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**Political Orientation in Ecocriticism: National Allegory in Vietnamese Ecofiction by Trần Duy Phiên**

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**Volume 24 Issue 5 (December 2022) Article 1****Chi P. Pham,****"Political Orientation in Ecocriticism: National Allegory in Vietnamese Ecofiction by Trần Duy Phiên"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol24/iss5/1>>

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**Abstract:** Since the late 1990s, theories and practices of ecocriticism have tended to be more politically engaged than in its earliest phase, considering that "environmental problems cannot be solved without addressing issues of wealth and poverty, overconsumption, underdevelopment, and the notion of resource scarcity" (Heise 251-2). This paper engages with the political orientation in ecocriticism by examining presentations of humans and nature in three Vietnamese short stories – "Kiến và người" (The Ants and the Man, 1990), "Mối và người" (The Termite and the Man, 1992), and "Nhện và người" (The Spider and the Man, 2012) by Trần Duy Phiên (born 1942). These presentations center around conflicts between human characters and insect characters, in which the former attempt to dominate and exploit the latter and the latter resist and take revenge on the former. This paper delves into the political context of these presentations which is the Vietnamese government's projects of modernizing the nation since the time it came into power in 1945 and particularly since the time of Reform in 1986. These projects include the making of modern citizens, civilizing the highland, and modernizing the national economy, all have aimed at clearing colonial legacies in material and mental aspects of postcolonial Vietnam. The paper argues that national allegory is a characteristic of Vietnamese ecofiction, which forms Vietnamese intellectuals' engagement with the postcolonial condition of Vietnam. This argument in its turn affirms political engagements in ecocriticism as a historical situation, particularly in former colonial countries.

## Chi P. PHAM

### Political Orientation in Ecocriticism: National Allegory in Vietnamese Ecofiction by Trần Duy Phiên

Since the late 1990s, theories and practices of ecocriticism have tended to be more politically engaged than in its earliest phase, considering that "environmental problems cannot be solved without addressing issues of wealth and poverty, overconsumption, underdevelopment, and the notion of resource scarcity" (Heise 251-2). This paper engages with the political orientation in ecocriticism by examining presentations of humans and nature in three Vietnamese short stories – "Kiến và người" (The Ants and the Man, 1990), "Mối và người" (The Termite and the Man, 1992), and "Nhện và người" (The Spider and the Man, 2012) by Trần Duy Phiên (born 1942). These presentations center around conflicts between human characters and insect characters, in which the former attempt to dominate and exploit the latter and the latter resist and take revenge on the former. This paper delves into the political context of these presentations which is the Vietnamese government's projects of modernizing the nation since the time it came into power in 1945 and particularly since the time of Reform in 1986. These projects include the making of modern citizens, civilizing the highland, and modernizing the national economy, all have aimed at clearing colonial legacies in material and mental aspects of postcolonial Vietnam. The paper argues that national allegory is a characteristic of Vietnamese ecofiction, which forms Vietnamese intellectuals' engagement with the postcolonial condition of Vietnam. This argument in its turn affirms political engagements in ecocriticism as a historical situation, particularly in former colonial countries.

National allegory, a term coined by Fredric Jameson (1986), refers to the way of reading literary texts coming from non-Western cultures as "the embattled situation of the public...culture, and society" (69). Imre Szeman -- like Jameson, a Marxist literary critic -- specifies the idea of "national allegory," highlighting it as the emphasis on the context to which the text "speaks" as the condition of the interpretation (Szeman 803-827). It is the material world in which the text is produced and with which it engages. In colonies and former colonies, that is the condition of struggles for national independence and cultural hegemony in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Szeman even develops the concept of "national allegory" as a strategy of a cultural revolution in the former colonies. It aims at undoing subaltern habits that colonialism and imperialism implanted into the third world cultures. That is, ways of writing and appreciating literary texts as national allegories form the third world intellectuals' efforts in producing authentic and sovereign subjectivity and collectivity suppressed by colonialism and its postcolonial legacy. Inspired by this Marxist literary criticism, this paper approaches the three Vietnamese stories by Trần Duy Phiên, asking how these works – widely categorized ecofiction written by a commonly-known leading Vietnamese eco-writer – engage with nation-building of postcolonial Vietnam. As will be explored in the paper, narratives on the power and agency of the non-human characters in the stories mostly end at evoking public anxiety about governmental projects of modernizing the nation, officially seen as the pavement towards socialism and national hegemony. In other words, the ecofiction texts by Trần Duy Phiên demonstrate Vietnamese writers' efforts in warning the public about the possible continuity of colonizing practices in postcolonial nation-building of Vietnam. This national allegory of Vietnamese ecofiction that the paper examines will potentially indicate the recent tendency of pulling ecocriticism back to human-centered directions that are political and social commitments.

The choice of the three stories "The Ants and the Man" (abbr: AM), "The Termite and the Man" (TM) 1992), and "The Spider and the Man" (SM) as the research subject of this paper is derived from special connection of this author's writing career and ecocriticism. Before being widely appreciated as the most prolific writer of ecofiction, Trần Duy Phiên was marginalized by the government and thus neglected by the public due to his political background. He was categorized as an author from the Republic of Vietnam (1954-1975) whose writings would be officially banned by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the political regime that took power in 1975. Under the new government, even if an author of the former regime continued writing, his works were normally declined for publication. As a South Vietnamese writer, Trần Duy Phiên experienced social exclusion in the early days of the Socialist Republic: from the latter half of the 1970s to the first half of the 1980s, he was forced to confine himself to his home town in Kontum, a province located in the Central Highlands region of Vietnam. He had to withdraw from the writing and teaching that he had done under the former regime and had to take manual jobs of various types to earn a living. The author writes about his struggle for survival due to the socialist government's intensive distrust of people from the former Republic of Vietnam, of people growing up in so-called governmentally uncontrolled remote mountain areas. He also lost his creative ability and passion for writing due to the

dominance of propaganda in socialist art and literature, to which that the postcolonial government of Vietnam forced writers and educators to adhere. Trần Duy Phiên did not take up his pen again until the early period of Reform (1986-1991), when the government allowed freedom of creativity, accepting critical realism of the new society (Trần Duy Phiên, "Ý thức và tôi"). That is, presenting negative aspects within the socialist society became typical of this new wave of reportage in Vietnamese writing (see Tuan Ngọc Nguyễn).

