



Continuing Marxist-Leninist Perspectives of Literature in Vietnam: Social Criticism in Vietnamese Ecocriticism

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[*Abstract*]

Many publications of ecocritical research papers and translations of ecocriticism occur in Vietnam in recent years. This paper examines ecocritical scholarly writing in Vietnam, understanding how it corresponds to—reflects and attends to—contemporary Vietnamese society and politics. Specifically, this paper contextualizes Vietnamese ecocriticism in contemporary social and political concerns—embodied in journalistic and administrative documents—about the modernity-oriented postcolonial nation-building of Vietnam. In revealing critiques of political and social degenerations implied in ecocritical writings in Vietnam, this paper suggests that the emergence of ecocriticism in present-day Vietnam indicates a recent “political turn.” More importantly, such emergence reflects and engages with the continuing Marxist perspective of literature as an instrument for social criticism and cultural revolution in Vietnam. Vietnamese ecocritics bear the mission of prophets of the time, public educators, and soul engineers, writing is an act of engaging with and influencing reality. Writing (literary and scholarly) still forms an

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idealized ideological instrument in the struggles for national homogeneity and sovereignty and social democracy in present-day Vietnam.

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I . Introduction

Environmental analyses of literature form a major interest among Vietnamese scholars of literary studies in recent years. Many ecocritical research papers and translations of ecocriticism have been published in recent years. This paper examines ecocritical scholarly writing in Vietnam, understanding how it corresponds to—reflects and attends to—contemporary Vietnamese society and politics. Specifically, this paper contextualizes Vietnamese ecocriticism in contemporary social and political concerns—embodied in journalistic and administrative documents—about the modernity-oriented postcolonial nation-building of Vietnam. In revealing critiques of political and social degenerations implied in ecocritical writings in Vietnam, this paper suggests that the emergence of ecocriticism in present-day Vietnam indicates a recent “political turn.” More importantly, such emergence reflects and engages with the continuing Marxist perspective of literature as an instrument for social criticism and cultural revolution in Vietnam. Vietnamese ecocritics bear the mission of prophets of their time, public educators, and soul engineers, writing is an act of engaging with and influencing reality. Writing (literary and scholarly) still form an idealized ideological instrument in the struggles for national homogeneity and sovereignty and social democracy in present-day Vietnam.

II . Presence of Ecocriticism and Its Social Engagements in Vietnam

Environmental analyses of literature form a major interest among Vietnamese scholars of literary studies in recent years. There are two international conferences on ecocriticism in recent consecutive

years. In 2017, the American Embassy in Hanoi and the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences co-organized the first conference on literature and environment in Vietnam, *Ecocriticism: Global and Local Voices*. The conference attracted presentations from twenty international scholars and 102 Vietnamese scholars. In addition, in January 2018, the newly-launched ASLE-ASEAN held its second workshop *Ecologies in Southeast Asian Literatures: Histories, Myths, and Societies* in Hanoi. This conference had more than sixty presenters from not only all-over Southeast Asia but also from Taiwan and China in East Asia, and France in Europe. Some workshops and conferences at the national level have taken place in universities and research centers. For example, in 2021, the Institute of Literature (Hanoi), in cooperation with Thủ Dầu Một University (Ho Chi Minh City) organized an international conference, *Southern Ecology and Culture in Vietnamese Literature*. Many publications of ecocritical research papers and translations of ecocriticism occur in recent years including *Phê bình sinh thái: Tiếng nói bản địa, tiếng nói toàn cầu (Ecocriticism: Global and Local Voices)* (2017) by the Institute of Literature; *Rừng khô, suối cạn, biển độc...và văn chương - phê bình sinh thái (Dry Forests, Parched Streams, Poisonous Seas... and Literature—Ecocriticism* 2017) by Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy, professor of Hue University; and *Phê bình sinh thái với văn xuôi Nam Bộ (Ecocriticism with Southern Vietnamese Prose* 2018) by Bùi Thanh Truyền. These papers and publications attempt to figure out their representations of ecological and environmental issues in Vietnamese literature from the past to the present; researchers and educators in big cities and districts have collaborated in research projects that address ways through which to educate children and learners at large about environmental awareness through literature reading.

Although Vietnamese ecocriticism is thematically diverse, it addresses, directly or indirectly, critical environmental and ecological issues in the present day. The papers and published articles share the ideas of how Vietnamese literature touches upon ecological and environmental crises that have been caused by modernization and industrialization.

