



**Ecocriticism in Non-Western Contexts:  
Natural Disasters, Ecological Wounds, and Colonial  
Conditions in *Thơ mới*  
(Vietnamese New Poetry, 1932-1945)**

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[ *Abstract* ]

*Thơ mới* (Vietnamese New Poetry, 1932-1945) is a literary movement in colonial Vietnam that is broadly considered to have marked the modernization of Vietnamese literature. This paper examines depictions about natural disasters, ecological wounds, and about relationships between humans and nature in New Poetry, asking how those descriptions reflect social and political issues in colonial Vietnam. The paper argues that ecocriticism, developed in Western academy, brought to the New Poetry Movement new meanings, associated with a material world. That is the specific reality of colonial Vietnam in the early twentieth century, when the colonial modernization resulted in natural and social collapses in the area. This approach is especially significant, given that New Poetry is largely seen as the embodiment of the expansion of Western romanticism by Vietnamese scholars. Moreover, in examining *Thơ mới* (Vietnam) from perspective of ecocriticism, this paper extends the ecocritical approach to non-Western literatures. Specifically, although ecocriticism developed in the West,

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particularly in United States and England, it has become an effective approach to non-Western literatures, particularly since the early twentieth first century. In this context, Asian literatures, particularly Southeast Asian literatures, potentially offer ecocriticism new meanings, many of which are associated with local social and political conditions and histories.

**Keywords:** Thơ mới (Vietnamese New Poetry), Ecocriticism in non-Western context, Natural Disasters, Ecological Wounds, Political Turns in Ecocriticism

## I . Introduction

Although ecocriticism developed in the West, particularly in United States and England, it has become an effective approach to non-Western literatures, particularly since the early twentieth first century. In this context, Asian literatures, particularly Southeast Asian literatures, potentially offer ecocriticism new meanings, many of which are associated with local social and political conditions and histories. This paper extends the rising ecocritical approach to non-Western literatures in examining Thơ mới (Vietnam) from perspective of ecocriticism. Thơ mới (Vietnamese New Poetry, 1932-1945) is a literary movement in colonial Vietnam that marked the turn to modern phase of Vietnamese literature (Jamieson 1995: 108-115). This paper examines the New Poetry's ecologies themes, asking how they reflect colonial conditions of contemporary Vietnam. Sepcifically, the paper delves deeply into depictions of natural disasters, ecological wounds, and relationships between human and nature in New Poetry, examining how they were shaped by social and political issues in colonial Vietnam. The paper argues that ecocriticism, developed in Western academy, bought to the New Poetry Movement with new meanings, associated with a material world. That is the specific reality of colonial Vietnam in the early twentieth century, when the colonial modernization resulted in natural and social collapses in the area. While attending the rising This approach is also significant, given that New Poetry is largely seen as the embodiment of the expansion of Western romanticism by Vietnamese scholars.

## II . Ecocriticism in non-Western contexts

Despite originating in the UK and the US, ecocritical approach to literary studies has been applied all over the world (Heise 2013). The recent expansion of ecocriticism to include all literatures of the world and indicate its diverse development. Members of the Association for Studies of Literature and Environment (ASLE), who are largely eminent English scholars working on English texts, have attempted to explore environmental issues and ecological perspectives in Asian literary traditions, especially Japanese, Korean, or Chinese literatures. Aim of the scholarship about non-Western ecological literatures is largely to assert points that potentially challenge ecological and environmental views in the West. An early ecocritical scholarship about non-Western literature is *Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crises and East Asian Literatures* by Karen Thornber (2012). This monograph analyzes environmental crises that are presented in East Asian literatures from the classical to the present time. Thornber emphasizes "the duality" and "the paradox" as the characteristics of ecological views in East Asian literatures. Example analyzed is the parallel reverence of nature and exploitation of nature in the cultures of East Asian countries. She argues that this ecological paradox continues to challenge Western ecocriticism (Thornber 2012: 139). Noticeably, Scott Slovic, founder of the Association of Literature and Environment (ASLE attempts to identify the long tradition of ecocritical perspectives in Eastern literatures even before the entry of environmental and ecological views from the West. In his paper "Landmarks in Chinese ecocriticism and environmental literature: the emergence of a new ecological civilization" (2013), he analyzes ecological and environmental issues in the Chinese poetry of a wide range, from Tang poetry to modern and contemporary poetry. He also describes research centers and events that have existed in China since the ancient time. All are to argue the long established ecocriticism in China.

