

EMPATHY FOR ANIMALS: ECOLOGICAL ETHICS IN VIETNAMESE CONTEMPORARY PROSE

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Abstract - In response to the global environmental crisis, ecocriticism emerged in the 1970s, fitting the demands of the time and becoming a dynamic movement that continues to this day. Ecological theory acknowledges the equal existence of creatures, believing that all creatures are the same and that no species is dominating. From the innovative idea of ecocriticism, Vietnamese fictional prose after the Innovation 1986 years has emerged characters who share the sense of pain with all creatures. This article highlights the shift in environmental discourses, which no longer view humans as the lord of all creatures but rather as being able to listen to the voices of nature, care for injured animals, and love and protect all living things—a perspective that first established ecological ethics in Vietnamese literature.

Key words - Ecocriticism; ecological ethic; empathy for animals; ecological humanism

1. Introduction

The 21st century will be the one in which humanity faces the most serious ecological threats. With the advent of urbanization and the reliance on science and technology in modern civilization, people are progressively turning their backs on nature, over-exploiting it and eliminating it from their lives. Nature responds not just with disasters and calamities, but also with the disappearance of itself. Nature—the “magic chain of life”—is being destroyed at an alarming rate. Ecocriticism emerges when climate change and environmental degradation become a concern affecting life, which literature is interested in, so its turning point is ultimately associated with the nature of literature.

In numerous ecocriticism research directions, researchers are passionate about studying the relationship between humans and animals, as well as how culture influences the current ecological problem. In the early phase, based on the deep ecology theory of animal criticism, there was a biocentric approach, subsequently evolving to eco-social criticism, combined with concerns such as gender, post-colonialism, globalization... Aldo Leopold (1887 - 1948) is considered to be the first proponent of the ecological protection in the modern Western literature. *A sand county almanac and sketches here and there* (Oxford University Press, 1949) are beautiful texts blended with scientific and historical elements about his journey to explore wildlife, and observations about how organisms change through the seasons. His work instills a love for nature and advocates for environmental protection [1]. In his two bestselling books *The Naked Apes* [2] and *The Human Zoo* [3], Desmond Morris made an in-depth analysis of the state of animals in captivity, assisting us in understanding and recognizing the similarities of the stresses and pressures that consumer society life brings, that we, like animals in zoos, are imprisoned in cramped urban environments. *Animal*

Liberation (1975) by Peter Singer is a revolutionary phenomenon. He argued that “the ability to experience pain, rather than the power of thinking, has the right to be morally considered for an organism” [4, p.9]. Sharing with Peter Singer, *When animals look at us* [5] is a philosophical essay for young children that contains the concept of equality with animals. Elisabeth de Fontenay stated that animals have feelings, language, and we need to treat species as if we were their own, which is also a method to respect biodiversity. John Berger's essay “*Why Look at Animals?*” studies the treatment of animals in modern culture. According to him, anthropomorphism is the fallback of using metaphors about animals for a long time, but in the last two centuries, animals gradually disappeared, machines replaced the work of animals in industrial society, and the remaining wild creatures were put into the system of national parks or protected areas [6]. The remaining animals are pets and have become commercial products of modern culture. Garrad Grey in the study of “Animals” (*Ecocriticism (The New Critical Idiom)*), has gone straight to the contemporary issues of ecocriticism shared with liberationists or cyborgs (cyborg: robot characters in fiction works that are half human, half machine) [4]. However, a new set of concerns about animals and animal products has emerged recently: when pandemic problems occur (mad cow disease), it is understood that robots are not aware of the hazards of bacteria, and every time an epidemic appears on animals, it becomes a global risk [7].

In this study, we analyze the human-animal interaction to convey those who sympathize with wounded creatures, share suffering with animals, listen to their voices, and appreciate the natural world.