Implicit in the critical and analytical arguments about the

environment of Vietnamese scholars through their works are concerns that warn about environmental and ecological destructions due to the impact of the modern nation project that aims at modernization and industrialization. In other words, methodologically, ecology-oriented literary criticism in Vietnam embodies public concerns about Vietnamese modern-nation building and ecological and environmental consequences. Vietnamese ecocriticism is conducted in relation and reference to environmental and ecological realities in present-day Vietnam. For example, Đặng Thị Thái Hà (2017), by employing the theory of ecological ambiguity and ecotourism in approaching Nguyễn Ngọc Tư, points out the paradox of infatuation where breathtaking natural beauty leads to destructive actions that destroy ecosystems (deforestation, cutting mountains). She says that ecotourism deprives people of the coast, expels mountain people of their living space, and exoticizes indigenous people for visitors. Thus, there is a contradiction in the way people behave with nature at present, giving rise to skepticism about civilization, development, and tourism. Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt (2016, 2017) surveys Southern prose, focusing on the content of ecological imbalance in the Southern region (landslide, mountain avalanche, drought, saltwater intrusion, prolonged floating water); Modern life makes farmers lose their support in the ecological space in the field. Hoàng Tố Mai (2017), in analyzing Y Ban (1961-)'s *Cấm Cù* novella, pointed out the ecological underground circuit on sanitation, organic and inorganic fertilizers, and the impact on the environment, and argues about the negative impact of industrialization and modernization on the environment. Author Lê Hương Thủy, reading fiction by Đỗ Phấn (1956-), focuses on the topic of polluted urban life (environmental pollution, noise pollution, smog pollution, water pollution, destroyed trees, hunting wild animals, killing animals, etc.) in Hanoi, where people live in frustration and suffocation in ecological insecurity and indicated aspirations for a peaceful living space. Other authors such as Trịnh Đăng Nguyên Hương (2017), Nguyễn Diệu Linh (2017), and Đỗ Hải Ninh (2017) read contemporary Vietnamese literary works (by Nguyễn Ngọc Tư (1976-), Đỗ Phấn (1956-), and Hoàng A Sáng (1976-?)) in relation to the destruction of human society to the natural environment. It is a phenomenon that the downstream river is flooded with salt,

causing vegetation destruction (poor, sparse forests), river leveling, and river erosion (many people are swept away suddenly, terrible disasters). Upstream rivers and forests are destroyed; the environment is destroyed due to the consequences of climate change.

III. Vietnamese Ecocriticism on Nature Writing

While lamenting its representation of nature's beauty, Vietnamese scholars read nature writing as arguing idea that man and nature are not in opposition to each other. Instead, man is a part of the natural cycle, therefore, all changes in human life will affect nature. Vietnamese ecocritics recognize that ecological aesthetics were expressed quite clearly in medieval Vietnamese literature, typically with the poetry of royal writers such as Trần Nhân Tông (1258-1308), Nguyễn Trãi (1380-1442), and Nguyễn Du (1766-1820). While critic Trần Thị Nhung (2017) taps the aesthetic aspect of ecological holism in Trần Nhân Tông's poetry, some other critics such as Đoàn Thị Thu Vân (2017) and Nguyễn Thanh Tú (2017) emphasize natural beauty in harmony with emotional feelings of love and appreciation for life as well as for nature; this is observable in the poems by Nguyễn Trãi. Ecological aesthetics is also exploited in modern Vietnamese literature to show the diverse and colorful natural beauty in the poems of New Poetry¹ (Bùi Thị Thu Thủy 2017) or the idyllic beauty of the countryside associated with the love of nature and people's homeland in the short stories by writer Ngọc Giao (1911-1997) (Lê Tú Anh 2017). In addition, Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt looks for ecological aesthetic sense in Vietnamese literature since the Renovation Period (1986).² She considers Vietnamese

¹ New Poetry is a concept used to refer to a trend of composing non-classical poetry influenced by the rules of rhetoric, rhyme, themes, and ideas of Western poetry. New poetry appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in countries such as Japan, China, Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, Thailand, and Malaysia and became a common phenomenon in East Asian literature.

² 1986, an important milestone in the history of socio-economic development of Socialist Vietnam, was when the Communist Party of Vietnam decided to revitalize the country's economy. The program called *Đổi Mới* transformed Vietnam from a command economy to a socialist-oriented market economy. As a result, the economy has achieved a high growth rate and the living conditions of the

ecological prose after 1986 as filled with the romantic discourse on nature which could be seen in the way it recreates the motifs of country homage and hermitage, sanctifying, and beautifying nature. According to Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt, such a way of appreciating nature has deep roots in the idealized oriental culture which has the traditional harmony between humans with plants and trees (Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt 2018: 116). For other scholars, Vietnamese nature writing also demonstrates the ecological feelings of people before nature's beauty, the human infatuation with nature, and the expression of human love for fragile beings such as plants and animals. By listening to nature, people will understand and respect nature, thereby leading human behavior to be in harmony with nature. Thus, ecocriticism upholds natural beauty, praising the lifestyle of people in harmony with nature in literary works. It conveys the importance of ecological harmony, reminding people of the value of living with respect for nature. (Nguyễn Thị Thúy Hằng 2017: 552).