Moreover, there exist some ecocritical works by non-Western scholars. The edited book *Southeast Asian Ecocriticism: Theories, Practices, prospects* by John Ryan (2018) includes chapters by non-Western scholars, examining literatures of Southeast Asian

countries from the ecocritical approach. The anthology emphasizes two characteristics of ecological Southeast Asian literature. First, this body of literature is the “upshot” of biocultural inflows of Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism and of indigenous belief in animism and sacrality of nature (Ryan 2018: 9-12). Second, ecological Southeast Asian literature largely criticizes eco-degradation by way of presenting the loss of biodiversity and the situation of being in danger of indigenous animals and plants (Ryan 1-9). These non-Western scholars agree on the point that it is the rapid postwar industrialization that poses immediate social and environmental challenges to the region (Estok 2016: 1-15; Ryan 2018: 13-15).

South and West Asian literatures also form a research subject of non-Western ecocriticism. Specifically, much scholarship examines ancient Indian literature from perspectives of ecocriticism. The monograph *Ecocriticism and the Ramayana of Tulsidasa* by Pankaj Sharma (2011) and the research article “Ecocriticism in Eastern and Western Traditions” by Raj Kumar Mishra (2012) study the works of Kalidasa and Valmiki from the lens of ecocriticism. The scholar K. R. Aiyer has a series of papers studying the epic Mahabharata from ecological perspectives. Two of them are “Dharma in the Mahabharata as a response to ecological crises: A speculation” (2009) and “A social ecological perspective on some episodes from the Mahabharata” (2009). These scholarly works mainly point out that spirituality and morality in traditional Indian cultures form typical characteristics of Indian ecocriticism. Interestingly, some works of Arabian literature become more politically significant when explored from ecocriticism. In the controversial article *Greening of Resistance in Arabic Poetry: An Ecocritical Interpretation of Selected Arabic Poems*, Hamoud y'ahya Ahmed (2005) analyzes a number of Arabic poems from the lens of ecocriticism. The article describes that nature and environment - embodied in biological communities and organizations in the Arab world -- have formed a force that shaped social and political resistance movements. In this context, Arabian poets presented ecological forms of the resistance in their works. The article points out that there exist the deep and cohesive presence of nature in Arabian poets' descriptions of human resistance to existing land encroachment. Apparently, non-Western

ecocritical scholarship attempts to contextualize non-Western literatures to local ecological and environmental beliefs and practices.

The development of ecocriticism in non-Western areas is the most evident in the emergence of regional and national associations of literature and environment over the world. Local scholars have established branches of ASLE in Japan, UK, Australia / New Zealand, Korea, India and Taiwan, in Europe and Canada. ASLE held the first conference outside of the United States in June 2017 in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. This means that, outside the British and American centers, non-Western scholars has established their own branches or schools of ecocriticism, which are embodied in phrases, as well as in titles of many articles, textbook, and research works, such as "Japanese ecocriticism", "Chinese ecocriticism", and "Taiwan ecocriticism." These phrases suggest the growing belief in the existence of other schools of ecocriticism outside the United States and British; they own specific characteristics that are unique to local cultures and literatures. In other words, the associations or schools of ecocriticism over the world emphasize traditional and indigenous beliefs about relationships between literature and nature while implementing ecocritical theories originated from the United States and British.

Nevertheless, although ecocriticism has had "shoots" sprouting all over the planet outside England and the United States, there remain important questions such as: Should theories and practices of ecocriticism outside the United States and British be understood as the same as in British and the United States? Are the central concepts of ecocriticism such as nature, countryside, and wilderness in the world mean the same as those of ecocriticism in the United States and the United Kingdom? What are the challenges when translating Western ecocritic terms and concepts into other languages and cultures? Have the studies about relations between nature and human in non-English literatures changed or influenced theoretical points of the Anglo-American school of ecocriticism, which is mainly based on English culture and literature? And can the ecocritical approach to non-English literatures and cultures provide these cultures and literatures with new significances? (Flys 2010: 108 -122).

This paper addresses the recent development of ecocriticism in non-Western contexts by way of taking this approach to examine New Poetry Movement (Phong trào Thơ mới, 1932-1945) of Vietnam. This body of Vietnamese literature has never been analyzed from the perspectives of ecocriticism. Instead, most existing scholarship about the New Poetry Movement emphasizes its role as an embodiment of a new paradigm in Vietnamese cultural and literary life in the early twentieth century. That is the emergence of individualism, which marked the shift of the form and content of Vietnamese literature and culture from the traditional models based on Confucian thought to much more modern ones based on Western thought. An ecocritical approach to Vietnamese New Poetry extends the significant dimension of this literature to cover environmental and ecological issues of early twentieth century Vietnam. Specifically, New Poetry, instead of emphatically describing romantic personal emotions, embraces the themes of natural disasters and ecological wounds caused by colonization. As such, the ecocritical approach potentially provides New Poetry with new political position; that is, the criticism of colonial condition.