2. Killing animals: collision between sacred and mortal

In the traditional understanding of the East, stories about dishes that extend life and treat illnesses are common. Those dishes include shark fin, tiger bone glue, rhino horn, bear bile, greater coucal soaked in liquor... Legends about the mysterious influences of nature encourage wild animals to be killed more swiftly. When An (*River*, Nguyen Ngoc Tu) got to the river to write about But snails - a very precious kind of snail in Dong Nang, An was bitter because when he could hear the song of those snails, they were trapped to death. About sparrows in Dieu Mountain, “according to the book, sparrows travel to mountains from July to September in large numbers, and many believe they come to see the deceased Phoenix. They are no longer seen, maybe because those lovely birds were trapped and turned into restaurant meals” [7, p.170]. The greater coucal became a wine dish, “The owner took a bottle of greater coucal soaked in liquor out, he offered to have a few

glasses to relieve boredom. From the other side of the glass layer, the poor bird looked at the world with its gloomy red eyes, and he suddenly wanted to close those eyes for the bird to have a real rest" [7, p.31]. Readers are afraid by the wild side of man when they eat in barbarous manners. The specialty "immortal monkey brain" is made by taking the pain of the animal as a terrifying joy: "In the flash of an eye, even the monkey, who had not yet felt pain, had his skull chopped into two parts, surrounded by crimson and pink blood. The "executioner" raised the headpiece using a cover. The brain still retains the entire pink-white membrane intertwined with swinging bloodlines. Great performance! The spoons clashed with "kay kay" sounds and the shouting "dzo dzo" mixed with the screaming groaning and kicking under the table" [9]. Many writers convey their worry for humanity through works about killing animals. Killing animals and being insensitive to animals will result in insensitivity to people. When people do not feel the pain of animals, people do not feel the pain of their fellow human beings. When people kill animals with no limits, they trigger the instinct to kill. Humans perceive their humanity through the act of killing animals.

The wife (Doan, *The Dog and The Divorce*) loves and cares for the dog, so the husband, with his authoritarian mentality, feels like an extra member of the family. He ruthlessly abused the dog, leaving its young floating in the river, kicking it hard when furious, and slaughtering it as a side dish for his celebration... Her husband's brutal treatment of the dog made her feeling sad. Her life is devoid of empathy and affection. However, in court, it's foolish and unreasonable to state that the cause of the divorce was the dog. Doan lost all ability to speak after facing all injustices, patriarchal tendencies, and selfishness from her husband. Even before the court, she was under the gaze of the judge and the terrible attitude of the husband. Doan was unable to speak up before the prejudice that surrounded her became overwhelming. In this situation, the reader learns that patriarchal culture has given men the upper hand, while women and nature are The Others "losing voice". The dog also suffered the tragedy of losing voice. The Black Dog inherently has language but it is the language of "the others", it "cannot fully master human language" [7, p.207].

Francis Fukuyama (*Our Posthuman Future*) uses the terms "sacred" and "dignity" when analyzing the ideals that morality puts beyond the criteria that make us keep human dignity in the treatment of animals [7]. The fact that a community does not eat a certain animal is a religious and moral category. If we use the pair of divine/ mortal relations to solve animal problems, we clearly see that there is a certain connection between the mortal (body) and the divine (sacred, religious). If people do not clearly define the moral boundaries between the body and the sacred, they may suffer the same consequences. In the article "Sacred and mortal – Linda Le's letter of death", Bui Bich Hanh noted that in creative psychology, strive by suffering yourself between the sacred/mortal part, the dark/light part to get towards the light. From there, we question people's attitude toward nature: would they "save" or "destroy" the nature? The author of the article raises the dilemma of humanity in the future "through the empirical discourse of living writers struggling in the "posthuman future" of the trauma of the twenty-first century,

when they share the same humanistic view of reflective people" [10, p.41]. Accordingly, referring to the view of "empathy with animals", people realize their most inhuman expression through the killing of animals. Francis Fukuyama openly criticizes utilitarianism for its focus solely on the economics of food processing. After the pigs, chickens, ducks, and cows are cut and processed into hamburger, chicken sandwiches, grilled meats, and cold meats... In addition to the edible sections of the animal's body, there are still enormous volumes of corpses, and the contemporary food processing industry converts these parts into oil, bone-based food, and back into animal feed. In other words, "we force cows and other animals to eat their own flesh" [7, p.154]. That procedure is assumed to be the origin of "mad cow disease" (BSE bovine spongiform encephalopathy), protein prions that are not eliminated during processing but exist in processed foods for animal feed and infect healthy cattle who eat them.