Noticeably, while appreciating the so-called traditional harmony between humans and nature in Vietnamese nature writing, Vietnamese ecocritics discuss concerns about modern ecological problems. For example, while reading ecological aesthetics in Trần Nhân Tông's poetry, ecocritic Trần Thị Nhung wonders about "the world reality (that) is in more danger, the problem of environmental pollution (that) is getting more serious every day" (2017: 331). She asserts that it is necessary to promote ecological aesthetic education for everyone, especially the young generation. In particular, this author emphasizes that "literature is the 'most suitable' field to do this educating function," and ecological aesthetic education "can form a new generation of people who respect nature, harmony with nature, consciously fighting for the protection of the global ecological environment" (Trần Thị Nhung 2017: 331). Bùi Thị Thu Thủy, another female ecocritic, by way of analyzing nature's beauty in "New Poetry," emphasizes "knowing how to find the beauty of nature, cherishing, respecting and living in harmony with nature form a positive attitude to life" (Bùi Thị Thu Thủy 2017: 474). Bùi

Vietnamese improved drastically. However, economic growth gave rise to many challenges, including pollution and income inequality.

Thị Thu Thủy attempts to refer to such poetic nature as a contrast to the present-day reality of the environment of Vietnam which is being destroyed. She fears that one day nature, as it was in New Poetry, "remains only in the nostalgia" (Bùi Thị Thu Thủy 2017: 474). This is a way of criticism on the current state of degraded nature in Vietnam. Ostensibly, criticism of aesthetics and ecological sensibility in medieval and modern Vietnamese literature makes audiences think about the environmental and ecological.

Such appraisals of nature's beauty in literary works published in the past seem to imply criticism against the increasing destruction of nature in present-day Vietnam. Data indicate that the area of natural forests in Vietnam is declining at a rapid rate. According to statistics before 1945, forest covers accounted for 43.8%; now it is just over 28% (i.e. below the alarming level of 30%). The main cause of this situation is due to projects of cutting forests for hydropower, factories, farms, and road constructions. In addition to primary forests, coastal protection forests are also cleared to make aquaculture ponds. Accordingly, the species of flora and fauna in primary forests and protection forests are reduced; many species face extinction, for example, red coral reefs; cranes have disappeared; and finally, biodiversity is severely degraded. At the same time, deforestation also causes floods and saltwater intrusion takes place with greater frequency. Droughts become frequent in the Mekong Delta, while floods have occurred in the central and northern mountainous provinces of Vietnam (Hội đồng lý luận trung ương 2021).

IV. Vietnamese Ecocriticism on Writings about Non-Human Beings

In a more direct way, criticism of literary works about animals and other non-human beings echoes public concerns about animal respect and recent losses of species diversity. The article "Tinh thần sinh thái trong văn xuôi Nam Bộ" (Ecological Spirit in Southern Prose) by Bùi Thanh Truyền (2017) emphasizes livelihood and freedom of all species. According to Bùi Thanh Truyền, Vietnamese

short stories and novels in Southern Vietnam demonstrate how animal freedom is taken away with the portrayal of men's brutality in killing sharks, hunting elephants, catching monkeys, and trapping birds (Bùi Thanh Truyền 2017). Also following this tendency, Trần Ngọc Hiếu and Đặng Thị Thái Hà (2017) analyze the short story "Salt of the Forest" (Muối của rừng) by the famous author Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, considering the act of Mr. Diều (the hunter) in shooting the male monkey and accidentally pushing the baby monkey into the cliff as an embodiment of the ferocious human treatment toward non-human beings. Later, the critic appreciates the diversion of Mr. Diều's behavior: he bandages the wound to save the male monkey he has shot. The essay shows the viewpoint of animal liberation and respect for the life of all species. Looking at other short stories by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, critic Nguyễn Thị Thúy Hằng (2017) warns of the consequences when humans attack animals in the forest (wolf, tiger and monkey). The destruction of nature and the cruel treatment of other living creatures cost people their own lives.

Such ecological warnings by Vietnamese writers correspond to the decline and extinction of many species of animals and plants that have been recorded in contemporary Vietnamese journalistic and scientific publications. Tigers, bears, rhinos, and elephants are killed for tiger bones, bear bile, rhino horn, and ivory, respectively. Many other animals and birds are hunted simply for food or amusement. Regarding the risk of extinction for tigers, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) estimates that until January 2022, Vietnam has only about 5 tigers left in the wild (Sputnik Việt Nam 2022). Meanwhile, the Javan rhinoceros (one-horned rhinoceros) was confirmed to be extinct in Vietnam in October 2011. Also as recorded, the last rhino was shot dead by hunters in the Cát Lộc area of Cát Tiên National Park, Southern Vietnam (WCS Vietnam). Besides, according to the Center for People and Nature (PanNature) report, the number of wild elephants in Vietnam as of 2020 was only about 124 to 148 (Mạng Thông tin Bảo vệ Môi trường 2022). In general, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List updated in November 2020, the number of threatened species in Vietnam was 745 species, including 64 species of mammals, 53 of birds, 70 of reptiles, 45 of amphibians, and 96

of fish. The Red Book of Vietnam also records 6 species that have been categorized from endangered to extinct, including two-horned rhinoceros, gray cow, tapir, otter civet, lilac crocodile, and star deer (Vietnam Plus 2021). Besides habitat loss, it is indiscriminate hunting, killing, and exploitation of humans that are the main causes of decline and extinction of many species of flora and fauna in Vietnam. This fact must have prompted Vietnamese ecocritics, along with writers, to urgently speak out to protect the ecosystem as well as to combat the cruel destruction of other species by humans.