### **III. Natural Disasters in Vietnamese New Poetry**

Ecocriticism, especially in its latest development, have emphasized the understanding of literary responses to environmental crises, and other social uncertainties caused by climate change, water deficiency, deforestation, and green house. The University of Virginia Press developed a book series, entitled *Under the Sign of Nature: Ecocriticism, investigating how weather abnormalities both have been reflected in and have shaped literature and art in America*. As part of this series, *Dancing with Disaster Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times* (2015) by Kate Rigby affirms that the disastrous effects of climate change over the world indicate the inexplicable complexity in human and natural history. Rigby analyzes many descriptions of catastrophes from the Black Death in the Middle Ages to the super typhoons of the twenty-first century to point out dynamic interactions between humans and non-human factors that are causative, extensive, and consequent.

Another work that explores literary response to the natural disasters is *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (2016) by Jesse Oak. In way of analyzing English novels about London fog in the late 19th and early 20th century, the author asserts the importance of fiction in understanding climate change, environmental pollution, and ecological collapse. Also exploring the involvement of literature in environmental matters is the work *Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice and Political Ecology* (2014) by Byron Caminero-Santangelo. Based on postcolonial studies, political ecology, environmental history and environmental literature in Africa, Byron Caminero-Santangelo highlights how African writers have challenged the unjust and ecologically destructive forms of modern development and resource exploitation.

Interestingly, the most recent publication in the series on the relationship of literature and the unusual climate change is about poetry. They are *Building Natures: Modern American Poetry, Landscape Architecture, and City Planning* (2017) by Julia Daniel and *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* (2018) by Lynn Keller. The former examines the influences of landscape architecture, city planning and park management on American poetry, analyzing how the twentieth century modernists engaged with the green world and artificial public playgrounds. The latter focuses on the 21st century writing of thirteen North American poets who have tried to step through literary conventions in search of forms and languages that match complex environmental problems.

In Vietnam, the ecocritical scholarship that focuses on the relationship between literature and disaster issues largely explores contemporary Vietnamese literature, particularly the prose genre (Nguyễn Đăng Điệp 2017: 1-10). Vietnamese poetry, especially *Thơ mới* (Romantic New Poetry), 1932-1945, is mainly explored in terms of reflecting, evoking and encouraging harmonious relationships between man and nature. New poems about natural disasters and associated social issues have not received much attention from the perspective of ecocriticism by researchers (Nguyễn Đăng Điệp 2014: 31-46). This paper aims to fill this gap by analyzing descriptions

about natural disasters and destructions in New Poetry, understanding how those descriptions reflect colonial conditions of Vietnam in the early twentieth century.

It is discernible that New Poetry expresses human awareness of natural phenomena unfavorable to man. The lyrical characters in New Poetry acknowledge that natural phenomena do not please people in the tropical monsoon land. In other words, the physical responses of people to climates and ecologic systems typical of the tropics occur frequently in this poetry. For example, Anh Tho's poem "In the Summer" (Vào hè) describes the sultry, stinky, and exhausted silence of the northern Vietnamese summer:

The sun was burning, the garden trees were breathing the wind  
The alley was full of flies and mosquitoes; the butterflies were absent. ...  
In the fields, rice also began to thirst  
The young girls sluggishly pulled the bucket string.

The hot sun and the dense heat create a thick, stuffy space; the air does not move, the silent objects make the space more stagnant; the appearance of flies and mosquitoes indicate that the air is humid and still. Such a summer-noon atmosphere definitely drains human vitality; people also become somber, and tired; and even young people become "sluggish". The poem is a poetic description of geographical characteristics in the mid-summer time of the Northern Delta of Vietnam, which is both high temperature and high humidity, easily making the body and mind of human drowsy and exhausted.

The acknowledgment of the inevitable but unfavorable natural conditions against the human mental and body forms the main theme in Đoàn Văn Cù's poem "The Village Field" (Đồng làng). Here, the geographical features (soil, climate, water level, and temperature) are the most challenging to human activities and to plants' survival in the Northern Delta of Vietnam. These challenges appear directly in this poem:

June afternoon and night the water dried up  
The sound of chicken raising the neck ...



July it rained, flooding four sides  
Late-night copper waves hit the bamboo-made banks ...  
January's wind and rain were freezing  
...

The poem features the typical climatic features of the North from time to time. The appearance of the specific time in the poem ("June", "July", "January") gives the impression of the immutable harsh nature. As thousands of generations pass, June is the driest and hottest month of the year, July is the rainiest month, and January is the coldest though theoretically it is spring. Dwellers, as described, appear to have familiarized with the drought in June, flood in July and the coldness in January. In other words, that the climate does not favor humans and other beings is normalized in lives of people in River Delta area. More than that, farm work still takes place in accordance to climatic characteristics of each time: January is for plowing and December is for beating the soil and sowing seeds.

