

## Toward an Anthroporelational Humanism: A Configuration of Zoocriticism in Vietnamese Postcolonial Literature

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### Abstract

*Recently, posthumanism has emerged as a vital lens for elevating nonhuman voices in contemporary literature. However, in the Vietnamese postcolonial context, where the legacies of war and colonialism remain profound, fully displacing the human subject is challenging. This qualitative textual analysis examines a purposive sample of short stories by writers Bùi Ngọc Tấn and Nguyễn Quang Thân to explore how animal representations function as a site of negotiation between humanism and posthumanism. Utilizing close reading and thematic analysis, the study investigates specific human-animal entanglements, such as the anthropomorphized grief of the dog in “The Puppy” and the institutionalized exploitation of the goat in “The Man Who Made Earthquakes”. By analyzing these textual moments through postcolonial ecocriticism and zoocriticism, the research illustrates how these narratives disrupt the strict human-animal divides established by colonial discourse. The findings suggest that these texts operate within a mode of anthroporelational humanism, a perspective that maintains human-centered ethical concerns while granting animals distinct narrative subjectivity. Rather than reducing animals to mere*

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*background symbols, these stories reveal a shared ground of vulnerability, where humans and animals process colonial trauma together. The article concludes that this relational framework enriches postcolonial discourse, demonstrating how interspecies empathy serves as a crucial mechanism for cultural recovery and the rearticulation of identity.*

**Keywords:** *anthroporelational humanism, postcolonial ecocriticism, Vietnamese postcolonial literature; zoocriticism*

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## Introduction

Posthumanism, a philosophical stance that decenters human consciousness as the exclusive marker of superiority, has challenged the traditional human-centered position. It extends ethical and political concerns toward animals, granting them subjectivity and the narrative agency to articulate their own existence (Wolfe, 2009). Emerging from this broader movement is zoocriticism, a critical approach that interrogates the textual presence of animals not merely as signs, metaphors, but as subjects in their own right.

Yet, how animals are to be endowed with autonomy and a voice in narrative remains contested. This challenge becomes even more pronounced when applied to postcolonial ecocriticism, a field examining the environmental and interspecies impacts of imperialism, in which zoocriticism forms a crucial strand. The hybrid and fractured subjectivities in postcolonial contexts destabilize any clear demarcation between human and nonhuman, because of colonial power restructuring indigenous relations with nature. As Haraway (2006) has famously conceptualized, these entangled relations form “naturecultures”, a framework that fundamentally questions the purity of any isolated subject and recognizes the co-shaping of species. Indeed, as scholars have argued, moving against the myth of ecological authenticity, by disrupting notions of a pristine, untouched “nature” is a necessary condition for postcolonial ecocriticism to critically address the

complex environmental histories of imperialism (Cilano & DeLoughrey, 2007). Consequently, envisioning a narrative that excludes the human, or that fully displaces human centrality, appears unattainable.

To navigate this ontological and epistemological tension, theorists have turned toward inclusive frameworks such as panhumanism, which seeks to include all parts of humankind in synergism rather than antagonism. Hofkirchner, in his influential essay *The Future of Anthroposociogenesis: Panhumanism, Anthroporelational Humanism and Digital Humanism*, outlines the necessity of transforming human thought by moving away from self-centeredness. For him, panhumanism offers an inclusive perspective that “does not exclude any part of the common humankind by antagonisms [...] but includes all of them in synergisms” (Hofkirchner, 2022, p. 2).

More specifically, Hofkirchner argues that it is *anthroporelational humanism*, a framework that attributes intrinsic natural values to nonhumans while granting them a parallel voice, that can offer a genuine alternative to anthropo-centrism. From the standpoint of systems theory, he recognizes that “humans relate to nature by not giving up their specific position of an *animal sociale* or *zoon politikon*”. In this vision, nonhumans are also granted a voice, though one that exists in parity with, rather than displacement of, the human (Hofkirchner, 2022, p. 3). By retaining the humanist legacy of humanity while embracing the posthumanist impulse to grant subjectivity to animals, this

framework blurs dualistic boundaries. By bridging these two poles, we suggest that this semi-posthumanist perspective constitutes a highly productive supplement for examining Vietnamese postcolonial literature.