Nevertheless, Trần Duy Phiên's writing is not widely appreciated in mainstream Vietnamese academic forums until the presence of ecocriticism as a literary approach from environmental perspectives in Vietnam. This field of research has provided the theoretical ground on which he has been officially recognized as the first modern Vietnamese author who focuses on environmental themes in his literary works and indeed as the founder of environmental literature in Vietnam. In other words, the appreciation of Trần Duy Phiên as the author with the clearest environmental consciousness in modern Vietnamese literature. During two international conferences on ecocriticism in 2017 and 2018 as well as in numerous workshops and local conferences on this theme in recent years, Vietnamese scholars, mainly in the field of literary studies, have attempted to identify and trace literary works that may be said to be environmentally oriented.<sup>1</sup> In this context, Trần Duy Phiên has risen in stature in modern Vietnamese literature: thanks to his works, Vietnamese scholars could propose strong arguments about environmental literature in Vietnam in the present and the past. So, the integration of ecocriticism into Vietnamese literary studies since the late 2010s, was the precondition for the influence of concepts such as *văn học sinh thái* (ecoliterature), *thơ sinh thái* (ecopoetry), or *truyện sinh thái* (ecofiction) in Vietnamese literary thought, thereby rescuing Trần Duy Phiên from his previous marginalization.

Accordingly, his trio of stories TM, AM, and SM would have not been recognized as typical ecofiction of Vietnam if ecocriticism did not appear in Vietnam. As noted in the re-typed manuscript provided by the author himself, his writing of "AN" was completed on February 23, 1989, and published in the newspaper *Đất Quảng* [Quang Land] in September-October 1990. "TM" was completed on March 3, 1989, and was published in the journal *Cửa Việt* in May 1992. And due to political criticism of the published stories in the series, the third story, "SM" despite being written in 1989, was not published until October 2012 in the journal *Sông Hương* [Huong River].<sup>2</sup> With the adoption of the environmentally oriented approach to literary studies in Vietnam in the late 2010s, Trần Duy Phiên's works have provided Vietnamese scholars with a case study to examine how much Vietnamese environmental literature fits the more general characteristics of Southeast Asian environmental literature that John Charles Ryan has characterized as an "upshot" of the cultural influences of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, and indigenous beliefs in animism and the sacredness of nature (Ryan 9-12). Broadly speaking, Vietnamese ecocritics have interpreted Trần Duy Phiên's three stories as relying on conventions of Asian nature writing along with minute details about the sensory experience of nature, deep understandings of natural rhythms, and particularly emphasizes on the unity of humans and nature (Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy, "Tư tưởng sinh thái"; Nguyễn Thùy Trang, "Cảm quan sinh thái" and "Sự lật đổ quan niệm"). In other words, the three environmental stories by Trần Duy Phiên convey traditional images of Asian ecological harmony: as Karen Thornber has pointed out, Asian authors, in general, have long idealized humans' interactions with their nonhuman surroundings (Thornber, *Ecoambiguity* 199-200; "Environmental Crises" 198-211).

Nevertheless, the politically complex process in which Trần Duy was initially marginalized and then widely recognized by Vietnamese public suggests political involvements of his ecofiction. This article focuses on the political orientations of these ecological narratives, particularly conflicts around governmental policies that seek to promote images of modern citizens, civilized central highland areas, and modernized farming practices. This research direction is potentially the case, given current extensive discussions about political references in ecocriticism. Many environmental historians and ecocritics have argued against ecocentric positions and called for more engagement with issues of race, class, gender, and national identity in their fields. That is, environmental literary approaches must engage with serious and urgent questions of social and environmental justices; they 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, and the poor. Michael

<sup>1</sup> 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, entitled *Ecocriticism: Global and Local Voices*. The conference attracted presentations from twenty international and 102 Vietnamese scholars. In 2018, the newly-launched ASLE-ASEAN organization held its second workshop, *Ecologies in Southeast Asian Literatures: Histories, Myths and Societies*, in Hanoi.

<sup>2</sup> This retyped manuscript was shared with me by Dr. Nguyen Thi Tinh Thy (Hue University) through an email exchange on December 8, 2016.

Cohen has asserted that ecological literary criticism must be politically engaged, that is, it must inform actions dealing with a rising environmental crisis (Cohen 24-27). Similarly, Dana Phillips has stated that traditional ecocriticism was lingering in "the wilderness of signs"; he has urged ecocritics to address present-day "complexities of acid rain, global warming, and a host of other environmental ills" (Phillips 599). Likewise, Lawrence Buell has pointed out that ecological literary criticism should focus more on the impoverished and socially marginalized, and voices of victims of environmental injustice (Buell, *Future* 112). Or, as Terry Gifford has summarized it, ecocritics have moved in new directions, including ecofeminism, toxic industries, urbanization, globalization, ethnic and national identities, and environmental justice (Gifford, "Recent" 15). Provoked themes about ethnic and class tensions, moral corruption, and social degeneration caused by the Vietnamese government's modernizing projects in the ecological narratives by Trần Duy Phiên potentially indicate such turn toward greater political commitment among ecocritical scholars.