Along with killing living creatures, seeking and exploiting precious minerals by all means also form a way for humans to destroy nature. Ecocritic Bùi Thanh Truyền (2018), by way of examining some fictions by the famous contemporary Vietnamese eco-writer Nguyễn Trí (1956-) such as “Gold mining Sites, Gemstones, Agarwood” (Bãi vàng, đá quý, trầm hương); “Butcher” (Đồ tể); “Fantasy and Fear” (Ảo và sợ), “Old stories from the forest” (Chuyện cũ từ rừng), and his novel *Paradise of Illusion* (Thiên đường ảo vọng), highlights the reality of “forests being destroyed by many methods for “gold, gems, agarwood, cut wood, burn coal, collecting rattan, bamboo, hunting animals, and trapping birds... The forest is dying and it is people who are dying” (Bùi Thanh Truyền 2018: 145). Bùi Thanh Truyền emphasizes Trí Nguyễn’s statement that as long as man is not aware of his wrong actions with nature, “nature is still being destroyed and devastated and invisibly which form a way of humans destroying themselves” (Bùi Thanh Truyền 2018: 145). Sharing Bùi Thanh Truyền’s thought on the consequences for humans when over-exploiting nature, ecocritic Nguyễn Thùy Trang (2017) examines post-1986 Vietnamese novels, highlighting regret and criticism about human stupidity, greed, and disregard for nature when they plunge into the forest and deep river to explore resources; in return they pay with their own lives. Thus, in way of appreciating ecofiction that condemn man’s excessive exploitation of nature, Vietnamese ecocritics warn people about the terrible consequences that people will suffer when they abuse nature.

V. Vietnamese Ecocriticism on Writing about Forest

In Vietnamese ecocriticism, forest literature is a subject of special attention. Many ecocritics such as Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy (2017), Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt (2016, 2018), Bùi Thanh Truyền (2017, 2018) Nguyễn Thị Thúy Hằng (2017), Nguyễn Thị Diệu Linh (2017), and Lê Ngọc Bích (2017) pay attention to forest-related topics in literary works, from people's feelings of attachment to forests, human exploitation, deforestation, and brave people's struggle to protect the forest. One of the most concerned Vietnamese ecocritics on the problem of deforestation is Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy. Her concerns, as well as those of other ecological critics, regarding the issue of forest exploitation and protection in the literature, are apparently linked to the rising concern of the Vietnamese public about deforestation in recent Vietnam: as recorded, in 1945 Vietnam had 14.3 million hectares of forest (accounting for 43% of the natural land area), but by 1995, the natural forest had shrunk to only 8.25 million hectares (*Người Lao động* 2020). The decline in forest areas has many causes, but one of them is illegal logging. Even so, there are many illegal deforestation cases directed by forest rangers themselves. For example, in 2003 there was large illegal deforestation in Kon Ka Kinh National Park (Gia Lai) and Mang Den Forest Enterprise (Kon Tum) led by the directors of Mang Den SFE (State Forest Enterprise) and Tân Lập SFE. By criticizing the work "Cross in the deep forest" (Thập giá giữa rừng sâu) by writer Nguyễn Khắc Phê (1939-), ecocritic Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy not only condemns illegal deforestation but also calls for and supports the struggle to protect forests. Her research represents "writing for an endangered world" and "raising one more cry for help from the forest, and the forest" (Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy 2017: 332-333).

Also "raising one more cry for help from the forest," ecocritic Trịnh Đăng Nguyên Hương (2017) worries about the decline and disappearance of coastal protection forests in Vietnam. Emphasizing the image of "the sparse mangrove forests and the saltwater intrusion from the sea into the river" in the novel *The River* (Sông) by Nguyễn Ngọc Tư (1976-), Trịnh Đăng Nguyên Hương relates to a similar recorded reality: based on 2017 data, hundreds of hectares

of mangrove forest, as well as other coastal forests across the country are being severely damaged; mangrove forests in Tân Ninh, Quảng Bình are desolate and sparse; many mangrove trees are dead. "The forests are like wastelands because inside the forest are construction sites for digging ponds and dams..." (Trịnh Đăng Nguyễn Hương 2017: 750). Trịnh Đăng Nguyễn Hương's reference to the recorded data indicates her deep concern about people's activities of destroying protection forests in Vietnam and her desire for the restoration of the forest system.