Contextually, after the end of the Vietnam War with the United States, Vietnamese literature largely continued under the banner of socialist realism as the dominant, state-sanctioned paradigm. Yet this does not mean that a postcolonial current was absent from Vietnamese literature, nor that there was a rupture after the nation's liberation from French colonial rule in 1954. For reasons of scope, however, this article limits itself to delineating some of the defining characteristics of postcolonial Vietnamese literature. What can be observed is that, under the hegemony of socialist realism, questions concerning the legacies of colonialism after 1975 (following the Vietnam War) were rendered increasingly indistinct. Precisely because of this condition, postcolonial Vietnamese writing in the postwar context often turns toward reworking colonial memory and war trauma; foregrounding the voices and subjectivities of the border-dwelling, the *subaltern*, marginalized populations outside the hegemonic power structure, and other marginalized figures; and rewriting official historical grand narratives (see Andrew, N., 2014; Nguyen, T. T. T. & Hoang, G., 2024, among others). Although distinctive marks of a postcolonial sensibility had already taken shape, this current remained shadowy after 1975 and only began to flourish in earnest following the cultural reforms of 1986 (Đổi Mới).

In this context, among the few writers who sustained this postcolonial impulse within Vietnamese literature are Bùi Ngọc Tấn and Nguyễn Quang Thân. Writing with the conviction that “only by suffering

bruises and headlong blows can we raise the ceiling [of a literature still mimetic of its own time]” (Nguyen, Q. T., 2018, p. 9), both Bùi Ngọc Tấn (1934–2014) and Nguyễn Quang Thân (1936–2017) emerged, even before 1975, as markedly different voices from their contemporaries aligned with socialist realism. They wrote not of heroic abstractions but of the bare, vulnerable conditions of human existence in the aftermath of war. Following Đổi Mới, this spirit became even more explicit in their memoirs, where they articulated a shared awareness of the necessity of literary renewal. For this reason, they may be regarded as emblematic voices of a Vietnamese postcolonial literature, raising the submerged wounds of postwar life into narrative visibility and diversifying the very texture of “reality”.

More significantly, when examined through the lens of human–animal relations, they appear as pioneering figures in dismantling symbolic economies of the animal in Vietnamese writing. Their work deliberately grants animals a space of enunciation within the text, most vividly in Thân's *The Man Who Made Earthquakes* (Người làm ra động đất, 1987) and Tấn's *The Puppy* (Cún, 1990), where animals occupy central positions in the narrative structure. Despite their pioneering approach, their names remain underacknowledged in global literary discourse, prompting our focus on these two writers for this study.

Regarding the current scholarship, recent works have increasingly examined how Southeast Asian literatures, including those from Vietnam, negotiate entanglements between humans, animals, and the environment. Key contributions in recent journal articles have increasingly highlighted cross-species interrelations in the Global South (Rangarajan, 2022); explored political dimensions and eco-trauma in Vietnamese ecofiction (Nguyen,

2021); and examined how contemporary prose foregrounds empathy for nonhuman suffering (Nguyet & Hanh, 2024). Furthermore, expanding research within zoocriticism has demonstrated how animal subjectivity functions as a site of postcolonial resistance and decolonial kinship in various cultural contexts (Karagöz, 2023; Toppo, 2024), while also narrating environmental catastrophes through the embodied trauma of the nonhuman (Gogoi, 2024).

However, despite these rich contributions, a gap remains: most studies focus broadly on ecocriticism or environmental allegory, but few explicitly explore how animals are granted autonomous narrative agency as a transition between humanism and posthumanism. Moreover, while the concept of “entanglement” is frequently employed, there is limited work tracing the oscillation in perspective, examining how texts partially depart from human-centered agency yet retain humanist residues. Finally, there is a lack of studies theorizing this semi-posthumanism, such as the anthroporelational humanism framework, within Vietnamese post-colonial literature.

In view of this gap, this article aims to: (1) analyze selected short stories by Bùi Ngọc Tấn and Nguyễn Quang Thân to identify moments where the narrative perspective oscillates between human and nonhuman, revealing a semi-posthumanist stance; (2) examine how these texts grant animals subjectivity and the capacity to speak; and (3) affirm anthroporelational humanism as a viable perspective for studying Vietnamese postcolonial literature, particularly where human experiences still demand critical ethical attention.

## Methodology

### Data Collection, Textual Scope, and Sampling Rationale

This qualitative literary study employs purposive sampling to select primary data from the post-1975 Vietnamese literary corpus. The textual scope is specifically delimited to the short stories of Bùi Ngọc Tấn and Nguyễn Quang Thân. The sampling rationale is based on their pioneering roles in dismantling anthropocentric narratives and foregrounding postcolonial trauma during a period heavily dominated by socialist realism. Specifically, texts such as *The Puppy*, *The Ant Keeper*, *A Joyful Evening*, and *The Man Who Made Earthquakes* were selected because they prominently feature human-animal entanglements, making them rich textual sites for observing the negotiation of subjectivity.