The change of soil over time, accompanied by the blurring of human traces, is also described as a rule in another poem, entitled "Afternoon rain on the grave" (Chiều mưa trên mộ địa) by Phan Văn Dật:

The old tombs are spacious  
River water has not evaded yet  
Now each year the soil is increasingly falling  
Every day exposing a few more skulls  
Eroding soil, naked banks  
The bones drifted together

The poem describes the erosion of burial grounds, normally established in rice paddies, due to river tides and season floods. The transformation of the burial ground here looks like the rhyme of the universe. The disappearance of human bodies becomes natural. As such, the poem seems to contain a philosophy about the relationship between man and nature, that is the mental acceptance of the harsh conditions of nature. By bringing in the poems the unfavorable aspects and conditions of nature towards the man, New

Poetry reflects and develops a spirit of harmony with nature and the natural way of life of man. Evoking such a philosophy, New Poetry seems to attempt to build a dialectic and indirect relationship between nature and culture. It seems to reassert man as part of nature, or as part of the natural cycle just like the rest of this world. With this meaning, New Poetry potentially offers a point that is relevant to the classic ecocriticism. That is the emphasis on man-made landscape as the symbol of instability, death, and loneliness and nature as the place of alleviation and protection.

But nature in Poetry also appears as a threatening force to human life. Together with socio-cultural forces, nature participates in human destruction. In other words, New Poetry contains the poems that demonstrate mismatches of cultural and natural duality. Poems about natural disasters of New Poetry show that people are both struggling and fleeing from society while struggling and feeling from nature at the same time.

Specifically, a series of poems in the New Poetry movement describes natural disasters of the delta area in the form of stories that contain events, plots, and characters. In them, the two main protagonists are human and water; the narrative progresses in the order that water attacks humans and in return, humans psychologically, physiologically and physically react to escape from it. The final win always belongs to nature. This is apparent in the poem "Night rain on the Fish Tent" (Mưa đêm lều vó) by Trần Huyền Trân:

Rain flooding pond, rain throughout the night  
The trees on the shore bewildered, seeing the rising water  
My tent, ants have moved to the roof  
The old fisherwoman worries that she does not have a boat

Here, people and creatures reacted passively to the floods: "trees bewildered", "ants ... moved to the roof", and "the old fisherwoman worries that he doesn't have a boat". The inability of man facing the nature is also demonstrated in the poem "Mountain rain" (Mưa ngàn) by Hồ Dzenh:

April flood and heavy rain  
Water flowing down bringing along all the yellow leaves  
Road back: flooded river, floating bridge  
The way to your hometown is too far away!

Culture - embodied in objects made by humans for survival such as "boats", "tents", "bridges", "ways of return" -- become useless and are even destroyed by the onslaught of nature (bridges are washed away, roads are flooded).

In the works by the female poet Anh Tho, natural disasters are described as the "wrath" of heaven and earth. Both the sun and the flood appeared in a fierce, fervent state: "the sun is shining through the golden sun!". All living creatures were exhausted facing the drought:

Banana garden wilted in silence  
The vegetables in the pond were dried up  
In the fields, ripened rice was burned to the ground (Great Drought).

Anh Tho also describes storms and floods as raging hurricanes:

Rains are pouring all over the sky,  
The wind is roaring all over the earth, hurting trees  
Lightning raging from the sky vibrating  
Howling long snails in fear  
In the wind roaring green bamboo (Thunderstorm night).  
The scene of the broken dyke is described as a cataclysm:  
The dyke broke down on a rainy night  
River water flowed massively, submerging the rice fields (Flood).

The poem "The sound of waves" (Tiếng sóng) by Phạm Huy Thông also shares the scene of terrible storms and floods, which become fiercer when being placed in a dark space:

There are many dark nights like hell,  
Waves like a holy ghost howling,  
Naturally, in the dark, lightning flashed  
And storms roaring and thunders booming  
Chaotic night waves shouted loudly

The whole universe seemed to be buried in a storm!

Strong verbs "massively ... pour", "roar", "slash tree", "strike back", "roar ... snatch tree", "howl", "roar", "Booming", "thunderstorms" and "chaos of lightning," emphasize the wild and rage angers of the nature. And the whole universe, including people, became small and helpless as if "to be buried in a storm!". Likewise, the poem "Deep Love" (Tình thâm) by Hôi Văn Thảo also shows the "cruelty" of nature:

A big and cruel wave  
Slowly slap the hip  
Leaning ... then falling ... the farmer:  
"Oh! hurry up! Otherwise I will die! ...

In the dark pool a person was wading  
Hands holding the child, holding his wife, floundering in the water ...