VI. Vietnamese Ecocriticism about Fictions on Pollution

Besides forest degradation, many Vietnamese ecocritics pay attention to presentations of sea pollution as well as the depletion of rivers in Vietnamese literary works. Bùi Thanh Truyền (2018) analyzes the novel *River* (Sông) by Nguyễn Ngọc Tư and other works by contemporary Vietnamese writers such as Lý Lan (1957-), Võ Diệu Thanh (1975-) and Lê Minh Nhật (-) to criticize the human act of damaging rivers. The ecocritic shows his concerns with the described reality of "prolonged droughts that make people not have enough fresh water for their minimum needs even though they are living on the banks of a large river" (Bùi Thanh Truyền 2018: 149); at the same time, he expresses his anxiety and insecurity when people in dozens of provinces in the Mekong Delta area are daily facing drought, making them unable to cultivate on familiar fields. According to this southern ecocritic, those disasters of the South are not only caused by global climate change but are also the consequences of "the destruction of watershed forests and protection forests due to human greed" (Bùi Thanh Truyền 2018: 156).

The ecocritical research by Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy, Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt, and many other ecocritics, do not only reflect their pursuit of a new literary approach in the world but also engage with the rising concerns of Vietnamese intellectuals about the reality of the country's ecological systems and environment of water being destroyed. Examples of projects that threaten water environments in Vietnam include the bauxite mining project in the Central Highlands

(2007-2025) (Thế Kha 2018); the untreated waste discharges of the Vedan Company, directly thrown into Đồng Nai River (Hà Hồng and Tuấn Anh 2008); and Formosa Hà Tĩnh factory's pouring of toxic waste into the central seas causing massive fishkill (Xuân Long 2017). These are typical environmental disasters in Vietnam over the past decade, creating public fervent debates. Most Vietnamese ecocritics are concerned about the considerable destruction of the ecological environment caused by industrializing and modernizing processes in Vietnam. In addition to directly speaking out to require the government to adjust the way of socio-economic management, the intelligentsia, specifically researchers of ecocriticism, also look to literature to continue to express and reflect on their belief in the intrinsic relationship between society and nature and their concerns about ecological degradation. This is not only a way to create a trend to protect the ecological environment, thus protecting the sustainable life of people, but also contributes to creating pressure to reform the production and environmental management mechanism in Vietnam.

VII. Vietnamese Ecocriticism with Social Justice

Aside from paying attention to environmental issues, Vietnamese ecocritics are also concerned with the fate of the disadvantaged social groups in Vietnamese ecological literary works. Poor people in general, displaced peasants, women, and ethnic minorities are all disadvantaged groups in society. Their miserable fate can be seen in Vietnamese literature from 1975 until the present day. After 1975, when the Vietnam War ended, the theme of war in Vietnamese literature was gradually replaced by the theme of people's daily lives, in which the poor, such as displaced farmers, fishermen, workers, and women have been typically represented. Realizing the consequential connection between market economy, ecological change, even patriarchal cultural factors, and the fate of these vulnerable people in literature, Vietnamese ecocritics mentioned the issues of class-based ecocriticism and ecofeminism as important parts of Vietnamese ecocriticism. Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt (2017), Nguyễn Thùy Trang (2017), and Bùi Thanh Truyền (2018) were the

first researchers who have conducted research on this. Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt (2017), focusing on a series of post 1986 Vietnamese literary works about farmers, indicates that the farmers have to "grapple with the land, the weather, the natural disasters" and have to "leave the land behind which is like leaving the roots of the soul and spirit". These are farmers who are "poor, hungry, illiterate, insecure, caught up in the whirlwind of the market economy" but they are all "attached and loving to the land, the fruit trees, the sky, and the river... with a deep love" (Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt 2017: 566-567). Here, the critic's sympathy and understanding of the farmers is not based solely on the literary text, but more deeply rooted in the critic's concern about the reality of ecology and environment being destroyed when farming land becomes industrial zones, which disperse farmers' right on their own land. Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt explains that the fact that many Vietnamese farmers have to give up their familiar farming land, become unemployed, and then engage in prostitution and drugs, all emanating from "environmental injustice" (Nguyễn Thị Ánh Nguyệt 2017: 567). The destruction of traditional ecosystems to build urban areas, industrial parks, and tourist areas does not only take away traditional jobs but also makes poor people deprived of their access to nature. Bùi Thanh Truyền, in his reading of the story "Tears and Dust" (Áo rách và năm bụi) by Nguyễn Ngọc Tư, stresses that recently built eco-tourism areas "(rob) people's coastal areas... (by) not giving them access to the living space that once belonged to them, (and) pushing them to the margins of society"; meanwhile the tourists, the "outsiders," occupy and drive away indigenous people (Bùi Thanh Truyền 2018: 263). Likewise, Nguyễn Thùy Trang, looking into many modern Vietnamese literary works, points out the difficult living situations of people living along the coastal area of the Red River who depend on river water for both their livelihood and daily life (Nguyễn Thùy Trang 2017).