### Analytic Process

To ensure methodological transparency, the study proceeds through a systematic, three-step qualitative analytic process:

Step 1: Textual Extraction and Close Reading. The primary texts are systematically close-read to isolate specific narrative manifestations of nonhuman figures. In this step, we extract textual data concerning interspecies interactions, the physiological and emotional expressions of animals, and instances where human colonial trauma is projected onto nonhuman subjects.

Step 2: Thematic Analysis via Zoocriticism. In the second phase, zoocriticism is employed to observe and analyze how animals are constructed within the extracted texts, how they are granted narrative agency, and what purposes such narrative strategies serve in

the specific historical and cultural contexts of the two authors.

Step 3: Theoretical Synthesis via Postcolonial Ecocriticism. Finally, postcolonial ecocriticism serves as an interdisciplinary perspective through which we examine the restructuring of power and discourse, as well as the interactions between humans and nature, which are constitutive of postcolonial subjectivity and its attendant concerns. To operationalize this step, we adopt an interdisciplinary approach that draws upon theoretical legacies and insights from other branches of the humanities, such as poetics, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial criticism, to supplement and enrich our analysis of relevant textual manifestations.

## Results and Discussion

### 1. Species Interaction as the Reinforcement and Reconstruction of Identity amid Colonial Dehumanization

#### a. The relief of trauma through witnessing violence enacted upon animals

First, animals in the short stories of Bùi Ngọc Tấn and Nguyễn Quang Thân emerge as the *absolute other*, mobilized to reinforce power and to reconstruct the identity of the indigenous human. As a consequence of the colonial process, the indigenous characters in these stories appear as fractured subjectivities, destabilized in their encounter with colonial power/discourse. From the standpoint of postcolonial ecocriticism, this constitutes *dehumanization*, a consequence of dualistic thinking and androcentric logocentrism. As Huggan (2004) points out, colonial discourse inherently relies on such dehumanizing mechanisms, effectively reducing colonized subjects to a subhuman or animalistic status as a means to justify and perpetuate systemic oppression. By

appropriating this logic, systems of power establish and maintain rigid species boundaries, thereby rationalizing discourses of domination and violence against both marginalized human populations and the nonhuman world. Indeed, the postcolonial human is deprived of agency and the capacity for self-determination as an existential affirmation, an outcome of internal division and alienation in Lacanian terms. At the same time, this lack becomes the driving force for seeking an *other* to compensate for the absence. As scholars of animal studies have observed regarding the role of violence and the killing of animals, when humans manipulate or control animals, they may be seeking a reflection of a power, a “subjectivity” they feel is missing within themselves, thereby constructing a sense of self-existence.

In the short stories of Bùi Ngọc Tấn and Nguyễn Quang Thân, the indigenous human reconstitutes their subjectivity by displacing and releasing their own feelings of solitude. This mode of release seems to become a characteristic expression of how humans relate to animals within the Vietnamese postcolonial context. Positioned on a continuum that stretches between wartime and peacetime – since Vietnam’s decolonization first emerged through political violence in the wars of independence – humans are displaced from the fear of national loss to the fear of self-loss. Even when witnessing the prospect of peace, they are unable to fully experience happiness, for they must quickly confront a harsh reality: the inability to locate a place of their own within it. They are solitary in relation to their era, solitary in relation to others, and solitary in relation to themselves. Consequently, humans turn to animals as objects – and, extremely, exploit them – as a means of releasing the existential anxieties that weigh upon them.

In *An Endless Day* (*Một ngày dài đằng đẵng*), the prisoner Cường, though not directly involved in the hunt, experiences a fleeting sense of relief when he witnesses “the policeman driver stepping in with four dead turtle-doves in hand.” For him, the solitude mingled with fear along the journey from prison camp P to some other camp N made a single day feel interminably long. Cường clearly embodies an existential crisis in his perception of time as endlessly extending, “[c]ompletely suspended. Time was a block of leaden weight” (Bui, N. T., 2010, p. 76). As a prisoner, he carries within himself a persistent sense of being “hollow inside. Worse than the loss of life and despair” (Bui, N. T., 2010, p. 69). It is evident here that Bùi Ngọc Tấn renders his character deprived of *Dasein*, not only in terms of perception but also in terms of identity, as time is perceived merely as a “black hole,’ suspended, with no distinction between days, months, or years; time turning into a stream of molten lava, cooling into a viscous or solidified mass within memory” (Bui, N. T., 2010, p. 63). This prisoner Cường transforms his existence into a “silent” and “disoriented” one during the transfer (Bui, N. T., 2010, pp. 64, 71). His profound psychological trauma manifests as a complete detachment from reality and a total dissolution of identity, moving him into a state of existential void. Clearly, this void originates in the presence of “two rifles,” as Cường suspects that he himself will be executed during the prison transfer. Yet, through a mechanism of superiority, he finds relief upon realizing that the victims of the hunt are not himself but rather the “bulbuls, turtle-doves, bellbirds, warblers, white-eyes, and finches – hundreds of them,” who become the true objects of subjugation. The hunted birds materialize the threat, while he remains outside the line of designation in the establishment of a power order. Only upon this recognition does Cường reestablish an awareness that

