> Despite Cao’s and Vũ’s broad range of river analysis in various Vietnamese works, their analysis primarily stops at a general assertion of the importance of such geological bodies for Vietnamese literature, grounded by a superficial linkage between rivers and humans. Though indebted to their work, this essay seeks to move beyond a general analysis of rivers in Vietnamese culture to a consideration of how *The Sorrow of War*, as the defining modern Vietnamese novel, interacts with nature as both symbol and reality. Most specifically, this analysis seeks to understand how Bảo-Ninh constructs the book such that an ecological persona is imbued through his inventive use of form and diction.

This diction may be described as infused with nature and is recognisable on each page of the text. For example, “Four dimensions are fogged with the hue of rainy gloom, the shade of forested monotony and suffering.”<sup>15</sup> Here, human sentiment is subtly infused with nature’s distinctive lexicon. The Vietnamese spoken language uses nature as the basis for colour nomenclature – “xanh lá” (leaf) signifies green, “xanh da trời” (sky) or “xanh nước biển” (ocean) denotes blue. However, “màu mưa trĩu long” (the hue of rainy gloom) stands out as an author’s unique invention. Unlike the conspicuously uniform hues of leaves, sky, or ocean, rain does not immediately conceive a colour in mind, because raindrops are inherently transparent, mirroring the shades of their surroundings. The gloom and monotony of humans, therefore, interpellate into nature a distinct personality, which in turn permeates our language of conceiving the world.

However, this analysis alone is unable to show the mechanism of metaphors, which imbues the whole text with an ecological essence. Therefore, one must examine the function of metaphor more closely in

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<sup>12</sup> Cao, H.T.T., and Vũ, D.T.T, ‘Giải Mã Biểu Tượng “Sông” Trong Văn Xuôi Dân Tộc Thiểu Số Miền Núi Phía Bắc,’ Giáo Dục & Xã Hội, 2021. <https://sti.vista.gov.vn/tw/Lists/TaiLieuKHCN/Attachments/323418/CVv328S1232021030.pdf>, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> Bùi, M. C., *Bến Nước Lành*, in Cao, H.T.T., and Vũ, D.T.T, ‘Giải Mã Biểu Tượng “Sông” Trong Văn Xuôi Dân Tộc Thiểu Số Miền Núi Phía Bắc,’ Giáo Dục & Xã Hội, 2021. <https://sti.vista.gov.vn/tw/Lists/TaiLieuKHCN/Attachments/323418/CVv328S1232021030.pdf>, p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> Bảo-Ninh, *Nỗi Buồn Chiến Tranh*, Hà Nội, Nhà Xuất bản Trẻ, p. 21.

the text to understand the significance of the natural world. Through the theory of conceptual metaphor, this paper focuses primarily on *rivers*, given their pervasive recurrence within the text's literal and figurative complex: the text opens with a scene at "the banks of the Ya Cong Poco river,"<sup>16</sup> and the river or stream – whether depicted literally (85 times) or metaphorically (8 times) – emerges as a crucial thread connecting nature and humanity. Tracing such linkages, which primarily constitutes the formation of Kien's stream of consciousness, unveils the broader figurative scheme of the narrative.

Stream of consciousness is a narrative device that attempts to give the written equivalent of the character's thought processes, which refocuses readers' attention on the protagonist's perception of time. The reality of the story emerges in the manipulation of temporality – elongating or compressing events according to the protagonist's subjective experience. In such behaviour of temporality not just a literary but also a psychological truth is seen – as Barry Dainton provides, "the temporal manifests in the most basic forms of our consciousness" while consciousness seems to exist *in* time.<sup>17</sup> The presence of stream of consciousness in Vietnamese literature has been critically fruitful – Anh Thái, for instance, highlights the role of this form in his commentary on the novel *A Board for Dagger* by Mặc Can.<sup>18</sup> This can be complemented by other analyses that acknowledge *The Sorrow of War* as a stream-of-consciousness piece, as presented by Tiến Nguyễn<sup>19</sup> and Tao Đàn.<sup>20</sup>

If it has been established that rivers are a recurring motif in *The Sorrow of War* and that the text is written in a stream-of-consciousness form, understanding their relationship requires a wider conceptual