For some other Vietnamese ecocritics, particularly those who have an ethnic-minority background, ecocriticism is a way of addressing social problems concerning ethnic policies. Lê Ngọc Bình (2017) works on the epic of Xơ Đăng, an ethnic group in Central Highland Vietnam, to explore the relationship between the human

and nature. Focusing on the epic's portrayal of Xơ Đăng people traditionally exploiting nature for farming, trading, and for other socio-cultural activities, Lê Thị Bình highlights the traditional harmony "between people, nature, and gods" based on the traditional harmony of interests, the "fairness," in the way of "giving and receiving" (Lê Ngọc Bình 2017: 289). Such a traditional harmony, as stated by the female ecocritic, is contradictory to the critical situation of the natural landscape in present-day Central Highlands: "Day by day, hour by hour, the forests of the Central Highlands are disappearing, many forests are now becoming bare hills" in the process of economic, cultural, and social development in the region. Lê Thị Bình highlights that the processes of urbanization, migration, and the dominance of science and technology have degraded the natural landscape of the Central Highlands and caused the loss of many typical cultural and moral values of the region. Here, the ecocritic does not limit herself solely to completing literary criticism; instead, she tends to warn the public about environmental, political, and social issues in her country. Such a social engagement is evident in her way of writing as though she was giving a public speech about how people around her should behave towards nature: "Humans who want to exploit nature must also understand that they are a part of that nature. If humans want to receive back, they must give away and respect the things that have nourished them" (Lê Ngọc Bình 2017: 289). This ethnic ecocritic also raises the question of how the government's policies on hunger eradication, poverty reduction, and socio-economic development for the Central Highlands must aim at the goal of "sustainable development." She also sets responsibility for her community in the Central Highlands to "protect the ecological environment, to revive the lost forests while developing the economy, culture, and society in a sustainable way" and to "keep the forests of the Central Highlands green while preserving cultural and social space of the indigenous inhabitants" (Lê Ngọc Bình 2017: 290).

Similar to Lê Ngọc Bình, Bàn Thị Quỳnh Giao, a scholar with a Dao ethnic minority background, studies the ecological spirit in the poetry of Dao ethnic poets. While emphasizing the natural

beauty embodied in the Dao's poetry and the Dao's deep attachment to the mountains and forests, this female critic also taps into the feelings of loss and grief felt by the Dao poets when writing about Dao nature which is badly treated by the humans: beautiful nature is being destroyed due to human's exhaustive exploitation of the mountains and forests (Bàn Thị Quỳnh Giao 2017: 307). The critic reminds her audience to be "aware of their roles and responsibilities about nature"; she asserts that the descendants of the Dao need to "love and protect, know how to fear natural life" so that "the Dao people today and forever in the future have a peaceful and happy life in the mountains and forests" (Bàn Thị Quỳnh Giao 2017: 319). Bàn Thị Quỳnh Giao's concerns about environmental and ecological issues in her ethnic area appear to correspond to modernizing policy concerning ethnic minority areas that Vietnamese government has been conducting for years. Between 1980 and the early 1990s, the Vietnamese government vigorously implemented policies that aimed to modernize the Central Highlands through a program of "clearing the wilderness" (*khai hoang*) and its derivative, "building new economic zones" (*Xây dựng các vùng kinh tế mới*). This program attempted to relocate lowland and city residents in general and farmers, in particular, to supposedly "empty" or "virgin" forest areas to clear lands and cultivate them for cooperatives and the agro-industrial complex (McElwee 2016: 76-7; Evans 1992: 280-82). The program, as clearly written, strongly encourage organizations, collective groups, and farmers in areas that lack cultivated lands and unemployed non-agriculturalist householders to invest their own labor and capital to move to wildland areas for living and developing). This strategy is stated in Decision 254-CP, *khuyến khích khai hoang phục hóa* [encouragement? to clear the wilderness and to recover civilization] issued on June 16, 1981, by the Governmental Committee (Chính phủ 1982). Decision 254-CP, in fact, forms part of the nationally implemented governmental program initiated in the 1960s and further developed with Decision No. 95-CP on March 27, 1980, "strongly developing the cultivation of large wildland areas for new economic zones."

VIII. Vietnamese Ecocritical Statements about Social Engagements

It can be seen that Vietnam's ecocriticism has embraced the traditional arguments of ecocriticism as a literary approach originated from American and English humanities. Vietnamese critics and researchers have studied a fairly large volume of literary works in the country, from fairy tales, and myths, to medieval, modern, and contemporary literature (poetry, short stories, novels, children's literature); from northern to southern literatures; from majority and minority literatures. Vietnamese ecocriticism has shed more light on critical issues of ecological environment that have been happening in Vietnam recently: environmental pollution, resource depletion, land loss, the decline of living species, and the plight of vulnerable people in ecological destruction. Each ecocritical project potentially forms a call to warn society about the danger of ecological destruction to human future life. At the same time, discussed in Vietnamese ecocritical writing is discontent about socio-political issues related to the ecological environment, and calls for literature and literary criticism to be more active in the struggle to protect ecosystems and sustainable human life.

Particularly, many Vietnamese ecocritics have directly stated their social orientations in their research. Typical work for this trend of ecocriticism in Vietnam is *Dry forests, parched streams, poisonous seas... and literature* (2017) by Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy. This is an outstanding work in Vietnamese ecocriticism with its attachment to social and political issues. This political orientation is shown at the beginning of the book when the author writes:

Vietnam is a country directly affected by climate change. Environmental pollution from daily life and economic production has been and will be a problem, or a great disaster, for people and all other species. Dry forests, parched streams, poisoned seas, dead fish, floods, droughts, broken dams, mudslides, etc., form common disasters in present-day Vietnam (16-17).