delineates the actuality of space and time. Thus, even without directly exercising domination over animal subjectivity, merely witnessing animals as victims can generate an almost absolute sense of release for a human oppressed by loneliness, serving as a covert projection of power structures onto subjugated lives.

#### **b. Directly subjecting the power to animals to reinforce their subjectivity**

Colonial hegemonic thinking permeates the formation of postcolonial human consciousness; subjected to power, the victims develop an impulse to resist by replicating similar acts in order to reinforce their own subjectivity. In *A Joyful Evening* (*Một tối vui*) by Bùi Ngọc Tấn, set within a prison camp, the inmates transform a rat into a source of amusement through both physical and psychological torture. Having captured the rat, the prisoners stage a mock interrogation and conviction before deciding to torment the animal by electrocuting it, causing it to “leap violently into the air, dart like lightning, then drop down, dangling, thrashing, and writhing on the hanging thread of twine, shrieking out savage squeaks” (Bui, N. T., 2010, p. 40). Clearly, the torture of the animal makes the prisoners “laugh with delight”, their “eyes gleaming with curious pleasure” (Bui, N. T., 2010, p. 40). And later, “[t]onight, as they went to bed, they did not commemorate their families [...] but instead sank into sleep with such laughter and pleasure” (Bui, N. T., 2010, p. 49). Yet this excitement does not stem from savagery, as colonial discourse often imagined of the indigenous. On the contrary, in Bùi Ngọc Tấn’s prose, he offers a humanistic perspective by portraying the prisoners staging a performance, a “trial,” essentially as a way to reclaim a position, a semblance of authority that would allow them to believe in their residual existential worth. By assigning each participant a role –

judge, prosecutor, interpreter of the rat's language, and charging the animal with crimes such as "embezzlement", "sabotage", and "counterrevolution", before sentencing it to "life imprisonment" or "death" (Bui, N. T., 2010, pp. 42-45), it becomes evident that the underlying motive of the torture was the need to reaffirm power under conditions of subjugation. This reveals a tense and complex struggle between systems of need and systems of value in human psychology, resulting in an asymmetrical conflict: in the desire to fulfill the need for self-assertion, humans suppress the basic need for survival in animals.

Moreover, from Nguyễn Quang Thân's perspective, the postcolonial subject remains shaped by colonial thought, believing it has the power to civilize and restrain animals. In this context, animals become victims of the human desire to assert and consolidate power over those deemed weaker. In this regard, animals are also victims of the human desire to assert and reinforce power over those considered weaker, exemplified in *The Twelfth Night That Was Not Shakespeare's* (*Đêm thứ 12 không phải của Shakespeare*), where the mountain bird, caged, becomes a victim as the musician seeks to assert and reinforce his androcentric authority over the student Thùy. The figure of the mountain bird in this context seems to embody a symbolic notion of freedom, of the wild instinct tied to pure ecology, now confined within a cage as a "privilege" of "becoming a Hanoian" (Nguyen, Q. T., 2010). Yet this very "privilege" is tantamount to the loss of existential essence, being "removed from the process of reproduction," excluded from nature, and subjected to the institutionalized space of the city, of civilization. The dialogue between the musician and Thùy reveals a linguistic duel over freedom and the desire to exercise discourse through the motif of "singing." The musician

invokes Freud: "Freud said so!" to assert that the repression of desire is the source of birdsong (Nguyen, Q. T., 2010). His words seem to embody a masculinized discourse of desire, insisting that artistic energy can only erupt from a state of prohibition. However, Thân counteracts this androcentric spirit by allowing Thùy to respond with a sharp retort: "Sir, not necessarily. Not everyone sings well only because they are repressed", a feminist denial that underscores freedom as not necessarily originating from constraint, and that no one can claim Freud as an absolute warrant to impose masculine authority upon a subject deemed weaker, such as Thùy or the mountain bird.