The three selected stories center around the event in which city citizens head to the highland areas, which mostly occur wild and empty, waiting for humans to come to cultivate them and make a profit from them. As described, the setting of the story TM is a place "tiếp với rừng" (next to the forest<sup>3</sup>), "giáp với núi" (near the hills), and "ở giữa một thung lũng nhỏ" (in the middle of a small valley's mist) where the northwest mountain tops are bright and clear; in the southeast valley, the fog descends as though clouds were falling onto blades of grass and onto the row of wet green orchids, cacti, and mums alongside the road. "AM" is set in a suburb next to a forest, a place where "mountains flood our eyes," and houses are located on the slope of the mountain. Clouds from the lowlands are like an ocean of grey water, spreading from the east to the west; it becomes hot and stuffy; forest and trees standstill; a thunderstorm passes by; then winds rush in; rain pours down torrentially; another bigger thunderstorm appears; water uproariously rasps on the tile-in roof; water suffuses from the yard to the mountain bottom; rain drops dance, sounding like "lóc cóc, long cong." It is possible to read here what Western ecocritics see as "a form of refuge from our right-angled, human-made environment" to be near nature (Slovic 104). Characters are urban men, either anxious or traumatized in life; they find solace and respect in nature; and significantly, they discover a broader framework of life in the system of ecology. For example, Uncle Bảy (Seven) in TM explicitly says that the fresh environment and plants of the highland help to forget his unwanted divorce. And in AM, the explicit cause of the family's move to the mountainous area is the father's belief that selling business – a typical job in the city -- is treacherous work and in self-farming as a good moral job of a socialist citizen. The settlement in the highland also provides the family with solace for distressed and repressed feelings as well as space for spiritual meditation, given that the family members want to escape from the deceitful lives of the city. That all means, failing in business and personal life, these men migrate to the forest and mountainous suburban areas. On the surface, descriptions of the mountain areas in the stories idealize and celebrate nature, following the classic ecofictional patterns that Cohen calls the 'praise-song school' of ecocriticism (21) with "experiences of individual epiphany" (Gifford 16). However, underlying such romanticized ecological descriptions is the "conquering gaze," of students and modern professionals in engineering, accounting, and business or the word of Dror Pimentel, "the gaze of modern, metaphysical man" (Pimentel 66). These citizens from the cities in the lowland undeniably cover the desire for controlling and making from nature with the thirst for peace of mind and satisfies their imagination and curiosity about the wildness and mysterious power of nature.

Evidently, their act of romanticizing the mountainous nature does not exist until he successfully runs the farming project. As soon as Uncle Seven arrives at the mountain, he immediately receives it as a natural resource that he can utilize to initiate his economic project. He implements scientific knowledge to exploit termites as food resources for the proposed chicken farm to reduce production costs and increase economic profits. Termites, native insects of the forest, are used as food for the chickens. Mr. Seven and Grand Nu calculate that without the available natural resource of termites, they will not be able to establish the farm in the forest because termites compensate for the lack of the necessary labor force and the cost of materials. They set up a lighting system throughout the thousand-square-meter farm to attract termites. At night, termites rush through the metal nets, falling like "a wind cascading across a rice field," while chickens continuously catch termites. Some jump up high to catch termites, opening their wings while falling on other chickens' heads; they even jump up repeatedly before their legs reach the floor while trying to catch termites stuck to other chickens' heads and tails. "There is a saying that blindness is like chicken eyes, but here the chickens are not blind at all. Their eyes are as sharply bright as stars [while eating termites]." The result is that the farm space is filled with termite wings: "in corners, termite wings pile up in a thick layer, some are mixed with husks, and some are

<sup>3</sup> All quotes from the Vietnamese texts are translated by the author.

entangled in walls and nets," while the "egg production of hens increases up to one and a half times. The time for raising chickens for meat is also shorter." The descriptions are exhausted with the character's vital rationalization of how to maximize the use of the natural source to feed the chickens.

Moreover, the characters stand in for the lowland and urban people who relocate to remote areas for purposes of modernization that end up exploiting and destroying resources and spaces. Mr. Seven in "The Termite and the Man," for example, is an engineer equipped with cutting-edge knowledge about modern agriculture. He seeks to establish a chicken farm in a forest with the ambition of becoming a millionaire, introducing modern, industrial-style agriculture: the farm is secured with iron wall frames and security nets; it is organized in terms of labor division, egg production, hybrid chickens adapted to the weather and environment, and food processing; and it is maintained with pharmacy micronutrients and modern methods of hygiene and disease prevention. Trần Duy Phiên's descriptions of chicken farming and egg-production abound with references to mechanization, automation, and accumulation - terms that are typical of modern farming operations: hens look like "machines of egg production;" "Grand Nu is like a machine." And noticeably, the moment in which the characters free themselves from the gaze at nature as an economic resource, paying attention to it as a living entity only comes when they complete their conquering career and enjoy its achievements.

More concretely, such romanticized narratives of natural phenomenon demonstrate a politics of the relations of power that celebrate the conquering career of the lowland citizens over the highland communities. This politics is particularly the case given the political and economic context of Vietnam out of which the three ecofiction stories by Trần Duy Phiên were written and published. 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, entitled "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, *Forests* 76-7; Evans 280-82). The program, as clearly written, strongly encourages organizations, collective groups, and farmers in areas that lack cultivated lands and unemployed non-agricultural householders to invest their labor and capital to move to wildland areas for living in them and developing them. This strategy is stated in Decision 254-CP, entitled *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). Decision 254-CP forms part of the nationally implemented governmental program initiated in the 1960s and further developed with Decision No. 95-CP on March 27, 1980, entitled "strongly developing the cultivation of large wildland areas for new economic zones."