3. Hunting journey: awareness of "sinners" status

Saving animals actually saves humanity. Tragedy is actually salvation. It is the journey of the works by Nguyen Huy Thiep: *The Wolf's Revenge* [11], *The Salt of the Forest* [11].

The Wolf's Revenge by Nguyen Huy Thiep tells the story of Hoang Van Nhan. All his family members (father, grandfather) are marksmen. He also expects his son to continue the family tradition, so he let his son, Hoang Van San, go to the forest from the age of five. Mr. Nhan is determined to prepare his son to be an expert hunter. He took his twelve-year-old son hunting wolves. At the end of the hunting day, the wolves were almost killed by the hunters. The hunters had cornered the alpha wolf in a deep cave. When the mother wolf had no way out, she bit the wolf cub and left a mark on its forehead before being shot. San brought this wolf cub home and raised him with domestic dogs. When San was thirteen years old, Mr. Nhan held a birthday celebration for his son and planned to kill the now-grown wolf cub. Unfortunately, San was trapped in the stairs and bled. The blood had reawakened something in the beast's foggy consciousness. He bared his sharp white teeth and raced forward, grabbing San by the neck. However, instead of killing the wolf, Mr. Nhan swung his axe down the chain, freeing it. The wolf howled as he fled towards the forest. As he knelt by the body of his only child, Mr. Nhan felt the pain of the wolves he had killed years before. At that time, he understood the advice of the old men in the village: "Be afraid of the forest!". The story reminds us to respect natural life, otherwise people will only suffer loss.

Therefore, loving animals is also a way of nurturing humanity. Mr. Dieu in *The Salt of the Forest* (Nguyen Huy Thiep) hunted but mainly felt "Mr Dieu sat quietly and relaxed for half an hour. The spring weather was warm and silky. It had been a long time since he had had the opportunity to sit as peacefully as this. And as he sat without a care in the world, the tranquillity of the jungle flowed through his being" [11, p.148], so every time he caused a disaster for monkeys, he regretted and was astonished. When he raised the gun to shoot, "the confusion into which the shotgun blast had thrown the monkey troop caused Mr Dieu to tremble. He had done something cruel" [11, p.149]; when he cornered the baby monkey to the brink of the abyss, it rolled down, "Mr Dieu was pale and

soaked with sweat. He stood looking down over the cliff with his body shaking. From far below came the echo of a piercing scream, the like of which he had never heard before" [11, p.152]. Mr. Dieu discovered that people were as helpless as animals in their naked form, stripped of all comforts, commodities, and civilization. He sympathized with the monkey's injuries: "The shotgun bullets had smashed the monkey's shoulder blade and come out through four centimetres of bone. Each time the bones rubbed together, the monkey writhed in pain." [11, p.154], he exclaimed: "I can't leave you like that" and searched for herbs, chewed and applied it on the monkey. After the monkey was taken care of, "The monkey then buried its head in Mr Dieu's arms, and a stammering sound came out of its mouth. The monkey was like a helpless child imploring him for help". Mr. Dieu relented and apologized: "What can I use to bandage you, poor monkey?". Those sincere and peaceful words reassure, soothe, and comfort the suffering male monkey. After a while, "he had no choice but to take off his underpants and use them to bandage the monkey's wound" [11, p.154]. The monkey "curled its body into a ball and again turned its moist eyes towards Mr Dieu. The old man looked away" [11, 154]. The eyes of animals cause us to wake up. Most animal ecologists focus on the gaze of animals: *When animals look at us* (Elisabeth de Fontenay); *Why look at animals* (John Berger) reminds humans of the strange gaze of species. When shooting down the wolf, Aldo Leopold was haunted by the light emitting "We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes – something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view" [1, p.130].