Clearly, both Bùi Ngọc Tấn and Nguyễn Quang Thân are conscious of portraying animals as victims of the postcolonial human condition, ranging from the imposition of violence to the institutionalization shaped by colonial thought. Yet, beyond the reinforcement of identity, the treatment of animals in their short stories assumes a higher function: it becomes that which constitutes human identity itself, defining subjectivity within the postcolonial social context. This is vividly exemplified in Nguyễn Quang Thân's *The Man Who Made the Earthquake* (*Người làm ra động đất*). It can be said that this is among the works that most vividly reveal Nguyễn Quang Thân's awareness of animal subjectivity, as the narrative is densely woven with collisions and intertwinements between human and nonhuman beings, braided together in the flow of memory toward a postcolonial present. Other issues will be discussed more fully in the following section. Here, within the story, the female character who makes an old man named Hạ, the main character, lovesick, is named Chắt, but because her family raised goats, she is called Chắt "Goat," and later her husband is likewise referred to as Thục "Goat". The family of Chắt Goat managed their

livelihood through the herd of goats kept in their hut, mainly by “selling the virility of the male goat to goat-raising households in the area” (Nguyen, Q. T., 2018, p. 117). That male goat became increasingly renowned in the Trại hamlet for “siring beautiful, fast-growing kids,” and thereby the reputation of Chắt Goat’s family also spread throughout the region. However, having been reduced to mere instruments of livelihood, the goats, especially the male goat, were constantly beaten and shouted at. This condition starkly reveals a paradox in the human-animal interaction within the postcolonial context.

### c. Instrumentalizing animals to constitute identity in a postcolonial context

While animals emerge as the *other* that reinforces, and, in this case, even constitutes human subjectivity by bringing wealth and reputation to humans, they simultaneously lose their own subjectivity, being instrumentalized, their instinctual acts such as sexuality transformed into something subjected to human control. In this context, the goat farm of Chắt Dê’s family seems to operate as a space of biopolitical control, designed to sustain the circulation of capital while regulating unwanted populations. Even reproduction itself, as a need and instinct of the species, is deprived of its autonomy. Yet here, Nguyễn Quang Thân constructs an ambivalence in his narrative, aligning neither fully with a posthumanist nor a humanist perspective, but rather foregrounding the tragedies borne by both humans and animals through the plight of Thục “Goat”: the husband was impotent. Accordingly, the beatings and shouting directed at the virile male goat spring from his own jealousy: “He wept for the impotence of a husband, the owner of a famous goat and a young, passionate, tender wife”, while Chắt “sought the most hidden corners of the house to sit and cry [...] becoming irritable and short-

tempered, prone to swearing, and often lashing the whip impatiently as she stood waiting for the vigorous goat to bestow its favors upon the herd of female goats before the pen each morning” (Nguyen, Q. T., 2018, p. 119-120). What becomes apparent is that, on the one hand, through the narrative perspective, the writer reveals animals as sentient beings with perception and emotion; on the other hand, he also depicts how indigenous humans, driven by subsistence and repressed sexuality, exercise controlling power and violence upon animals as instruments. Although he does not explicitly condemn such human acts, but rather portrays them with a residual humanist perspective, this does not render the compassion for animals in the text meaningless. Nguyễn Quang Thân here seems to cross species boundaries to voice compassion for beings who exist as solitary subjects, scarred by postcolonial wounds. There is the impotent, despairing old goat who has lived alone for thirty years as a mere sexual instrument; there is Thục “Goat,” consumed by jealousy and rendered infertile as his fractured subjectivity, the product of colonial feminization, leaves him “covetous and weak”; and there is Chắt “Goat,” who can only watch her male goat “dispense its grace” to the does through her fading youth, until she herself finds a final consummation in death alongside an old man after the earthquake. One might note moments where the author suggests parallels between human and animal figures, yet it remains difficult to sustain any straightforward allegorical reading between the two.