This politics of governmental intervention in less developed areas, particularly in the Central Highlands, provided the context in which Trần Duy Phiên wrote and published his three ecofiction stories. Growing up in Kontum, a region of mountainous old-growth forests in central Vietnam and the place of settlement for many relocated people from the lowlands and "more developed" areas, he experienced the most radical and traumatic social, cultural, and natural transformations in his homeland that were triggered by governmental programs of "clearing the wilderness." Trần Duy Phiên has a special attachment to forests in particular and remote mountain areas in central Vietnam more broadly; his writings, including memoirs and novels, are frequently set in the forest highlands of central Vietnam, home to many ethnic groups as well as many animal and plant species. Therefore, he was able to hear, see, and feel directly the negative impacts of urban and lowland citizens' migration to and interventions into forests in particular and so-called wild or empty areas in general (Trần Hữu Lộc). The portrayal of the agricultural ventures in TM echoes the governmental program for "Building New Economic Zones" in the 1980s and 1990s; this program, as mentioned earlier, encouraged lowland and urban citizens in general and farmers, in particular, to relocate to and develop forest areas. Mr. Seven embodies the introduction of machines, science, and technology into remote forest areas, which reflect the governmental scheme that aims at a modern homogeneity of the nation.

More importantly, the romanticized narratives of the highlands' nature, as said, signals the gaze of a colonizing actor who successfully intervenes in highland territories, forcefully changing their economic operations for accumulating economic profits. In TM, the character appreciates the wildness of nature and values their idealized harmony with it, while at the same time they consume nature and turn it into products for capital accumulation. The plot of the story emphasizes the violence and destruction in the way humans implement modern knowledge to exploit the natural resources of the highland. The fights between the human characters and the non-human characters lead to the mass deaths of the latter. The termites in TM and the ants in AM are burnt to death at the end after they attack the farmers and destroy their entire agricultural successes. The three stories all end with the death of non-human characters after forceful struggles against humans' intervention into their territories. This signals the

failure of the government's nationwide application of scientific and industrial methods to traditional agriculture regardless of geographical, historical, and ethnic differences between the urbanized lowland areas and the rural highland ones. In other words, the failures of Trần Duy Phiên's characters with all their modern knowledge and equipment in the fight against the native insects signal the failure of programs for wilderness clearing in remote areas in general and the Central Highlands in particular for cooperatives and agro-industrial complexes. Lives of people, both the cultivator and the cultivated subjects, in the new economic zones "have been hard," and "the need for self-sufficiency in food ... has resulted in the heavy destruction of forests" in these areas (Evans 282). This forced modernization program indicates what Evans, an expert on ethnic politics in what was formerly Indochina, calls "internal colonialism" in postcolonial Vietnam (274). The program caused large-scale waves of lowland and city resident migration to the highlands in the 1980s (281), where they pursued livelihoods as farmers, traders, and laborers while keeping in mind the official mission of civilizing and modernizing their local neighbors (Schoenberger and Turner 674). Negative impacts of this migration on nature, such as deforestation and biodiversity loss, led to the creation of many government-sponsored environmental programs (McElwee, *Forests* 100-102).

The conflict between humans and the termites in TM and AM embodies the political orientation of the Vietnamese government's environmental programs in highland areas. Pamela D. McElwee deliberately uses the term "environment rule" in her book *Forests Are Gold: Trees, People, and Environmental Rule in Vietnam* (2016) to address such political directions in governmental programs of the environment in Vietnam. She argues that labor forces and state-led development have shaped what Vietnamese policy-makers identify as environmental "problems," how they emphasize environmental "truth," and how they conduct environmental programs. McElwee points out that this way of generating "environmental rule" in Vietnam is particularly explicit in remote highland areas where the state has applied strategies of environmental and natural resource protection to reorganize land ownership and population settlement and to search for labor availability and markets (10-61). "Environmental rule" occurs when states, organizations, or individuals use environmental or ecological reasons to justify changes in social planning. These environmental interventions "are never exclusively about 'nature' or ecology, but rather about people ... about seeing and managing people" (McElwee, *Forests* 5). This means that ecological management in Vietnam "was intended to bring the remote highlands [uncivilized territories] under greater state control" (Schoenberger and Turner 674). In other words, environment or ecology functions only as a label through which the Vietnamese government justifies its control of all social groups.

And it is undeniable that this control aims to force all groups to participate in the state's pursuit of modernization and industrialization; migrants from lowland cities relocate to remote areas not as protectors of nature but as settlers, landowners, and laborers, who are equipped with knowledge of modern economy and technology (McElwee, *Forests Are Gold* 50-72; McElwee, *Becoming Socialist* 182-213). As Gerald Hickey makes clear in his book *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands 1954-1976* (1982), societies in the forested areas have their own dynamic social and cultural practices, and they are neither "living fossils" nor blank slates for postwar Vietnamese policy-makers, modern citizens, and organizations who wish to force them onto the national path toward "progress," "development," and "modernity." Therefore, Trần Duy Phiên's environmental stories focus on the dynamic modernization of postcolonial Vietnam, rather than foregrounding listening to nature as a way of negotiating with the past or portraying nature as a mediator among beings in dealing with war traumas, as many other Vietnamese environmental narratives do (Tran Ngoc Hieu and Dang Ha 205-228). As such, environmental management in Vietnam is associated with the government's internal colonialist programs. The ecofiction stories by Trần Duy Phiên reflect and engage with such political orientation typical of Vietnamese environmental narratives.