The paragraph lists a series of ecological and environmental disasters in present-day Vietnam. According to this passionate female critic, approaching literature from ecocritical perspectives is

an embodiment of human responsibility in tending to and listening to the earth. This literary approach is not a way of "seeing people eating potatoes, carrying shovels to dig" (the Vietnamese idiom "thấy người ta ăn khoai cũng vác mai đi đào") which refers to the way Vietnamese scholars imitate foreign ones or outsiders to take up ecocriticism. Instead, ecocriticism is "the work to be done by the insider...who must show the response of literary studies, as a science, to the cry for help of the ecological environment" (2017: 17). Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy's definition of "eco-literature" (văn học sinh thái) also shows the author's emphasis on the social commitment of this body of literature:

Ecological literature also shows ecological responsibility and ecological ideology, to criticize the dark side of civilization, and reflect ecological risks, spiritual risks, ideological risks and social origins of those dangers" (1997: 93).

The occurrence of the terms "responsibility" and "ideology" and their synonyms in the quotation indicate the social tasks that eco-writers and ecocritics take upon themselves.

In the article 'Sáng tác và phê bình sinh thái: Tiềm năng cần khai thác của văn học Việt Nam' (Ecocriticism and Composition—the Potential to be Exploited for Vietnamese Literature" (*Văn nghệ quân đội*, No. 10, 2014), Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy points out that ecocriticism is still a "slow response" to critical environmental and ecological problems in Vietnam. This widely acknowledged ecocritic suggests that the literary composition in Vietnam should be engaged with ecocriticism so that literature can be more practically attached to social realities. This critic clearly promotes the writer's responsibility in protecting the environment. Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy's passion for social engagements in Vietnamese ecocriticism is consonant with the direction of the second wave of world ecocriticism, which is attending to social and political issues

Another one that promotes social engagement is the book *Ecocriticism with Southern Prose* (quoted above). The book emphasizes the "socially committed" and "socially responsible" aspects of ecocriticism. This is reflected in the very definition of

ecocriticism that is printed on the book cover: "Ecological criticism... is the voice of literary studies, as a humanities science, in response to environmental peril" and "ecocriticism is an example of the researcher's sensitivity, bravery, mind, and civic responsibility to today's social situation" (cover page). The ecocritic Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt's contribution to this book, which emphasizes ecocriticism as a potential approach in Vietnamese literary criticism, lists a series of historical and social events such as war, industrialization, and modernization as main factors that caused environmental and ecological destruction in Vietnam. Noticeably, this ecocritic refers to some ecological destruction events that recently gets public attention in Vietnam including the disappearance of rhinoceri in Vietnam in 2010, the lack of forests for Central Highlands elephants, fields being destroyed, red-crowned cranes completely migrating to Cambodia, and the use of pesticides in agriculture that destroy the habitat of plants and animals in the regions of the country (Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt 2018). Contributions by Bùi Thanh Truyền and Phạm Ngọc Lan describe how southern areas of the country are bearing the brunt of global climate change, the destruction of watershed forests, and the destruction of protective forests (Bùi Thanh Truyền and Phạm Ngọc Lan 2018: 156). Thus, ecocriticism by Vietnamese scholars embodies socially responsible acts of Vietnamese intellectuals in the face of environmental issues in association with social, political, and historical issues.

Many other Vietnamese ecocritics directly voice their concerns about environmental problems in present-day Vietnam. The senior literary studies scholar Nguyễn Văn Dân considers "ecocriticism first and foremost (as) a modern movement within the socio-cultural movement for environmental protection" (Nguyễn Văn Dân 2017: 62). In particular, ecocriticism must "call on literature to contribute with society to fight for the protection of the ecological environment in sustainable development" (Nguyễn Văn Dân 2017: 63). In addition, Nguyễn Văn Dân also affirms that "ecocriticism is ... a theory that is more "socially engaged" (Nguyễn Văn Dân 2017: 63). He also asserts that ecology is an interdisciplinary discipline between biology, geography, and earth science, thus ecocriticism must focus on issues concerning the man's livelihood in the future,

and on the relation between humans and the environment, rather than simply lament or romanticize nature. According to this scholar, approaching literature from ecocriticism is to look for writers' engagements with environmental and associated developmental problems, and the way they suggest how to deal with those problems. The work of an ecocritic, thus, is to examine how literature suggests potential solutions for those problems rather. All constitute what Nguyễn Văn Dân addresses "the social responsibility of ecocriticism" (Nguyễn Văn Dân 2017: 64). Another senior scholar of literary studies, Nguyễn Đăng Điệp gives his thought about ecocriticism's social engagements that ecocriticism, "of course, cannot provide direct and immediate solutions to overcome environmental problems"; instead, ecocriticism, while emphasizing the intrinsic relationship between humans and nature, contributes to "changing community awareness," and "correcting harmful misunderstandings" about the ecological environment, thereby "having appropriate behavior with nature...understanding and listening to the voice of nature for the sake of sustainable development" (Nguyễn Đăng Điệp 2017: 24). In general, with Vietnamese ecocritics, ecocriticism is not a literary theory but a social responsibility. That means their ecocriticism aims to contribute to the fight for ecological protection.