### d. Species hierarchy as a consequence of the discursive reconstruction

In another instance, also framed around the imposition of power over animals, Bùi Ngọc Tấn’s *The Ant Keeper* (*Người chăn kiến*) introduces a different

perspective to the problem of power relations, between human and human, and between human and animal. In this case, Bùi Ngọc Tấn appears to move beyond the binary of human/animal to interrogate the very notion of essence, suggesting that the status of both human and animal is not biologically predetermined but continually reconfigured within systems of discursive power. Specifically, in the story, the Chief of Cell B appears to wield the power of life and death, determining the status and position of all beings within the prison cell. He objectifies other inmates as a form of degradation, forcing them to become his “fans,” from “Hitachi” to “Panasonic”. Mr. M. suffers an even harsher debasement: stripped naked, he is first reduced to the “Statue of Liberty”, and later compelled to embody a “little bird on a high branch” for him to shoot (Bui, N. T., 2010, p. 60). One day, he captures four ants and assigns twelve prisoners to herd them for his amusement: “You must always keep the ants inside the circle. There is biscuit, sugar, and meat in there [...]. You must constantly block the ants, but without breaking even a single leg” (Bui, N. T., 2010, p. 59-60). Evidently, the text reveals a striking reversal in the hierarchy between humans and animals: while the animals are now carefully tended to, the prisoners are subjected to brutal objectification and degradation, reduced to the status of animals themselves – “they must fall as if it [the impersonation of a bird] were real, as if truly shot” (Bui, N. T., 2010, p. 60). This inversion not only interrogates the very logic of a strict human/animal binary but also resonates with Wolfe’s (2009) argument that speciesism functions as a foundational modality of biopolitical power. Wolfe contends that within this dominant framework, beings are categorized along a spectrum of utility and proximity to humanity. The operation of power, which Derrida terms *carnophallogocentrism* in humanist thought, stems from humanity’s

illusion of itself as a pure, self-contained essence: the sovereign, untroubled human. Consequently, humans mobilize in-between, hybrid designations to reinforce ideological fictions and affirm their totalizing authority. In this light, the ants that Chief of Cell B assigns the prisoners to raise are positioned as humanized animals; they are granted a privileged proximity to the human center, thereby sparing them from the underlying logic of sacrifice (Wolfe, 2009). In stark contrast, Mr. M. embodies the animalized human, the most troubling category of all, reduced to mere biological material when he is turned into a bird for Chief of Cell B to mockingly “shoot down”. This juxtaposition further underscores that species hierarchy is nothing more than a human illusion, constructed through power/discourse to legitimate *non-criminal putting to death*.

Moreover, when read through the lens of postcolonial discourse, it appears that Bùi Ngọc Tấn attempted to construct a paradigm of colonial control in which the status of “my ants” is positioned as superior to that of “their ants”. From a political order in which the Chief of Cell B wields absolute authority over the prison – issuing “demands” for prisoners to serve him and carrying out executions when they resist – to the imposition of his own value systems and the reinforcement of those systems through his power, the world of *The Ant Keeper* can be interpreted as a colonial formation in which colonial authority is concentrated in the hands of Chief of Cell B. And precisely for that reason, the detail in which the Chief of Cell B “squashes the ant” that Mr. M. “had just caught while going to the toilet and timidly, stammeringly asked to tend” is a form of colonial power enforcement (Bui, N. T., 2010, p. 60). Although based on the very hierarchy of human/animal, since these “ants” are “Mr. M.’s ants”, in the eyes of the Chief of Cell B they are nothing more

than “animalized animals”. Bùi Ngọc Tấn explicitly exposes this contradiction within the spirit of anthropocentrism, which, under a postcolonial lens, is colonialism itself. Through the framework of postcolonial ecocriticism, one may view humans precisely as embodiments of animals, and the essence of racism as speciesism, thereby interrogating the structures of power that humans continually fabricate and impose.

## 2. The Granting of Subjective Agency to Animals

### a. Animals as the sentient and affective beings

It can be seen that Bùi Ngọc Tấn and Nguyễn Quang Thân did not “deal with animal subjects, i.e., by relegating them to the background of human activity or reading them as more-or-less transparent allegories of ourselves” as Huggan and Tiffin point out regarding the nature of classic narratives (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015, p. 191). Within the short stories of these two writers exist sentient and affective beings, consistently granted the agency to express their own emotions. We encountered the mouse in *A Joyful Evening*, which, after being electrocuted to the point of “shitting both of which are capable of conveying every sentiment toward his master. He may “half-close his eyes, inhale the scent of familiar clothes and sweat”, “wag his tail as if in guilt” when reproached, “bark, his eyes blazing, growl resentfully, baring his teeth in threat” when obstructed from greeting his returning master, and ultimately “whine in agony” upon recognizing that his master will never return (Bui, N. T., 2010, pp. 15-27). Clearly, through this narrative strategy, Bùi Ngọc Tấn and Nguyễn Quang Thân enable animals to articulate themselves according to their own species-specific practices, while simultaneously mediating their voices through the writer’s act of translation and the internal

focalization of characters. In doing so, they avoid the tendency toward “infantilization” or the satirical mimicry of speech that often arises when human language is imposed on animals, thereby resisting straightforward anthropomorphism. The animal, in this way, is constructed within the textual fabric through its own manifestations, while also preserving interspecies differences in behavior – achieving, on the one hand, the associative advantages of anthropomorphic resonance, and, on the other, sufficient distance so that it is never simply read as “a human” within the text.