Political criticism of Trần Duy Phiên's ecofiction also extend to the image of modernized citizens that is officially promoted in Vietnam. Put differently, the main character here embodies the image of "new [Vietnamese] people" that the Communist Party has constantly emphasized in its campaign for national industrialization. As asserted in the 7th Congress (1991), the new Vietnamese people in the era of the "industrialized country" (đất nước công nghiệp hóa) are intellectual, active, energetic, and creative; they must possess revolutionary morals, love for country, and faith in socialism; and they must have professional skills and practical abilities (Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *Văn kiện Đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ VII* 81). In the field of literature, the party's theoreticians still adhere to Marxist-Leninist ideology. Accordingly, literature must inform new Vietnamese people while fighting against any obstacles to the nation's socialist construction and independence (Đảng cộng sản Việt Nam, *Văn kiện hội nghị lần thứ tư* 54-55), and it is expected to build up the Vietnamese people's morals to serve the industrialization and modernization of the country. Such imagination of ideal citizens is reflected in the main characters of three stories, who are all well-educated and have high social status. They are

engineers, accountants, officials, and students who embody the notion of an idealized Vietnam as modernized and globalized in the reform era. Chiến, the main character of "The Spider and the Man," is a perfect representative of the ideal modern Vietnamese youth. He is a talented student, winning prizes in national competitions. In the entrance exam for graduate school, he achieves the top position at two universities, and he completes his degree in computer engineering as the first of his class. Chiến is a high-achieving intellectual: his university recruits him to be a teaching assistant, then sponsors him to study abroad, and later, he returns with an excellent Ph.D. degree. He also possesses talents in entertainment as a melodious singer and proficient painter. Chiến is an active citizen, ambitious in earning money quickly: upon his return from overseas, he is determined not to return to academia and decides to work for a company to earn more money and have greater freedom. Mr. Seven in TM is also ambitious becoming a millionaire with his modernized chicken farm. The family in AM establishes the agricultural crop farm to become a professional contributor of fresh, bio vegetables to the city. Constructing his ecological stories around highly educated characters with high social status, Trần Duy Phiên appears to conform his imagination to the mainstream idea of "modern Vietnamese," knowledgeable, confident, and victorious.

Interestingly, Trần Duy Phiên's ecological narratives reveal the powerlessness of the modernized in face of nature. Here, the power of nature is explicit in the stories' narrative structure which centers on the disrespect of nature as the cause of collapses of the humans' business projects. The narration of the three stories first follows a logic that highlights the power of humans: they intervene into the non-human characters' living spaces with the belief that the former will easily win over the latter, given the equipped modern knowledge of the former and the foolish and weakness of the latter. In other words, the main characters are prototypes of modern society; they are constructed as confidently dominating nature with machines and chemical substances to generate more economic profits. In AM, the family from the city decide to move to the forest nearby to farm for a living; the family moves in the dry season, building fences and planting crops. The cultivation of the new land is described with excitement and determination, which is presented in the short and rhythmic sentences: "they cut down trees"; "they dug up the soil"; "the green, following the rain, grows to be able to cool the eyes." They assume that forest is ownerless and that ownership of land is only applicable to urban spaces. Although the human characters are aware that "Forest land is of them [ants], not us [human]" and that "our land is on the market, in the city [where we] we registered residency and paid tax for it," they still believe that forest is ownerless because ants are not considered authentic dwellers. The family invades the ants' territory in their ambition to make a profit and achieve spiritual satisfaction. The invasion is explicitly presented in the story as being supported by modern insect-killing chemicals. The father announces that modern humans must understand that "land does not belong to anyone"; "land is ownerless but the city is owned"; "the city is a thing that human beings brought in to stall on this land"; and "the extent to which the city extends is the extent that belongs to human beings." Humans assert land ownership through "modern science and progressive technology," and those who do not believe in the dominance of humans over nature are seen as "even more backward than the feudalists." In this context, the ants are not perceived by the humans as inhabitants of the forest, but only the invaders or a saboteur that needs to be get rid of. In TM, human characters enjoy activities through which they dominate the termites and express their power. As narrated, Grand Nu, seeing some lost termites fly in, circling the neon light, turn on the generator outside, resulting in the fact that "more and more termites flew in, felling on the table, on our hair, and even on our plates." At that time, in contrast, human characters are sitting, relaxed, slurping wine, proudly observing termites falling.

Here, humans appear to have some knowledge of the living circle of the nonhuman insects but do not empathize with the losses experienced by those animals (cf. Shapiro and Copeland 345). It is because humans do not perceive the animals as authentic dwellers and conscious beings of the earth, thus disrespecting them. Significantly, such ecological ignorance constitutes a situation in which people must experience and learn the power of non-human beings. In other words, the narration of the stories follows a similar causal logic: to repeat, it is the humans' disrespect of nature that leads to their failures. That logic is based on the construction of animals as beings who have wisdom and consciousness in all three stories. In AM, which features fierce and exhausting struggles over land between ants and humans, the ants appear to know how to calculate every step and cooperate in the aim of defeating humans. Innumerable ants besiege the whole family, who raise crops in their land -- the land that they suppose ownerless but in fact, it was owned by the ants. Garden, house, gate, and even the clothes of the family who live and farm in the land are filled with and destroyed by the ants. "Ants are thick as rice husk, spreading throughout like sand," and "ants set up a commanding position, sticking all over" to "entrap the whole family and drive them to hunger and despair." "The ants... apparently vengefully seeking out the enemy who had dared to destroy their nest." "Some even climbed up to the top of the potato plants,



*raising their antennae* towards the sky to *spy out their foe*, their bottoms swaying." The verbs, italicized, indicate the animals are active and have an aim in their actions. It is the narrator explicit realizes that "This was not an accident... This was no mere coincidental encounter... I believed that I could discern strategy here." In story TM, in one night, "the termites *ambushed* and *chewed* everything" including clothes that characters are wearing and their luggage bags, all with the aim of taking revenge on those who have treated them only as food sources. By way of humanizing the insects, Trần Duy Phiên's narration apparently emphasizes their "agentic power," suggesting a horizontal version of the relation between humans and non-human beings (cf. Iovino and Oppermann 75-91).