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Dainton, B, 'Time and Temporal Experience,' [https://www.academia.edu/35704419/Time\\_and\\_Temporal\\_Experience](https://www.academia.edu/35704419/Time_and_Temporal_Experience), accessed on 20 December 2023, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Thái, P. V. A, 'Thời Gian Trần Thuật Trong Tiểu Thuyết Việt Nam Đương Đại,' *Tạp chí Khoa Học, Đại Học Huế*, no. 54, 2009, p. 9 Nguyễn, T. K. T, 'Kỹ thuật "Dòng ý thức" trong xây dựng nhân vật của tiểu thuyết Việt Nam thời kỳ đổi mới', *Tạp chí Khoa học Việt Nam Trực tuyến*, <https://vjol.info.vn/index.php/khkhvn/article/download/32463/27584/>, accessed on 24 October 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Nguyễn, T. K. T, 'Kỹ thuật "Dòng ý thức" trong xây dựng nhân vật của tiểu thuyết Việt Nam thời kỳ đổi mới', *Tạp chí Khoa học Việt Nam Trực tuyến*, <https://vjol.info.vn/index.php/khkhvn/article/download/32463/27584/>, accessed on 24 October 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Tao Đàn, "Thủ pháp 'dòng ý thức' với ám ảnh về sự thật trong 'Nỗi buồn chiến tranh,'" *Tạp Chí Tao Đàn*, <https://taodan.com.vn/thu-phap-dong-y-thuc-voi-am-anh-ve-su-that-trong-noi-buon-chien-tranh.html>, accessed on 24 October 2023.

grounding. To this end, this analysis draws upon the notion of conceptual metaphor, developed by Zoltan Kövecses' *Metaphor*, and Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*. It is first vital to acknowledge that the concept of stream of consciousness is itself a metaphor – more precisely, a dead metaphor. Kövecses defines dead metaphors as those “that may have been alive and vigorous at some point but have become so conventional” with constant use that by now they have lost their vigour and ceased to be metaphors.<sup>21</sup> William Empson, in turn, has argued that “all languages are composed of dead metaphors as the soil of corpses,”<sup>22</sup> and in the case of stream of consciousness, Vietnamese is no exception: “dòng” (flow) often comes before “sông” (river) to form a phrase that roughly translates to “a flow of river”. Derived from this original meaning, “dòng” often goes hand-in-hand with “thời gian” (time) or “ý thức” (consciousness), “ký ức” (memory). By viewing stream of consciousness as a dead metaphor, the critic is no longer motivated to dissect the apparent linkage and pinpoint exactly why “stream” and “consciousness” are interconnected. Yet it is the achievement of *The Sorrow of War* that resurrects this dead metaphor by blending form and content to create a broader conceptual metaphor.

It is necessary to distinguish two types of metaphors: conceptual and linguistic. A *conceptual domain* is any coherent organisation of experience. A *conceptual metaphor* consists of two conceptual domains, in which the target domain is understood in terms of the source domain. In simple terms, CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN A (TARGET DOMAIN) IS CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN B (SOURCE DOMAIN). This can be understood through *conceptual mappings*, which are a set of systematic correspondences between A and B, in that constituent elements of B correspond to constituent elements of A.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, linguistic metaphors are expressions that come from the terminology of the more concrete conceptual domain B.

“Your claims are undefensible  
He attacked every weak point in my argument  
I've never won an argument with him”<sup>24</sup>

In this context, all the individual examples above regarding argument and the domain of war are linguistic, while the corresponding conceptual

<sup>21</sup> Kövecses, Z., *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Empson, W., *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, London, 1949, p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Kövecses, Z., *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M., *Metaphors We Live By*, The University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 4.

metaphors in the mappings together manifest into a conceptual metaphor, ARGUMENT IS WAR.