Silence ... slowly sinking into the bottom of the water  
Wanting to pull his wife up, but being exhausted  
Trying his best to raise up the child, diving straight to shore  
Looking back, just a hazy sequence  
Where is the corpse of unlucky flowing?

The poem is like a short film showing a family caught in a flood. The husband tries to save his wife and children. However, he is exhausted; the wife sacrifices herself, leaving him so that he can save their child.

All the poems are about human fear and horror in the face of natural disasters. Man becomes small and helpless in front of it; cultural objects and human civilization are depicted in the state of fleeing from nature, powerless and overthrown by nature. Here, it seems that people who are at the deathly pinnacle of their lives - on the boundary between life and death --become prisoners of culture and history. They realize that their lives are ruled by nature and that they could never be able to live in a space out of nature. The poems seem to be proving that man cannot expect a relief either in culture or in nature.

New poems about natural disasters also present a deep sense

of space and place as a fact that the lyrical author and the characters deeply feel connected with words, images, and stories that are related to their own geographic place. This embodies what the critic Neil Evernden describes the ways through which ecological stories evolve (Evernden 1978: 16-20). The sensitivity of people to geography is more discernible in Doan Van Cu's poem "Omen: Good, Evil, Weather" ("Điềm ứng: lành dữ, thời tiết"). In this poem, natural phenomena correspond to individual and communal destinies: for example, the phenomenon "bear eating the moon" is the omen of "community's unavoidable hunger"; "crowing hen" is a signal of bad news; similarly, "the black clouds rising in the east, it is about to storm / The crabs scrawling on the main road: a flood is coming... / The moon is covered with clouds: there are coming drought and cracked fields / Ants crawling on the walls: big rains are wading / lightening mid-autumn moonlight: a good harvesting is coming / A dark night, ghosts are wandering/ if they are lighting green, it will be sunny; red, raining / Crows crying, dead people, dead soul". The poem demonstrates human's recognition or awareness of the initiative and acumen of natural creatures in particular and of the non-human world at large. The poem is also the human's self-consciousness about the inseparable relationship between their lives and the lives of all beings.

Notably, this relationship tends to appear in ominous and catastrophic forms. This shows the human's insecurity living in the universe. In another poem, Đoàn Văn Cừ names this insecurity as "Lingering Vague Fears" (Những mối lo sợ phấp phồng). The poem is short, but includes adjectives that indicate human's constant mental crises facing natural disasters: "youth and elders are afraid" and "flabbergasted worrying the broken dyke":

June rain flashes brightly  
 The wind flies, the straw swirls in the distance  
 Youth and elders are looking for ways to avoid storms  
 Take the pestle to support the house  
 July is resplendent with dike protection  
 It rains, flood water keeps pouring back  
 Villagers flabbergast, worrying broken embankments  
 At late night, they cut the bamboo stumps

June has not yet come, but the lyrical character and the lyrical author have faintly feared about the natural disasters normally happening during this time. All the characters in the poem are anxious about the disasters and even take extreme actions in responding to the forecasted catastrophes: storm has not come yet, but people have already "supported the house;" the embankment has not been broken yet, but people have already rushed to "cut the bamboo stump" even in the dark to support it. This indicates that people constantly live in a state of anxiety and uncertainty. In other words, natural disasters and other dangers hidden in nature are seen as possible at any time and people are constantly feeling insecure. Yi-Fu Tuan, a humanist geographer in his book *The Landscape of Fear* affirmed that this type of uncertainty is common in many ecological literatures (Tuan 1979). Natural catastrophic events cause humans to struggle and even die in the literal sense of the word. Yi-Fu Tuan describes this strange connection - the connection that occurs between human consciousness and a place - as an "awareness of the place," where from time to time, places can become places of terror or a landscape filled with dark images of the mind and with fears of drought, earthquake, floods, famines, and diseases that are all felt by members of a community (Tuan 1979). The village space in the New Poetry with the emergence of natural disasters becomes a container filled with fears of seemingly captive people, helpless people, and people of failure.

But the New Poetry of natural disasters not only reflects man's self-awareness of their failure in front of nature and his abandon of the traditional thinking of nature as a place to return for peace and stability. Rather, New Poetry's narratives about natural disasters reflect and participate in a discourse on environmental and social justice. Observably, disaster poems focus on rural areas and the inferior social groups. In other words, those who suffer the disaster can be classified under what Karen Warren calls "Other human groups" in her book *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It is and Why It Matters* (2000). According to Warren, inferior people groups such as women, people of color, children, and the poor people belong to the Other human groups. The inferior position is derived from the condition of being unfairly excluded