However, the animals having "agentic capacities" as such, as described in all the stories, are totally ignored by the modernized humans, resulting in their miserable losses. All the stories follow a similar causal narration: modern individuals attempt to intervene into wild ecosystems and non-human lives, modernize them, and exploit them for economic benefit; but in the end, non-humans take revenge on humans and successfully force them out of their territory. In other words, in Trần Duy Phiên's stories, modern people fail in implementing their knowledge and technology to modernize and exploit the so-called uncultivated areas. In "The Spider and The Man" (SM), the spider uses the body of Trần Việt Chiển, an official, who perceives himself as superman, as bait to attract mosquitoes. Chiển, as narrated, is enraged, and decides to imprison the spider to death in the sleeping net because that "stupid creature," "a small, inglorious creature," dares to encroach on his space. He seals the four sides of his bed with the net and carefully locks in the spider. However, the spider was still alive; it even makes the cobweb from which the egg sac is hanging. He realizes that the spider makes a hole at the corner of the net outside which a swarm of mosquitoes is buzzing. As he watches, one by one, they creep through the hole and immediately get stuck in the cobweb. Chiển realizes "that is a trap, "a very effective trap! . He sees "the sparkling wings of numerous mosquitoes are stuck in the cobweb. 'But who is meant to be the prey here?' Chiển asks himself, and then, as realization dawned, he slowly looked down at his body. Larger realities of life and death gradually dawned on him and gave him perspective." That means it is Chiển's blood that feeds the spider ever then. Since then, Trần Việt Chiển no longer wants to be a superman." That means, the human character surrenders to non-human beings. In AM, likewise, humans have to pay a price for their ignorance of the lives of non-human beings. As narrated, all modern techniques become useless in dealing with the revenge of the ants. Even "experts and scientists" of the "Company of Animal and Plant Protection" cannot cross the ant-made barrier to saving the captives. They realize that neither "the insect spray gun" nor "insecticide" can rescue the family. They even consider applying "modern tools" such as a "plane" or truck with electric appliance" to overcome the ants. In the end, the family is forced to use fire, a solution that also destroys the entire property. These ecological situations reveal how vulnerable human beings become if they do not respect the lives of other beings. In presenting humans' losses are the consequences of their disrespect of non-humans' "status of being a creature" like humans, Trần Duy Phiên's stories apparently highlight what David Herman addresses as "fundamental continuity between humans and animals," only in which "forms of bodily exposure and vulnerability" are revealed (Herman 3).

The other ecological situation in Trần Duy Phiên's stories through which humans' vulnerability is revealed is when they have to remove their clothes, directly connecting with nature. At this moment, people realize the truth about their status as only a part of the ecological system, not as the master of it. Specifically, all three stories include a scene in which characters strip off their clothes in war with nature to indicate their enlightenment about correct attitudes toward the environment. In TM, human characters wake up in terror to discover that termites have destroyed all their clothes and anything that can be used to cover their bodies, such as blankets, towels, nets, and curtains. All objects made of cloth, leather, or mixed wood have disintegrated, although they are on bodies, in closets, or bags. What is left are mere residues, like buttons, metal straps, and other objects made from hardwood or plastics. Similarly, in AM, ants also destroy all clothes of the whole family. They have to tear the net and the blanket into strips and use them to wrap around their legs, arms, faces, and necks, with just our two eyes exposed to get out of their house, which is covered by angry ants. The father in the family wraps his wife with the rags but in the end, there are no rags left for him. Noticeably, in their nudity, the characters recognize the insects' rightness and humans' wrongs. In AM, at the moment when the whole family cannot find a rag to cover the father of the family, they burst into tears, foreseeing their defeat facing the ants' vital attacks. In SM, the moment at which Chiển realizes his body has been trapped by the spider and become its food source is when "he slowly looked down at his body," feeling "larger realities of life and death dawned on him and give him perspective." In TM, after a moment of terror, characters realize that it is their ignorance of nature while implementing the economic project that leads to the anger of the termites. They accept the truth that "forest land is the homeland of the termites," and termites attack humans because farm construction "destroys their homeland and mashes up the

nests of their ancestors," and because modern men "use light to trap termites to feed chicken." The characters they contemplate the entanglement of humans and nature: clothes not only protect human beings from the heat and the cold and make people look beautiful, but also make humans stand out from Nature. "But can people really separate themselves from Nature? Not really!" They realize the human responsibility and any unexpected change in the environment can impact the ecology as a whole or "Forests feed termites. Termites feed chickens. Chickens feed you [human]." These observations correspond closely to central concepts in traditional ecology that were taken up by ecocriticism, including "ecosystem," "webs," "chains," "pyramids," and "niches," which were used to emphasize "unproblematic" assumptions of harmony, balance, and community between humans and nature (Gifford, "Recent" 17; Kerridge 535). In Trần Duy Phiên's stories, nature appears to transform the men of social failure into men of environmental philosophy and responsibility; as such, nature functions "not just as the stage upon which the human story is acted out, but as an actor in the drama nature occupies a dominating status in plot of the story" (Glotfelty xxi).