As Lakoff and Johnson show, conceptual metaphor results from an “inevitable process of human thought and reasoning,”<sup>25</sup> illustrated through the example ARGUMENT IS WAR. In such examples, the things one does in an argument are constructed through the concept of war. And it is rather unorthodox to view arguments through concepts other than war. For instance, viewing debaters of an argument as performers on stage takes away the battle-like nuance of an argument, which makes ‘arguing’ doesn’t seem like arguing at all. Therefore, despite being two different things, arguments are only partially structured in terms of war. In summary, not only is the concept metaphorically structured, but the activity of which, and thus the language used to describe which, is metaphorically structured.<sup>26</sup>

To apply this theoretical frame to *The Sorrow of War*, using the Vietnamese phrasing, it is possible to examine the flow/stream of time, whereby *time* is partially structured by *the flow*. The aspects of time, such as its forward and relentless motion, are constructed through the one-directional perpetual movement of a flow. If one attempts to figure *time* as a *pond*, although both possess a liquid texture, one would lose immediately the essence of *time*, for its defining forward motion would be omitted. Similarly, to the example of time being figured as a flow, stream of consciousness is fitting, for consciousness and the present moment both extend forward in time,<sup>27</sup> which can be structured by a stream. Yet the conceptual metaphor, by constructing consciousness through the motif of the river, opens up dimensions other than time – particularly, the dimension of space. These dimensions are visible in some common phrases attached to consciousness:

- (1) He drifted in and out of consciousness.
- (2) I banged my head and lost consciousness.

In both cases, by omitting the element of time, consciousness is no longer viewed as a continuous stream but, rather, a discrete state. In (1), amidst the movement “in and out” of the subject, “consciousness” stays the same, giving an impression of being stationary and fixed. In (2),

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<sup>25</sup> Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M., *Metaphors We Live By*. In Kövecses, Z., *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Kent, L., and M. Wittmann, ‘Time Consciousness: The Missing Link in Theories of Consciousness,’ *Neuroscience of Consciousness*, no. 2, 2021. doi:10.1093/nc/niab011.



the action “lose” suggests to us to view “consciousness” as a property, which can either be lost or gained. This opens a different perspective from viewing consciousness as a “stream”, in which the movement itself is continuous and the general subject ‘stream’ itself cannot be viewed as a property that can appear or disappear.

Overall, by delving into the dead metaphor of a stream of consciousness as a conceptual metaphor at its core, one can dissect the conceptual mappings, concerning the other schemas of the river: space, time, and motion. By viewing consciousness as an entity in itself, a different perspective opens up on how stream of consciousness can be conceptualised. It is from this point that the use of rivers in *The Sorrow of War* can be most fully understood – appreciating how Bảo-Ninh plays on two key dimensions: the capacity of rivers to move one forward, which may be termed the horizontal scheme; and one’s capacity to sink in a river, which may be termed the vertical scheme.

#### *Horizontal Dimensions of River as Conceptual Metaphor*

To fully comprehend the figurative relations in *The Sorrow of War*’s use of the horizontal scheme of the river motif, it becomes necessary to analyse three essential components: *motion*, *direction*, and *temporality*. Grounding the use of motion in the conceptual metaphor is the perception that the river embodies an eternal state of flux and transformation for its undefined boundaries.<sup>28</sup> Strengthened from a linguistic perspective as previously discussed, the term “trôi” (to flow or drift) inherently conveys the idea of lacking distinct navigation or a clear, predetermined course, but rather letting nature dictate your path. *The Sorrow of War* plays on these qualities to construct Kien’s characterisation and subjectivity. For example, when Kien reflects on his life, he states, “[i]t turns out that my life is actually no different than a boat going upstream on a river, constantly being pushed back into the past.”<sup>29</sup> By using the boat as a metaphor within a stream, two parallel images of a continuous backward motion emerge: the deviation from nature as a default course and the resistance against nature as an environment. By employing the dual-layered anomalous motion, Ninh evokes a profound sense of Kien’s and humanity’s vulnerability when pitted against the broader natural forces and humans. This brings the significance of nature to the forefront, a remarkable shift within the context of a war novel where humans are typically portrayed as overconfident figures.

<sup>28</sup> Chevalier, J., *Dictionary of Symbols*. In Cao, H.T.T., and Vũ, D.T.T, ‘Giải Mã Biểu Tượng “Sông” Trong Văn Xuôi Dân Tộc Thiểu Số Miền Núi Phía Bắc,’ Giáo Dục & Xã Hội, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Bảo-Ninh, *Nỗi Buồn Chiến Tranh*, Hà Nội, Nhà Xuất bản Trẻ, p. 59.