from the occupation of land and other natural sources. The characters who are defeated and exhausted by nature as seen in the New Poetry of Vietnam are largely women. It is the girl who visits the field in the poem "Big Drought" (Đại hạn) and "the young girls" drawing water from the well in the poem "In the summer" (Vào hè) by Anh Thơ. It is the wife drowned in the poem "Deep Love" (Tình thâm) of Hồ Văn Tháo. The appearance of the image of women in Anh Thơ's drought poems interestingly corresponds to Karen Warren's depiction of unjustly possessed (labor force) condition of women in drought conditions. Warren describes that in Asia and Africa, the majority of women and children are responsible for securing water. The scarcity of water causes women to walk farther to find water. And in Vietnamese New Poetry, the emergence of depressed women in the drought reflects both the possessed state of their labor – farming and gardening identified as women's work – and women's risks and dangers in the face of natural disasters. And as Warren argues, among those who suffer from environmental damage including the white, the black, the poor, children, women, the elderly, colonists, and Third World people, women are the most exposed to disproportionately high risks and dangers compared to men.

Not only women but also farmers are affected by natural disasters in Vietnamese New Poetry. The low class of those directly affected by natural disasters can be implied through the image of tents and thatched houses that pervade many new poems. As commonly described, the structure of these setting places is largely fragile, so poor farmers are the most direct and fastest subject exposed to the destructing forces of natural disasters: "In the village, the roof flies away" (Storm (Cơn giông), Anh Thơ), "All over the village, the house roof is exposing to the open air" (Thunderstorm night (Đêm going tố), Anh Thơ). Moreover, the destruction of nature is not only manifested in the fact that it takes away human lives but also in the fact that it threatens human survival. That is, for poor peasants, natural disasters destroy their crops – their food and clothes: gardens are being flooded: "The trees were lost in the middle of the immense" (Flood (Lụt), Anh Thơ), fields are drying "In the fields, ripen rice was burned to the ground ... / The girls took

each other to visit the fields. / Roll the buck rope depressively on the deserted field ... / In the field, ripened rice is dry till dead" (Great Drought, Anh Thơ). Lost crops, starvation, and homelessness are all the consequences of natural disasters that the farmers suffered.

Here, it seems that the Vietnamese New Poetry, with poems about hostile natural disasters, reflect the weather situation and social condition of Vietnam that were associated with colonization before 1945. According to the agricultural report of the colonial administrators in Indochina, Annam farmers always faced the dangers of tropical climate including storms, floods and droughts and related dangerous diseases. From 1902 to 1918, the Red River Delta was flooded every year; from 1913 to 1915, devastating floods destroyed 94,000 and 365,000 hectares of rice fields. In the years before the World War I, per capita rice consumption dramatically decreased and hunger was rampant. This situation became worse in 1916 as a result of droughts and floods. The rice harvest yielded half of the previous year's crop. In the 1920s, similar conditions forced northern farmers to become workers in the rubber plantation areas in the south and even further on the island of New Caledonia (Brocheux 2015). In the years 1936-1937, farmers from North to Central Vietnam experienced unusual droughts and catastrophic floods. As described by Geoffrey C. Gunn, in the summer of 1937, the monsoon appeared, creating long rains throughout the Red River Delta. In provinces such as Bac Ninh, Hai Huong, Hung Yen, and Bac Giang, dykes broke all at once, water spilled over the area. This made the productivity of rice decrease significantly. Famine threatened severely (Gunn 2014 121). Thus, the Vietnamese New Poetry reflects the local natural conditions and its impacts on the psychological life, physical condition and other material aspects of contemporary Vietnamese people.

#### **IV. Ecological Wounds in Vietnamese New Poetry**

With the advent of the animal rights movement, ecocritics increasingly accept that the non-human beings have emotions - or



at least are able to endure and experience pain - and therefore should be respected and sympathized (Phillips 2010: 1-2; Trexler 2015). Specifically, although the ecocritics do not claim that other ecosystems have emotions similar to humans, they do recognize the fragility and the biological importance of certain geographical areas. Human activities can adversely affect the species in these areas, even creating some lasting wounds on them. In order to sense the ecological wounds, environmentalists developed an awareness that humans are actually trapped in an ecosystem like any other animals. That is, when humans destroy the landscape by discharging hazardous waste into it and by blocking or filling wetlands, those interventions also spoil quality of drinking water, shade and oxygen needed for human life and limit humans' ability to mitigate floods with natural drainage. That wounded ecosystem would hurt people in return (Woolbright 2011: iv-v). Ecological critics have searched in literature for suggestive presentations of ecological wounds. Examining the Vietnamese New Poetry, this paper argues that this body of modern Vietnamese literature contains haunting expressions about painful feelings of the ecological world.