In such a way, Trần Duy Phiên's stories correspond to the criteria of a nature-oriented literary work that Lawrence Buell defines in his book *Environmental Imagination* (1996). Narratives about human failures in the face of local insects' attacks are meant to instill in readers' minds respect for the ecological and social characteristics of even allegedly wild areas. Presenting the dangers of nature in the face of human's spatial invasion to emphasize the harmony of humans and nature, the three stories embrace typical arguments of ecocriticism. Classic ecofiction that ecocritics have pointed out (Glotfelty i-xxv). Respecting local creatures and realizing the failure of machines, science, and technology in conquering nature emerges as the main lesson of Trần Duy Phiên's stories, which aim, like other environmental literature, at redirecting human minds to a realization of their humble position in nature and of the impossibility of nature's complete control by human beings regardless of increasing mechanization (Cohen 11). The stories also join the long-standing tradition in Asian literature of presenting the "humanist intervention into ecodegradation" (Thorner *Ecoambiguity* 435) as well as the ecological challenges posed by postwar modernization. In other words, Trần Duy Phiên's environmental narratives are potentially relevant to those East and Southeast Asian countries where rapid postwar industrialization has caused immediate social and environmental challenges (Estok, "Partial" 1-15; Ryan 13-15). But Trần Duy Phiên's stories do not articulate their criticism of ecological degradation by way of focusing on endangered species and biodiversity loss, as many other Southeast-Asian environmental narratives do (Ryan 1-9). Instead, they foreground the interactions of humans with common insects including termites, mosquitoes, and ants.

More importantly, presenting the defeat of the human characters at war with nature, the stories apparently imply the defeat of the national project of constructing new citizens in Vietnam. Put it differently, the resistance of native insects suggests a criticism of the ideal image of modern citizens that is officially promoted in Vietnam. This imaginary of new citizens, as mentioned above, emphasizes only capacities and morals that are needed for the national project of industrializing and modernizing the country. Nature in this imaginary is only a source-base that people can exploit for modern nation-building. In fact, this utilitarian perception of Nature officially has been adopted in Vietnam since 1945 when the Communist Party-led government came into power. The materialist ideology of nature, in which nature exists for human beings' use for their progress, pervades Vietnamese literature (Pham and Sankaran 2). Even in the stories by Trần Duy Phiên, statements of the main characters many times repeat such utilitarian perception. For example, the father character in AM asserts that humans can dominate nature through "modern science and progressive technology," and those who do not believe in the dominance of humans over nature are seen as "even more backward than the feudals." Mastering nature is seen as a moral of a citizen of a postcolonial society in an attempt of erasing colonialism and feudalism and their legacies. Vietnamese literature, an officially ideological instrument in nation-building of the Vietnamese government, celebrates acts that indicate the victory and the power of human beings over the natural world. Generations of Vietnamese citizens, in general, are taught in school that Vietnam has "forests of gold" and "seas of silver" as well as fertile land (*Vietnamese Courier* 20). Anyone who attends the socialist schools in Vietnam would know by heart the rhyme "our hands can make up everything/ with human's strength, soil and stones can transform into rice," an excerpt from the famous poem "Song about Breaking Soil" (Bài ca vỡ đất) by Hoàng Trung Thông (1925-1993), a well-known revolutionary writer. Vietnamese literary works, either about the non-human world or human world, potentially reflect and attend political orientations in environmental policies that encourage the humans' exploitation of nature, all intending to serve the path to "progress," "development," and "modernity" of the country. Nature and non-humans are considered not to have any rights, so they can be used to produce wealth and generate profits; economic development is the first, and the protection of the

environment comes after and later (Culas 120). In this context, Trần Duy Phiên's ecofiction provokes a criticism of the official ideology of postcolonial nation-building.

The ecofiction stories' engagement with criticism of the Vietnamese government's postcolonial nation-building is particularly exposed through the narrative structure of the connection of modern products with nature. Many times, modern commodities are presented as tools to engage and support humans in their attempts at invading and exploiting non-human species for industrialized farming. In TM, images of "Martini wine," "Heineken beer," "Lemon soda," "shiny Japanese porcelain objects" and "Honda motorbikes" occur as rewards when humans successfully invade the termites' space, to establish modern chicken farms. In AM insect-killing tools and chemicals occurs as effective instruments to suppress the ants' attacks. In SM, computers and memory sticks appear as signals of the good preparation of the characters with new technological development, which brings him confidence in his *invulnerability*. However, all these modern techniques cannot help in the humans' war with nature. The mother character in AM dies because of the ants' untreatable numerous bites. Her farming was burned to ashes. Similarly, in TM, the termites demolish the headquarters and the storehouse of the farming; only the brick walls, the metal frames, and sheets of the roof remain.

The presence of the natural world as a challenge to the implementation of modern economic projects in the stories calls into question the ideology of a future modernized Vietnam, which is implicitly presented as a force destroying ecological systems. And successful attacks of the non-human creatures against modern human beings as invaders and exploiters of nature allegorically present the failure of the postcolonial nation-building of Vietnam. This nation-building project, as already said, aims to achieve modernization and industrialization as an essential condition for completing socialism and national hegemony. This ideology remains official since the success of the August Revolution in 1945, even in the time of the Reform when Vietnam shifted to socialist-oriented capitalism. Political reports of the National Congresses, such as the 8th and the 9th, clearly states that Vietnam's official acceptance of the private capitalist sector helps the nation "step up Industrialization and Modernization," "building and safeguarding the Socialist Vietnamese Homeland (*75 Years of the Communist Party of Vietnam* 1097; capitalized letters are in origin). The powerless of the modern techniques and products in battles with nature indicates Trần Duy Phiên's ecofiction's criticism of "modernity," or "progress," and "technology," officially adopted as the path to reach socialism and national hegemony in Vietnam. In other words, Trần Duy Phiên's ecofiction provides audiences with a counter-narrative that challenges the socialist goals of development and modernization.