It is possible to see the tendency of Vietnamese ecocriticism as such echo recent discussions among environmental historians and ecocritics that call for more engagement with issues of race, class, gender, and national identity in ecocriticism. Michael Cohen asserted that ecological literary criticism must be politically engaging, that is, literature must inform actions dealing with a rising environmental crisis (Cohen 2004: 24-27). Similarly, Dana Phillip stated that traditional ecocriticism is lingering on "the wilderness of signs"; he urged ecocritics to address present-day "complexities of acid rain, global warming, and a host of other environmental ills" (Phillip 1999: 599). Likewise, Lawrence Buell points out that ecological literary criticism should focus more on the impoverished and socially marginalized, and the voices of victims of environmental injustice (Buell 2009: 112). In general, as Terry Gifford summarizes, ecocritics have pointed to new directions for

ecocriticism including ecofeminism, toxic industry, urbanization, globalization, ethnic-national identity, and environmental justice (Gifford 2008: 15). These new directions indicate a request of scholars of ecocritical practice to be more politically committed. That is, environmental literature and ecological literary approach must engage in a serious and urgent question of social and environmental justice; it must address institutional, economic, cultural, and political factors that involve social, cultural, and physical disasters in "unjustifiably dominated groups" including women, people of color, children, the poor, and nature (Wijkman and Timberlake 1988: 27; Warren 2000; 1-10; Worster 1996: 12).

More importantly, the political and economic concerns in Vietnamese ecocriticism are derived from the tradition of politics-oriented literary criticism in Vietnam. Since medieval times, there existed among Vietnamese intellectuals a belief in writing as "a special, autonomous power to alter reality" and "to stipulate a sweeping transformation of society" (Marr 1981: 336). Đinh Cung Viên in the thirteenth century wrote, "No one in this world knows all about change and destruction. That pen without mouth is still able to speak about emergence and collapse." In the nineteenth century, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, a celebrated southern author, challenged the colonial regime with his writings: "Stabbing many dishonest guys, the pen is still not blunt" (đâm mấy thằng gian bút chẳng tà). Phan Châu Trinh and Phan Bội Châu, famous patriots of the early twentieth century, respectively declared: "Pen and tongue want to turn around flood flow directions" (bút lưỡi muốn xoay dòng nước lũ) and "a three-inch tongue is like sword and gun; a pen is like battle drum and gong" (Ba tấc lưỡi mà gươm mà súng, một ngòi lông vừa trống vừa chiêng). Particularly, since the 1920s, when Marxist-Leninist doctrine and related "Chủ nghĩa hiện thực phê phán" (realist criticism) was introduced in Annam, Vietnamese intellectuals have increasingly believed in the material impacts of writing upon class and national struggles. For long, Vietnamese intellectuals believed in writing as a weapon in national and class struggles. High school students learned by heart the rhythmic sentences by Trường Chinh, a revered revolutionary character:

Using the pen to put upside down the regime
Each poetic verse [is] a bomb and bullet [able to] destroy power and
authority
(Dùng cán bút làm đòn xoay chế độ.
Mỗi vần thơ bom đạn phá cường quyền) (Pham 2017: 1-10)

IX. Conclusion

Vietnamese ecocriticism conforms with the traditional perception of literature as an instrument for social criticism in Vietnam. Vietnamese literary theorists have insisted on the social responsibility of authors, who must bear the mission of prophets of their time, public educators, and soul engineers; writing is an act of engaging with and influencing reality. Nguyễn Văn Trung asserted that authors and the type intellectuals are embodiments of national conscience and mind, thus their writings take social criticism as their essential responsibility (Volume 1 1963: 170-80). In the context of postcolonial nation-building, and with continuing dominance of Marxist-Leninist doctrine, literature is still regarded as an ideological instrument in the struggle for national homogeneity and sovereignty, and social democracy. Even in the 6th Party Congress (1986), the congress that lifted reform policies, the Party still asserted that no other ideological form other than literature could effectively foster "healthy sentiment" and "renew people's thinking habit [sic] and way of life," to eliminate possible lingering colonialist and feudalist habits of the act and thought (75 Years of the Communist Party: 744; Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam 1993: 54-55; Tô Huy Rúa 2009: 13-19).

It is possible to say that Western ecocriticism which came to Vietnam continues the long traditional Vietnamese view of literature as one of the material forces that must reflect social and political realities. These fields include environmental, historical, and political concerns. Ecocriticism in Vietnam functions both as a literary approach and a complex political force that addresses and interrogates current public concerns about modernization and industrialization that the postcolonial Vietnamese government sees as the ultimate goal of Vietnam's nation-building.

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