Indeed, a prominent theme in many new poems is the loss and vulnerability of beings living in forests. In these poems, natural beings painfully groan due to brutal interventions from humans. That is the scene of the forest being slaughtered: the animals are murdered, resulting in "the carpet of leaves and the blood of the birds over floating;" leaves of the forest are trampled, "groaning" (Fighting Elephants (Chiến tượng), Chế Lan Viên). In the poem, entitled "Visitors from afar" (Khách từ ngàn phương), by Cẩm Lai, the forest world becomes barren: "the forest is empty, trees are scattered"; only "yellow leaves... shivering;" in remaining tree bushes, "the leaves are leaving," and lonely birds are chirping "anxiously." The animals in Dinh Hùng's poetry howl and cry: "The wild gibbons cry, scaring the late moon" (The falling direction of the stars (Những hướng sao rơi)); "The forest that day echoed savage laughter / ... I came here to hear the mountain gibbons sadly crying" (A nature's girl (Người giá thiên nhiên)). The lotus pond in Trần Huyền Trân's poetry transforms into a sewage: "Being famous as a lotus pond/it is in fact now a waste water pond" (Mother raising children (Mẹ

nuôi con)).

The poem “Green Nostalgia” (Nhớ rừng) by Thế Lữ presents the most complex vulnerability of forest beings in particular and of nature in general. Vietnamese scholars have largely examined the poem’s symbolism, which embodies Vietnamese intellectuals’ longing for freedom in the colonized condition of their country (Nguyễn Đình Hòa 1972:17). However, this poem in its literal meaning is about the condition and the mood of a tiger living in a cage in a park. This man-made living space is supposed to save this animal from extinction. However, the tiger is constantly nostalgic for the wild life in the forest. S/he misses “the sound of the wind roaring ... the voice of the mountain screaming.” S/he also longs for the majesty that s/he possessed in the past, when s/he could “sing out loud the long epic” and “bravely walk with dignity.” All the moves in the past occurs in heroic manners, that are contradictory to the imprison of the present:

Moving the body like a smooth rolling wave  
Quietly playing with dark shadows, thorns leaves, sharp grass  
In the dark cave, when my eyes are crippled  
I can make everything silent.

But all these nostalgic images reflect mental exhaustion of the tiger, who is forced to live in the man-made house. The poem apparently criticizes the nature preservation that does not favor the animals and other non-human beings, whose lives are attached to the wilderness and freedom.

The idea of appreciating the wild nature (animals and plants) in the poem corresponds to the complex notion of nature protection in recent discussions among ecocritics. Bernard Williams emphasizes the paradox in projects of preserving the untouched natural spaces and species. He says, “we have to use our power to preserve a sense of what [nature] is not in our power.” And “anything we leave untouched, we have already touched.” The poem by Thế Lữ is filled with the sound of birds, plants and trees. However, they are all set in the context of a lost past, which is only for memory of the lyrical character, the tiger. That is the lost scenery. The reality in the

present is the loss and mourning of wild nature. The blood-stained and wound-stained images of the forest in the poems suggest a warning of the consequences of the wildlife protection programs that aim to capture animals and place them into parks.

According to Ursula Heise, ecocritics have recently asked the question which conflicts shape stories about endangered species in specific cultural communities. In the 70s and 80s of the twentieth century, when mass extinctions of many species happened, the term “biodiversity” emerged as an imperative of the environmental movement, resulting to the frequent concern of extinction that was seen as a guarantee of the quality of the environmental movement. “Endangered or extinct animals become a way of commemorating or mourning the loss to think of one’s own collective identity in the context of the major change in modernization or colonization, or both (Heise 2107: 8). In this understanding, the image of the tiger nostalgic for the freedom indicates that the preservation programs did not prioritize nature’s benefit and survival but proved human domination. That is, this animal is supposed by humans to have the tendency of living and feeling like humans; thus it is thought to be certainly happy to live in the park. The tiger’s view of the park as a prison suggest a criticism of the ignorance of human towards the non-human beings’ voices, feelings, and emotions. Moreover, the green nostalgia of the tiger suggests the present disappearance of wild landscapes caused by preservation programs. While seizing land, forest and species into preserved areas, owners of these programs must potentially abuse landscapes and injure ecosystems.