Beyond a linguistic perspective and a structural analysis, the quote can be analysed by mapping the domains of the river as a conceptual metaphor. This necessitates similarities within the constituents of the target domain (“my life”) and source domain (“a boat going upstream”). Three constituents are identified:

- (1) the very backward motion (“going upstream” – “pushed back”)
- (2) the subject (“my life” – a boat)
- (3) the background (river – the past)

Laying out the conceptual mapping, linkages are observable across all aspects of the conceptual metaphor – subject, background, and motion. What emerges is a focus on the horizontal movement of rivers amidst and against Kien’s movement. Furthermore, and more generally, the corresponding metaphorical expressions of the constituents in each domain construct a “coherent organisation of experience,”<sup>30</sup> which naturally brings readers into the language of nature. This, in itself, elucidates an eco-conscious element of the text evident in the very conceptual terrain of its language.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that one domain can *only* be partially constructed by another, which leaves open spaces for different qualities to be infused into one another. In (1), by employing the imagery “going upstream”, the orientation embeds a precarious nuance of falling, the natural behaviour of any object subject to gravity. This accentuates Kien’s susceptibility to be led astray from his course. Through metaphor, the implied two-dimensional movements (forward-backward, upward-downward) expands nature’s presence to envelop the reader. In (2), by associating a Life with a boat, the grandeur of a Life is resized into a small object (anthropocentric), amidst the wider river (ecocentric). Therefore, by conjuring a conceptual metaphor, readers can observe the proportion of items within a bigger picture: humans are embedded within the wider nature. In (3), there are no linking words between “river” and “past”. Still, the parallel makes us subconsciously subsume “river” into the “past” unifying two entities together and forming a coherent system of metaphor that Kien lives by.

Alongside motion, directionality is also a key dimension of this metaphor. Drawing on the same quote, the passive voice in “Being Pushed” underscores Kien’s inability to control the grip of memories or the natural stream of consciousness. Furthermore, the elliptical structure of the speech conceals the source of this turmoil, narrowing our focus to

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<sup>30</sup> Kövecses, Z., *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 4.

only Kien's fragility. However, it is deliberate of Ninh to employ a conceptual metaphor, for it motivates readers to establish a hypothetical link from the anomalous behaviour described – how can a boat travel against the current, which is at odds with nature? The answer, perhaps, is due to the inner propelling of the boat, or Kien's internal desire to resist the current. Kien could lack the power to dictate his direction in life but was volitional in pursuing that course of his fate – an idea the text later makes explicit in describing how Kien “seemed to have grasped his mandate of heaven: to live backward, to trace that path to his old love, to re-battle the battle.”<sup>31</sup> It is precisely the illogical gap in the conceptual metaphor of river life that compels the reader to make this connection, thus involving the reader in the active construction of Kien and aligning the reader with the overarching role of nature in the work.

The final element of the horizontal dimension of the river's conceptual metaphor is temporality. The dual-layered description of pulling backward reinforces the predisposition to reverse time, contrasting with the real-time present in which readers are situated. Going against its law of nature, the forward direction of temporality, attributes a sense of oddity in Kien's behaviour, effectively estranging Kien from us, those living in the present. This ultimately highlights Kien's misplaced position in the peace era. At this point, the use of natural metaphors proved ecocentric for its active construction in our understanding and its superior position to humans via indicators of space, orientation, and position. In the bigger picture, it is worth noticing the dynamics amongst the three schemas: *temporality* is constructed by the other two. Therefore, temporality emerges as a fundamental element in conceptualising the interplay between nature and human interaction. This sets the stage for a more in-depth exploration in the Eco-temporality section.

#### *Vertical Dimensions of Rivers as Conceptual Metaphor*

In framing the stream-of-consciousness metaphor, the novel not only integrates the horizontal dimension but also the vertical scheme. The following analysis therefore seeks to demonstrate how Bảo-Ninh unveils the contested identities of the afflicted by also constructing them along an internal, vertical hierarchy – on the surface of which there is the political and artificial, submerged to the depths one finds natural, human desire.

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<sup>31</sup> Bảo-Ninh, *Nỗi Buồn Chiến Tranh*, Hà Nội, Nhà Xuất bản Trẻ, p. 102.