What becomes evident is that Bùi Ngọc Tấn and Nguyễn Quang Thân resist the impulse to project human thoughts or sentiments onto animals. Instead, they endow animals with an autonomous capacity for expression, a form of subjectivity reminiscent of Donna Haraway’s proposition. Within their short stories, the animal figures as both “subject and agent of narration”, voicing its emotions in its own register. This narrative strategy effectively unsettles the hierarchical divide between species, suggesting that animals cannot be reduced to an inferior order in relation to humans precisely because of their sentient capacities. At this point, the boundary between species is no longer defined by physiological traits or cognitive capacities, but rather by the capacity for empathy. Armstrong (2002) contends that encountering the postcolonial animal requires a critical decentering of the human subject, demanding that we learn to listen to the voices of the nonhuman “other” without ventriloquizing them or filtering their existence through anthropocentric frameworks. This theoretical shift allows for a more ethical engagement with animal subjectivity, recognizing them as independent entities rather than mere allegorical tools for human narratives. This can be read as an

*anthropoluotic* move in Bùi Ngọc Tấn and Nguyễn Quang Thân, one that destabilizes the human monopoly on empathy. Within the textual fabric, animals participate not through a process of subordination but as independent presences, companions to humans, serving as emotional anchors and sites of connection.

#### **b. Animals as Repositories of Memory of the [pre]colonial era**

The independence of animal subjectivity in these works is revealed not only through their capacity to express emotions and thoughts but also through their function as repositories of memory, bearing traces and remnants of the precolonial and colonial past. It is important to note, however, that it is primarily humanized animals, especially pets, that evoke memories in their owners. Yet this very condition secures their subjectivity: while animals may serve as a prism through which humans reconnect with their own memories, they are not reduced to mere instruments but retain an intact sense of selfhood. For instance, in Bùi Ngọc Tấn's *Puppy*, when Trung "never returns", the dog becomes, in the eyes of his wife Thanh and the narrator Tuấn, a living relic of Trung himself, a fragile hope for those left behind awaiting his return. Yet, when viewed through an animal lens, Cún's longing is articulated in ways that are entirely natural and consistent with its species-specific behavior. It refuses food, "sniffing every square inch of the floor tiles", it "crosses long distances" in search of its master, only to return "covered in grime, filthy, collapsing flat on the ground, its tongue stretched out, red as blood, panting heavily" (Bui, N. T., 2010, pp. 25-27). Although the author never explicitly describes the dog as waiting for its owner's return, the very manner in which Cún behaves – and Bùi Ngọc Tấn's deliberate act of translation – renders this longing narratively effective within the spirit of

animal narratives. Clearly, the attribution of subjectivity to animals does not contradict their function as triggers of memory and nostalgia. In the context of postcolonial displacement, animals often embody a silent presence unburdened by complex human histories. Interacting with them, especially through shared moments of unspoken mutual acknowledgment, allows traumatized human subjects to reconnect with a sense of lost innocence and reconstruct their fragmented pasts.

This dynamic is similarly at work in Nguyễn Quang Thân's *The Man Who Made the Earthquake*, where the gaze of the dog Lu awakens in old Hạ a series of regrets and longings for his past. Consider the following passage:

"Lu seemed delighted because the old man had allowed it to follow him, [...], it suddenly recalled to him the angry face of his daughter-in-law, with her cheeks puffed in displeasure. He began to feel nostalgic for the time when he had no wife, no son, no daughter-in-law—only Lu. [...] He remembered how hastily he had married, as though fleeing a funeral, and when the bride entered the house, Lu barked as if foretelling misfortune like a prophet. When the newborn cried in the midwife's arms, it barked the same way. And when the daughter-in-law arrived, it howled again. [...] Lu coughed out a few harsh sounds, as though choking on a bone. It wept" (Nguyen, Q. T., 2018, pp. 110-111).