Moreover, contextualized in the colonial preservation initiatives in the early twentieth century in Vietnam, the poem “Green Nostalgia” provokes political meanings that are associated with ecological messages. Specifically, the nostalgia for freedom and the imprisoned condition of the tiger apparently referred to the disappearance of forest which was the result of the colonial projects of preserving nature and building parks in Indochina. In his study “Protection of Forests and Colonial Environmentalism in Indochina, 1860-1945,” Frédéric Thomas (2009) examines ecological consequences of the French’s occupation of Indochina’s forests and establishment of conservation sectors. In order to rationalize the colonial

government's intervention in Indochina's land and forest resources, French administrative officials fabricated the discourse of intense destruction of nature, in which precious animals such as water buffalo were increasingly extinct and many died due to viral infections. The discourse aimed to justify the governmental projects of transforming natural land into protected areas which would expand the land areas controlled and occupied by the colonial government. By 1928, up to 6.8 percent of the forests in Indochina were classified as protected areas and by the end of the colonial period, six hundred protected areas were set up in Indochina, representing 5.2 percent of the total area of rural land, 8.1 percent forest land. In 1926, the colonial government planned to create a conservation area for some species and to build a national park. The purpose of these plans was to protect elephants, rhino, wild buffalo, and female deer from extinction. And, as Aline Demay (2015) describes in his book *Tourism and Colonization in Indochina (1898-1939)*, the establishment of national parks to protect the indigenous flora was mainly aimed at attracting tourists (113-115). And as noted by Thomas (2009), protected area projects did not aim to protect the tropical forest environment but often to give priority to "free exploitation of the richest forest areas".

Thus, the poems about forests in general in New Poetry and the poem "Nhớ rừng" in particular, definitely resonated the public discussions about the colonial project of constructing forest reservation areas. Moreover, with emphasis on the nostalgia of forest creatures who were free and happy in the past and on their currently imprisoned and vulnerable condition, the poem seems to have participated into the anti-colonial movement in Vietnam from the late 1920s to the late 1930s. In other words, as the historian Thomas (2009) observed, public opposition to conservation policies form a central factor in the formation of many national independence movements [in Indochina]" (105).

It is obvious that natural disasters and ecological themes of the Vietnamese New Poetry are associated with the colonial conditions of Vietnam during the French colonial period (1858-1945). In other words, ecocriticism provides the Vietnamese New Poetry with undeniable political and social allegories, all of which suggest a

criticism of colonial policies of exploiting the local natural and ecological sources. These social and political messages potentially attend to rising theoretical and practical turns in ecocriticism recently. That is, this literary approach increasingly concerns complex associations between ecological and environmental problems with social and political conditions. Specifically, at the beginning 1970s, ecocriticism mostly concentrated on nature writing; since the early 21th century, this approach has tended to explore how literature presents social and political issues associated with environmental and ecological ones. In other words, recent environmental crisis - especially those associated with weather changes - have driven many environmental activists and even environmental scientists to further think about the complex connections of culture, language and narrative with natural and environmental issues.

In her lecture delivered at the Department of Literature (Hanoi National University of Social Sciences) on December 2, 2017, Ursula Heise quoted environmental historian Sverker Sörlin (2012: 788):

“Our belief that science alone could deliver us from the planetary quagmire is long dead. For some time, hopes were high for economics and incentive-driven new public management solutions. However, after the 20 years since the Rio Conference in 1992... we must again determine path-ways to sustainability. It seems this time that our hopes are tied to the humanities.”

The significance of such a transformation is not just a closer analysis of what is often referred to as the "human dimension of environmental crises" in the policy statements of NGOs and international institutions. Instead, when exploring local, ethnic, regional and global cultures of environmental issues, environmental humanists have searched to redefine perceptions of ecological crises. These crises, which are often primarily approached as questions about governmental policies, technology and science - like pollution, biodiversity loss, global warming - are now understood as challenges to social justice and cultural discrimination.

According to Ursula, environmental justice has formed a

central question of the latest development of ecocriticism. Environmental justice as a movement emerged in the United States in the 1980s, focusing on the uneven distribution of natural resources and environmental risks among different population groups. For example, colored communities (particularly African-American and Latino-American groups) often face hazardous industries, hazardous waste sites, polluted air and water, and barren soil. At the same time, similar environmental movements were prominent in the southern hemisphere: the sociologist Ramachandra Guha and the political scientist Joan Martínez-Alier called it "the environmental movement of the poor." This phrase means that communities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America believe that fighting against deforestation, erosion, pollution and government land acquisition is for self-preservation. Currently, as Ursula observed, ethnic minority communities (people of color, women, ethnic minorities, low-income people) are simultaneously fighting against conservation projects such as protected areas of wildlife or national parks. They are inherently established by environmental organizations in North America or Western Europe without taking into account opinions of the local communities. Environmental justice movements are not always easily connected to each other. Nevertheless, over the past decade, in new areas of social struggle such as food justice, energy justice, and fair weather, the struggles for a sustainable ecosystem have become connected in many parts of the world (Heise 2017: 5-8).

By way of implying colonial conditions in poetic descriptions of natural disasters and ecological wounds, the Vietnamese New Poetry affirms recent social and political concerns of ecocriticism. This potentially indicates dynamic developments of ecocriticism when it comes to non-Western literatures.

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