In Kien’s introspection, he envisions “every event, memory, face, each a drop of tear blended into a nameless ageless river of his own.”<sup>32</sup> The preposition “into”, suggests a sense of vertical depth, subsuming humans into a wider nature. Furthermore, the list of nouns “event”, “memory”, and “face” are respectively abstract, intangible, and solid – none of which matches the liquified texture of a river. Nevertheless, such nouns are positioned in accordance, or towards, the metaphor of rivers, implying that nature is the standard point that anthropocentric elements ought to follow. To situate this analysis in the wider context of the book, the prepositions “into” and “of” signify a sense of belonging to the crowd. Despite the clashing experiences of individuals in the ‘river’, they share a common denominator: *being a part of the river*. This singular uniformity coerces every individual into a single ideology, thereby suppressing individual identities. If one tries to maintain their individuality, they are fated to tragedy, like Can who died during his desertion journey for his desire to return home.<sup>33</sup> Precisely because authentic expression is impossible, evident in the Vietnamese censorship of novels that speak the ugly truth of war, the quest to rediscover one’s identity is inherently arduous. For Kien, only “by smoking *rosa canina*, [he can] immerse himself in a world of mythical and wonderful dreams which in ordinary moments his soul could never penetrate.”<sup>34</sup> Here again, the vertical lexicon recurs in “immerse” and “penetrate”. The *rosa canina* is smoked by soldiers, giving a window into their dreams through which their human desires are discovered, and can only be accessed by navigating under the external cover of an emotionless, stoic soldier. It is worth acknowledging that the term “immerse” carries a pervasive literary as well as aquatic resonance. Whenever one speaks of readers being “immersed in the text”, such “immersion” is itself a dead metaphor – evoking unconsciously a vertical descent into water.

To lay out the parallel significance of the term and understand the “depths” of soldiers’ human desires that constitute their identity, readers are compelled to “immerse” in the text. But the very act of submerging in the river, as in the first quotation, threatens to dilute Kien’s individuality when subsumed in the current of the crowd. This inherent paradox, whereby immersion in text and river both reveals and destroys identity, is representative of Kien’s tragedy – as described in the horizontal scheme, Kien is constantly torn in opposing directions or choices, both of which abrades him. Overall, the lens of conceptual metaphor developed into two pathways to approach the analysis of rivers. In the horizontal scheme, the active role of natural metaphors

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 147-148.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 30-31.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

reimagined an anthropocentric experience to be infused with an ecological essence. In the vertical scheme, the implication of the text's characters in a natural lexicon fleshes out the text's treatment identity. It is worth noticing that the element that shapes such pathways is *temporality*: the horizontal scheme is done with the element of time, while the vertical scheme detaches the stream of consciousness from time. As the next section explores in-depth, temporality emerges as a grounding element shaping the text and our analysis.

### Eco-temporality

This section analyses a key component that grounds the construction of the ecological persona discussed earlier. This focus leads to the conclusion that this usage of the natural is not an aberration from the text's human-centred focus or mere instruments for comprehension, but rather an ecologically sound contribution in itself. Specifically, this analysis draws upon the understanding of stream of consciousness through metaphor theories developed in the first section of this paper and relates the following narratological analysis that grounds eco-temporality to the use of rivers. As narratologist Mieke Bal describes, "time is a given" for narrative works that, whatever their configurations, are linked by the fact that "these arts unfold in time."<sup>35</sup> Despite this foundational quality, Bal recognises that "time" is not experienced in art or life homogeneously, distinguishing between "day-to-day time" of minutes and hours and "historical time" of eras and periods.<sup>36</sup> The temporal structure of *The Sorrow of War* invites us to introduce a further category to Bal's possibly anthropocentric catalogue: that of geologic time.

"The first dry season approaches the rear of the Northern Wing of the B3 front, fluid but belated. September and October, then past November, yet down the Ya Cong Poco stream of the rainy season is still an immeasurable green brimming within the banks."<sup>37</sup>

Here, two parallel timelines are introduced: human-made calendars (September, October, November) and the natural seasons (dry and rainy). The passage's syntax leads geologic time to override the human, surrounding the latter and creating a sense of human time being embedded in the broader natural time. This creates a pacing contrast

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<sup>35</sup> Bal, M., *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, University of Toronto Press, 4th ed., 2017, p. 77.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Bảo-Ninh, *Nỗi Buồn Chiến Tranh*, Hà Nội, Nhà Xuất bản Trẻ, p. 1.

where calendar time seems fleeting as if negligible, while geologic time unfolds at its own pace and volition, arousing human anticipation for its presence. The season comes in “fluid but belated”, indicating indifference to calendar months and adherence to its rhythm. The diction “immeasurable green” that persists across the months suggests a sense of timelessness, nesting our human timeframe in the grander scheme of the natural tapestry, ultimately highlighting our subservience to nature.