The passage above clearly illustrates the narrative effect achieved through the use of animal anthropomorphism, while at the same time preserving the subjectivity of the animal. As Thân suggests, animals themselves possess memory; however, for such memory to be inscribed within the text, he allows the reader direct access to the animal's consciousness rather than

mediating through human [character] perspectives. Although interwoven with the memories of the old man Hạ, the focalization in this scene clearly derives from the internal consciousness of the dog. This narrative strategy accomplishes two aims: first, it affirms the subjectivity of the animal through memory and language; and second, it demonstrates that animals possess their own discursive agency. As Weil (2010) suggests, the conceptual category of “the animal” frequently functions as an anthropocentric construct, formulated primarily to validate humanity’s own self-image rather than to reflect the ontological reality of nonhuman lives. However, by granting the dog Lu an internal focalization and an autonomous voice, Nguyễn Quang Thân actively resists this regressive tendency, ensuring that the animal in his text is not merely a restrictive mirror for human identity, but a deeply feeling subject in its own right. Although the author may appear to overuse the motif of the dog’s bark as a harbinger of misfortune, he does not reduce the animal to a mere symbol. Instead, he grants it the capacity to possess its own memory and emotions: the dog recalls the days before the arrival of the wife, the son, and the daughter-in-law, and it mourns the time when it lived alone with the old man – crying out in a *cough*, a guttural choking bark unique to dogs. Under this reading, in which Lu emerges as a subject with interiority, the bark transcends its conventional symbolic function and becomes an act of resistance, an assertion of the dog’s presence and voice within the family. This is precisely what positions Nguyễn Quang Thân’s narrative at the threshold between humanism and posthumanism: on the one hand, the animal carries memory and forges connections with humans in the construction of memory and identity; on the other hand, it simultaneously generates its own voice and articulates it according to its species-specific modes of

expression within the text.

Precisely, the short stories of Bùi Ngọc Tấn and Nguyễn Quang Thân create a distinctive effect by recognizing animal subjectivity, which paradoxically leads not to non-comprehension, but to mutual support and consolation in the postcolonial context. Their narratives occupy a threshold between humanism and posthumanism, simultaneously affirming the animal voice while offering solace to the wounded human subject. In these texts, even ethically problematic actions toward animals (like scolding or confinement) are traced back to deeper human wounds, loneliness, and desires, all consequences of colonialism and the difficult process of postcolonial identity reconstruction. This approach constitutes an anthroporelational humanism, raising a voice of compassion for both humans and indigenous animals alike.

Furthermore, this narrative strategy functions as a form of rehumanization. The Western colonial paradigm, rooted in rationalist thought, had previously marginalized emotional, affective human–animal relationships (as argued by Armstrong: 2008, p. 134), a process that paralleled the denial of indigenous epistemologies. By returning to modes of intimate human–animal interaction, Bùi Ngọc Tấn and Nguyễn Quang Thân employ a strategy of resistance against Cartesian colonial logic. Their works serve as a gesture toward human empathy and the rearticulation of postcolonial social values. This ambivalence ultimately resolves into a postcolonial discourse: a recognition that the indigenous community as a whole, both human and nonhuman, are wounded beings relying on one another to recover memory and reconstruct their collective identity following trauma.

## Conclusion

Similar to other “post-” paradigms, posthumanism and its related field, zoocriticism, challenge human centrality to focus on nonhuman and subaltern narratives. Situated within postcolonial ecocriticism, these approaches share concerns about interspecies and colonizer–colonized relational dynamics. However, the postcolonial commitment to the human subject often introduces a semi-humanist expression into zoocriticism. This is evident in the short stories of Vietnamese writers Bùi Ngọc Tấn and Nguyễn Quang Thân. Their animals are simultaneously victims of the postcolonial condition and essential *companion species* (in Haraway's sense)<sup>2</sup>, sharing vulnerability with humans. The authors grant nonhuman characters discursive authority and interior subjectivity through physiological responses and species-specific practices, while often depicting humans as “animalized,” isolated, and traumatized figures. These narratives establish an anthroporelational humanism, arguing that postcolonial humans, being frail and deeply traumatized, should not be hastily abandoned from narrative focus. This species discourse, exemplified by Bùi Ngọc Tấn and Nguyễn Quang Thân, suggests that Vietnamese postcolonial literature complicates the universalizing claims of posthumanism. It grounds interspecies dialogue in the historical trauma of colonial modernity. The work proposes a distinctive intervention into global zoocriticism: rather than an absolute “animal turn,” these texts prioritize a relational ethics of co-survival, where human and nonhuman lives are bound by shared vulnerability in the aftermath of colonialism.

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