The eyes of monkey gaze reminded Mr Dieu of reality. The monkey's pain brought him back to real love. He learned that everything, including himself, is greedy for life and fearful of death. "All animals are greedy for life and fearful of death, seeking protection and avoiding injury, and the human mentality is no exception" [12, 5]. He shared the feeling of pain with the animal, bandaged the wound, cared for it, "felt pity," and "avoided looking into its eyes" since it "easily relented". The gaze of animals awakens people. The female monkey followed him back down the mountain. When confronted with the female monkey's perseverance, Mr. Dieu recognized that "Profoundly sad, he was overcome by the realization that, in life, responsibility weighs heavily on every living thing" [11, p.156]. Finally, he decided "All right, I'll set you free". He lost everything on his way home, including his gun, clothes, and food, but received a rare gift from the forest, "Mr Dieu stopped in amazement. *Tu huyen* flower only bloom once in thirty years and people that come across them are said to meet with good luck. The flowers are white. They are small as the head of a toothpick, and have salty taste. People call them "salt of the jungle". When the jungle is braided together with these flowers, it is a sign that the country is blessed with peace and abundant harvests". So, he felt happy and peaceful "Naked and

lonely, he went on his way" [11, p.157]. Civilized people must empathize with nature, which is also why animal protection organizations were founded, to criticize offenses against animal rights such as collecting bear bile, rhino horn, ivory... Why is it important to save wildlife? Because in the process of preserving them, humans will develop humanness, which is what we need for humanity to survive. When people do not feel the pain of animals, they will not feel the pain of their fellow beings. The transition from human rights to natural rights is a significant step forward in human cultural development.

Many artists also share sympathy for ecological traumas. The situation in which the birds are having a pleasant and carefree life, but the calamity suddenly occurs, is like the scream of the human world empathizing with animals or the cry for their identity in the song *The Hunter and the Small Birds (Anh Bang)*: "*The birds are living peacefully/ Loving each other on the tip of the branches/ But the bullets come so fast/ The birds die, falling from the branches*" with a concern and melancholy. Michael Jackson's song, *Earth Song* (1995), is like a hymn, empathizing with the pain of nature, thereby awakening ecological conscience: *What about animals?/ (What about it?)/ We've turned kingdoms to dust/ (What about us?)/ What about elephants?/ (What about us?)/ Have we lost their trust?/ (What about us?) / What about crying whales?* The main motif has thus changed. The storyline of animal conquest is shattered and replaced by a different plot structure: hunting is not to conquer, but the role of the hunter becomes the destroyer, victim, or loser. When the authors learn that animals have life, spirit, and personality, the plot motif immediately shifts from exploiting animals to many other plot motifs: plots about revenge, loss of shelter, good orientation, and the pain of animals... People, who were once triumphantly conquering nature, are now "sinners" and victims of animals. People become metamorphosed and insecure. Yuval Noah Harari "call the last 70,000 years the Anthropocene epoch: the epoch of humanity. For during these millennia Homo sapiens became the single most important agent of change in the global ecology" [13, p.46].

4. Pets and non-ecological perspectives

John Berger in his study, *Why look at animals?*, sees pets as a kind of personification, an "invention of modern times" and has become a commercial product of contemporary culture "The animals of the mind, instead of being dispersed, have been co-opted into other categories so that the category animals has lost its central importance. Mostly they have been co-opted into the fairy and the spectacle" [6, p. 15]. In the short story *Their Skies* (Suong Nguyet Minh), the city daughter-in-law had a special affection for the dog Long Xu: "every two days, take a warm bath, scrub with fragrant soap, wear French perfume and a silver necklace. The young lady adores Long Xu so much that she allows the dog to lie in her bed each night. She's snuggling and patting... The previous maid, when she had not been fired, had to wipe Long Xu's mouth and take leftovers between his teeth, a duty that had never been seen before in the maid world". The love of animals thus incorporates a "human-centered" vision; in truth, it is not that she loves the dog, but the way the character is close to it, taking care of the dog as a human being has reflected a human take on nature. That attitude of the daughter-in-law demonstrates her arrogance and