To understand how *Bảo-Ninh* establishes the interplay of geologic and human time or the structure forged through this dynamic, it is necessary to supplement the previous reference to Mieke Bal with a further narratologist, Gerard Genette. In particular, Genette’s analysis of narrative sequence and order is particularly relevant to the complex narrative of the book. Genette draws on the German theoretician’s distinction “between Erzählte Zeit (Story time) and Erzählzeit (narrative time).”<sup>38</sup> Whereas narrative time is the presented order of events that the reader experiences, story time is the inferred sequence of events that the reader must work back to from the narrator’s words. Where there is a divergence between the presentation of events and their logical, sequential order, there is “anachrony” – in Genette’s terms a “discordance between two temporal orders of story and narrative.”<sup>39</sup>

Any reader of *The Sorrow of War* will be aware of the text’s persistent anachronies. Oanh’s survey of the text tallies 141 words indicating a movement to past time, of which “hồi ấy” (that time) constitutes the majority.<sup>40</sup> In its broadest definition, the pronoun “ấy” refers to something that “has been mentioned, known, but is not next to the speaker.”<sup>41</sup> Combined with “hồi” (time) or “đêm” (night), “ấy” becomes temporally deictic, suggesting a redirection of the narration to a past event. This frequent use of demonstrative pronouns facilitates the text’s anachronies: fragmenting the narrative to mirror the blurring of the present and past in Kien’s conception of time. To take one illustrative section, even within Kien’s stream of consciousness, it is possible to delineate four *redirections* of the temporality:

<sup>38</sup> Genette, G., trans. J.E. Lewin, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, 1980, <https://www.15orient.com/files/genette-on-narrative-discourse.pdf>, p. 33.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>40</sup> Le, L. O., “Thời Gian Tự Sự Trong Nỗi Buồn Chiến Tranh (Bảo-Ninh),” Lê Lưu Oanh’s Blog, 15 May 2020, <https://leluuoanh.wordpress.com/2019/02/23/thoi-gian-tu-su-trong-noi-buon-chien-tranh-Bảo-Ninh/>.

<sup>41</sup> Wiktionary Tiếng Việt, 2023, <https://vi.wiktionary.org/wiki/%E1%BA%A5y>.

“[A] But [B] it was truly happy, those days during most of the rainy season when they didn’t have to fight, the entire platoon of thirteen was safe. [C] Even Think would be living here for more than a month [D] before being killed. [E] Can hadn’t deserted. And Vinh, Think, Cu, Oanh, Tac were all still alive. [F] Yet now, besides a worn curled deck of cards, stained with the fingerprints of the dead, Kien no longer has any other mementos of his platoon.

- [G] Nine, Ten, Jack!  
- Queen - King - Ace!

[H] Occasionally he still dreamt of them, those cards.”<sup>42</sup>

To fully understand the technique of anachronies, it is helpful to draw on Dao Duy Hiep’s adaptation of Gerard Genette’s narratological framework into Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*.<sup>43</sup> In Hiep’s work, he dissects an excerpt into various segments and reconstructs them within their chronological timeline while examining the interplay of their temporal elements. Applying such an analysis with this section of *The Sorrow of War*, [A] signifies the first transition in temporality, whereby the speaker from the present is directed to the past. Both [B] and [C] are in the past, but the latter, similarly to [A] is influenced by [A], with the speaker’s perspective shifting to a past viewpoint, anticipating the future deaths of Think, Can, and Vinh as if narrating from the standpoint of a time traveller. [D] is a prolepsis into the nearer future before [A]. [F] represents the present but not as a discrete, but rather ongoing, moment. [F] is the present time which depends on the knowledge about the past at [B], thus infusing a nuanced tone into the present. [G] is an extracted moment from the ongoing happy days in [B], constructed by dialogue and exclamation marks which recreates the real-time atmosphere, effectively present-izing the past. [H] closes the cycle of consciousness by resurfacing to the present again.

This full sequence can be illustrated below. The numbers represent the chronological order in the story time, and the arrows demonstrate one’s dependence, or influence, on the other.