Such challenge is even more critical, given the Reform context in which Trần Duy Phiên's ecofiction texts are produced and with which they engage. The narrative of men enthusiastically establishing their businesses definitely parallels the emergence of capitalists in present-day Vietnam as the consequence of a blind acceptance of capitalism and the market economy since the Reform (Fforde 213). In particular, the portrayal of modern men violently invading other creatures' lands and killing non-human beings for their activities alludes to exploitative capitalists. Men in power in postcolonial Vietnam resemble men in power of colonial Vietnam who exploited the non-human world for maximum economic benefits (Frédéric 59-86). The term "parasites" refers to investigating officers who are indifferent to people being attacked by ants in AM story that is most explicitly critical of "new Vietnamese" capitalists. Mainstream socialist realist literature in Vietnam has a long tradition of associating capitalists with blood-sucking creatures such as vampires, leeches, and lice (Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism* 169-170; Pham 80-90). In this context, Trần Duy Phiên's eco-stories evoke in the audience an image of exploitative capitalists as a consequence of the recent economic reform, who will potentially betray the ideal socialist image of the nation. As such, ecofiction by Trần Duy Phiên embodies a critique of modernization in Vietnamese nation-building by foregrounding the resulting collapse of nature, the human body, and political ideology. Put it shortly, the ecofiction by Trần Duy Phiên engages with criticism of postcolonial nation-building in Vietnam.

Interpreting the ecological stories by Trần Duy Phiên in connection with postcolonial nation-building of Vietnam, particularly in the Reform period, reveals that they conform to the traditional perception of literature as an instrument for social criticism in Vietnam. In other words, the narration of Trần Duy Phiên is derived from the tradition of indirect, suggestive social criticism in Vietnamese literature. 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 type of intellectuals are embodiments of national conscience and mind, thus their writings take social criticism as their essential responsibility (*Lược khảo văn học*: I 170-80). In the context of postcolonial nation-building with continuing dominance of Marxist-Leninist doctrine, literature is still adopted as an ideological instrument in the struggle for national homogeneity and sovereignty, and social democracy. Even in the 6<sup>th</sup> 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 act and thought (75 Years of the Communist Party 744; Đảng cộng sản Việt Nam, *Văn kiện hội nghị lần thứ tư* 54-55; Tô Huy Rứa 13-19). In this context, Trần Duy Phiên's narratives around the human-nature battles form an allegory, indirect and suggestive, of Vietnamese intellectuals' social criticism that is to provoke public anxious concerns about the potential continuity of colonialist exploitation postcolonial nation-building of Vietnam.

This historically complex connection of Vietnamese literature with postcolonial nation-building of Vietnam calls for a reading of national allegories in modern Vietnamese eco-stories. Here, one might develop that postcolonial ecocriticism as it has developed over the last two decades is best suited to explore such dimensions of social criticism in Vietnamese eco-narratives. It is particularly the case, given emphases in political aspects of ecological and environmental narratives have led ecocritics to move toward the merging of postcolonial criticism with ecocriticism. Since the turn of the millennium, postcolonial scholars have attempted to bridge the gaps between ecocriticism and postcolonialism, "two of the most dynamic areas in literary studies" (Nixon 233). Rob Nixon, Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin, and Anne Maxwell, the pioneers of "green" postcolonial studies, stress that these two literary schools of thought share the common task of addressing environmental crises and the marginalization of dominated groups as a result of lingering colonial legacies in postcolonial states (see Huggan, "Greening" 701-733; Nixon 233-252; Huggan and Tiffin 1-11; Maxwell 15-26; Estok, "Afterword" 219-232). Notably, these ecocritics emphasize the growing globalization and its resulting environmental, social, and cultural effects in postcolonial countries as the historical context that requires green postcolonial criticism. The dynamic between global and local environmental, economic, cultural, and social forces in writings from postcolonial India, Australia, and South America has suggested the mutual dependence of the two literary approaches, postcolonialism and ecocriticism. But, as Heise (2008) has observed, while "shared risk" across the world makes necessary the building of theoretical bridges between different strands of literary study, different cultural frameworks of understanding remain a "shaping influence" in the engagement with ecological crisis (158). From this perspective, this paper offers another perspective on the postcolonial condition of ecological and environmental narratives from Vietnam -- a Vietnam that is nominally free from colonial rule but is still living the legacy of neo-colonialism (cf. Young 600). The goals of modernization and industrialization are themselves an embodiment of the colonial legacy in Vietnam; these nation-building goals grew out of Vietnamese intellectuals' faith in the promises of progress and modernity that were introduced by the French government in colonial times (Peycam 6; Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition* 138-139). The paper has just argued that Vietnamese ecological stories specifically reflect and inflect public anxiety about that idealized nation-building: they consider how modernization for the ultimate socialist goal has resulted in the collapse of nature, the human body, and political ideology. Vietnamese eco-narratives offer an ecological portrait that is deeply engaged with human experiences of class and national identity. In short, ecological narratives from Vietnam articulate national allegories. Modern ecological literature in Vietnam, therefore, combines the social, political, and ecological aspects whose combination has been the recent focus of ecocriticism.

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