selfishness. Paying someone else to take care of the animal so that it satisfies his or her companion hobby is not a true love of animals. The way she handles her pet reflects a sense of dominance; her style of caring for animals/pets expresses snobbery, a false love, not true affection. Thus, when the dog Cau Gia appeared, her false love of animals was exposed. Cau Gia is a dog that lives in the countryside, where villagers continue to eat and toss food to dogs. Afraid of getting the house dirty, the daughter-in-law “forced the maiden to drag Cau Gia out to the sidewalk, closed the door, and refused to let her in when coming to the meal”. When Long Xu was full and Cau Gia was starved, if Cau Gia ate Long Xu’s food, she was immediately mistreated, “grabbed the back of her neck, forced her mouth to the piece of bread... so that her mouth was grimy with butter and milk, her teeth rubbed down on the cement floor...” [14, p.42]. Finally, when Cau Gia was offered as a sacrifice for a broken Qing-era ceramic vase, her fate was decided. The daughter-in-law poisoned Cau Gia’s food, but the dog recalled the previous day’s punishment, so she did not eat; unfortunately, Long Xu did. The manner the character treated two dogs proved her hypocrisy. Suong Nguyet Minh questioned openly about a real phenomenon: when you observe a person caring for a certain animal, you should not instantly conclude that such a person loves animals, because behind that relationship there are many unclear discourses about human feelings. The mother-in-law in this short story reminded her son that animals sacrificed their bodies to feed the family, for him to grow up, but how ungrateful he was: “Cau Gia’s grandma gave birth to forty dogs five times. Then Cau Gia’s mother gave birth to forty dogs five times, for a total of eighty dogs. His parents’ earnings, along with the proceeds from the sale of eighty dogs, were sufficient to support him throughout high school. Cau Gia also gave birth to forty dogs five times. When his father died, his mother’s earnings, along with the proceeds from the sale of forty dogs was enough to allow him to go to college and get a doctorate” [14, p.43]. The fact that the son is a doctor may allude to achievement while also implying human intelligence. The writer sees that it appears that the more intellectual people are, the more ungrateful they get toward nature. The way of behaving with animals thus also shows the difference in lifestyle, between the innocent and simple way of life of the mother-in-law and the arrogance and contempt of rich people from cities. Indeed, “the nature’s point of view is always ideological”.

When it comes to animal rights, Elisabeth de Fontenay makes a very notable note: “There is a need for a specific right to each species: it is not possible to protect cows in the same way that protects hens” [5, 25]. Ecocritics oppose the care of animals in a non-ecological way. The *Beautiful Minu* (Nguyen Thi Thu Hue) is an example. Raising dogs as pets has become the “mode” of high-income families. As a result, breeding and selling pet dogs has become a trendy job. The family had a human-like dog care regime, yet the animal still died because it was unfamiliar with this way of life. This story shows two things. Firstly, people’s perceptions of animals as individuals are human-centered, which is disastrous for animals. Secondly, man considers the animal as a commodity, an asset, and he loves his property rather than the animal. In pre-industrial society, pets were frequently related with the role of use: dogs for housekeeping or hunting, cats for chasing rats, cows for

plowing fields, donkeys for carrying things... In today’s society, pets are domestic animals whose owners neglect how useful they are. In many families, dogs become friends and relatives. Sharing with dogs can sometimes replenish a human’s empty soul in times of loneliness, deprivation, or emotional impairment since communication with people attests to their “self”. But in the short story, *Beautiful Minu*, pets become economic benefits and commercial products. The writer has constructed a thought dialogue: when people turn pets into commodities, they lose faithful friends. The intellectual confrontation between the writer, the creative subject, and the philosophers generates a dialogic field of view: “People are isolated from one another and from animals. Their world has become unnatural in the most profound sense imaginable, because human nature has been altered” [7, p.18].

5. Conclusion

Knowing how to appreciate nature leads to a more sustainable, peaceful, and joyful life. The dialogue with animals build a universe of individuals who know how to share sorrow with animals, to empathize with wounded beings that are compassionate, honest, and full of love. The ethic of ecological humanism does not celebrate humans as the “lord of all species” or as the lord who conquer nature; rather, it celebrates humans as a species with an attitude of life that knows how to be humble, respect nature, and modify their attitudes and behaviors to be peaceful, joyful, and sustainable. Therefore, writers express the new moral sense of the 21st century: emerging from the new personality model - people who connect with the injured nature, share the earth’s anguish, listen to the voices of animals, and appreciate the natural world. The reflection of Vietnamese literature on dialogue with animals has been close to contemporary urgent voices in an era when the ecological crisis has become a serious global problem.

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