**A3 - B1 - C1 - D2 - E1 - F3 - G1 - H3**

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<sup>42</sup> Bảo-Ninh, *Nỗi Buồn Chiến Tranh*, Hà Nội, Nhà Xuất bản Trẻ, p. 16.

<sup>43</sup> Đào, D. H., “Thời gian trong “Đi tìm thời gian đã mất” của Marcel Proust,” *Trường Đại học Khoa học xã hội và Nhân văn*, Hà Nội, 2003, pp. 90-92.

From this sequence, one can derive several critical observations. The constant redirection, together with varying standpoints that construct a novel temporality, replicates Kien's restlessness in shifting between the present and the past. Furthermore, that past indicators (1,2) are considerably more prevailing than present indicators (3) and that the present is continuously interrupted by periods of the past, all the more, emphasises how Kien cannot fit into the present. Such temporal distortion in the chain, thereby, manifests the power of war to drive humans away from the natural course of time.

The significance of such analysis is eco-conscious: the superiority of nature is unfolded in two temporal aspects: geologic vs. human time and story vs. narrated time. The twist in *The Sorrow of War* is that despite the coexistence of the calendar time and the geologic time, such as seasons and natural time indicators, Bả-Ninh implies a hierarchy between the two: the rainy season is the dominant time reference, with sequential calendar timestamps constructed in relation to such. Particularly, it is not possible to conceive of Think's death by the time description, "more than a month", on its own, but in *comparison* to the "rainy season". This implicates human temporality as dependent on the natural temporal scheme, implicating the former as subordinate. Similarly, the quotation in footnote no. 37 illustrates the insignificance of calendar time as nested in the timelessness of geology. It is necessary then to extrapolate the conclusions outwards: this hierarchy in time is a pattern throughout the text, with recurrent references to the seasons punctuating our understanding of the narrative voice's temporal position.

It is within this context that the impact of the river conceptual metaphor can enhance our understanding of the work's structure. As analysed in the first section, if story time is constructed by the river metaphor for its forward and directional movement of time, then narrative time is figured through Kien's volition to fight against the current: not just against a "sequence of events", but against the natural equilibrium that the war disrupts. When presented with the narrative time, readers naturally work backward and piece the dates together to comprehend the actual courts of events, suggesting that story time is, to an extent, more important. As story time is intricately linked with natural, geologic time, the text encourages readers to move beyond the overtly narrated time of human consciousness and grasp the flow of geologic time, rendering the very structure of the text eco-conscious in suggesting that human chronology is subservient to a deeper, natural rhythm.



## Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that *The Sorrow of War* possesses a distinct yet unnoticed eco-critical dimension, notably in alignment with Buell's criterion that human history must be entwined with natural history. Metaphor theory has guided this exploration of Kien's life, offering two distinct avenues: the horizontal and vertical metaphorical framework of a river. This analysis discloses nature's dynamic role in constructing the imagery, presenting a reimagined reality, in which anthropocentric elements are infused with nature's unique attributes. The systematic conceptual metaphor creates such a coherent organisation of experience that naturally immerses readers into the grand scheme of nature. This highlights nature's potency that is far beyond its conventional role as a narrative backdrop, nuancing our understanding with an ecological essence. This analysis in turn provides an understanding of how the text's form, beyond the superficial content, can be viewed eco-critically. Through a narratological framework, the text's distinctive temporality becomes apparent, allowing the delineation of *The Sorrow of War*'s parallel undercurrents of geologic and human time and establishing the natural as a benchmark for human deviations. Here, the concept of 'eco-temporality' is naturally brought forward, for nature is viewed to be the standard, which primarily grounds the conception of time in the text. Thus, to view B  o-Ninh's masterpiece through an ecocritical lens brings forth an ethical imperative to the reader: to understand humanity's futility in opposing the more potent laws of nature.

## Notes

Many Vietnamese authors mentioned in the paper use pseudonyms. Since there is no clear differentiation between their first and last names, this paper formatted them with a dash in the middle to clarify this (e.g., Bảo-Ninh, Nguyễn-Ngọc).

Some titles of Vietnamese works cannot be adequately translated to English, given their specific meaning in context, namely *Đàn Trời* and *Bến Nước Lành*, in footnotes no. 11 and no. 13, respectively.

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