

***I AND THEY (MÌNH VÀ HỌ) OF NGUYEN BINH PHUONG
AND PARANOIA (HOANG TÂM) OF NGUYEN DINH TU - PERPECTIVES
FROM WAR OBSESSIONS***

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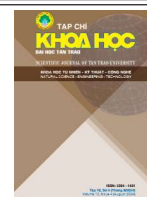
obsession,

Nguyễn Đình Tú,

Nguyễn Bình Phương

Abstract:

The literature on the topic of border wars (including the Northern Border War and the Southwestern Border War) is an important part that contributes to shaping the landscape of modern Vietnamese literature. In this article, we explore the war-related obsessions in two representative novels of this literary genre, *Mình và họ* (Nguyen Binh Phuong) and *Hoang tam* (Nguyen Dinh Tu). Drawing on insights from psychoanalytic theory, we delve into the obsessions with the crimes of war, the loneliness of individuals during and after the war. Through this analysis, we gain a deeper understanding of issues related to human existence, spiritual life, and the relationship between the individual and society, as portrayed by the authors through their character representations.



MÌNH VÀ HỌ CỦA NGUYỄN BÌNH PHƯƠNG VÀ HOANG TÂM CỦA NGUYỄN ĐÌNH TÚ - NHÌN TỪ NHỮNG ÁM ẢNH CHIẾN TRANH

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Tóm tắt

Văn học viết về đề tài chiến tranh biên giới (bao gồm chiến tranh biên giới phía Bắc và chiến tranh biên giới Tây Nam) là một bộ phận quan trọng góp phần hình thành nên diện mạo của văn học hiện đại Việt Nam. Trong bài viết này, chúng tôi tìm hiểu những ám ảnh chiến tranh trong hai tiểu thuyết tiêu biểu của mảng văn học trên, đó là *Mình và Họ* (Nguyễn Bình Phương) và *Hoang tâm* (Nguyễn Đình Tú). Từ sự gợi dẫn của lý thuyết phân tâm học, chúng tôi đi sâu phân tích những ám ảnh tội ác chiến tranh, sự cô đơn của con người trong chiến tranh và sau chiến tranh. Thông qua đây, chúng tôi có cái nhìn sâu sắc hơn về vấn đề bản thể con người, đời sống tinh thần của con người và mối quan hệ giữa con người cá nhân và con người xã hội được nhà văn thể hiện bằng những hình tượng nhân vật.

1. Introduction

War has long ended, but its obsessions continue to haunt the minds of individuals even to this day. Emerging from brutal conflicts, many have fallen into severe psychological trauma. While physical wounds may heal, mental scars often remain unresolved. War obsessions take refuge in the subconscious, pushing individuals into a state of anguish, torment, and fear. They may become trapped between the present and the past, reality and dreams, life and death, good and evil. Striving to integrate into peaceful life while fleeing from their painful past, these individuals often feel

isolated in the very tranquility they once longed for. For such existential selves, the obsessions of war are truly devastating.

Following the liberation of Southern Vietnam and the reunification of the country on April 30, 1975, the Vietnamese people faced two more devastating wars at their northern and southwestern borders: the Southwestern Border War (1975) and the Northern Border War (1979). During the years of resistance against the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary regime (in the Southwest) and Chinese forces (in the North), a literary movement centered on armed forces emerged. This genre

encompasses works addressing the Southwestern Border War, the Northern Border War, and even the maritime conflicts. After 1975, literature on war and human struggles continued to thrive well into the early 21st century and shows no signs of abating. When writing about the Southwestern or Northern Border Wars, authors not only depict the conflicts between “us” and the “enemy” but also focus on the human condition during and after the war, capturing the intricate and rich inner worlds of their characters, particularly their psychological obsessions.

Among the prominent authors writing about border wars, Nguyễn Bình Phương and Nguyễn Đình Tú stand out. Nguyễn Bình Phương born in 1965 in Thái Nguyên, served at the northern border during the 1979 war and is currently the Editor in Chief of Văn nghệ Quân đội (*Military Literature and Arts*) magazine. He is well-known for novels like *Một ví dụ xoàng*, *Ngôi*, *Người đi vắng*, *Những đứa trẻ chết già*, with *Mình và họ* being an exceptional work on the Northern Border War. Similarly, Nguyễn Đình Tú born in 1974 in Hải Phòng and also associated with Văn nghệ Quân đội (*Military Literature and Arts*), chose the armed forces as the focus of his literary creations. Among his works, including *Hồ sơ một tử tù*, *Bên dòng sấu diên*, *Nháp*, *Phiên bản*, *Kín*, *Hoang tâm* stands out as a novel reflecting on the realities and human experiences of the Southwestern Border War. This paper examines war obsessions through the lens of these two novels: *Mình và họ* (Nguyễn Bình Phương) and *Hoang tâm* (Nguyễn Đình Tú). By doing so, it aims to provide a multidimensional view of a painful yet heroic period in the nation’s history, exploring both external perspectives and the deep layers of the human psyche.

Since the early 20th century, psychoanalysis, founded by Austrian-Jewish scientist Sigmund Freud, has emerged as a significant theoretical framework in Europe. By focusing on the human unconscious, psychoanalysis offers effective

solutions for treating mental disorders such as neuroses, delusions, obsessions, and traumatic memories. Freud described psychoanalysis as “*a science of unconscious psychological processes*”, “*emphasizing its potential to analyze and affirm the unconscious in mental processes*” (Freud, 2016, p.107). His groundbreaking contributions include the concepts of the repressed unconscious (Id) and the “Ego”, along with his recognition of dreams and unconscious motives as manifestations of repressed experiences, particularly sexual repression. Additionally, Freud highlighted the importance of dreams as a tool for understanding neuroses, stating that “*dreams are studied to prepare for the examination of neuroses*” and that “*dreams may provide insights into neuroses*” (Freud, 2016, p.204). Subsequent figures such as Carl Jung and Jacques Lacan have further developed psychoanalysis into a flourishing discipline.

Overall, characters in novels about the Southwestern Border War (1975) and the Northern Border War (1979) exhibit complex and rich inner worlds. When reading this literary genre, readers often feel that these characters are struggling, trembling, and pulsating with desires and dreams. A shared feature of *Mình và họ* (Nguyễn Bình Phương) and *Hoang tâm* (Nguyễn Đình Tú) is their focus on the unconscious lives of their characters, particularly the profound war obsessions, psychological trauma, and existential self that wrestles with the shadow of war atrocities and the sense of isolation and estrangement experienced by survivors. Through an exploration of the internal and subconscious worlds of these characters, these novels vividly depict the realities of the after 1975 border wars, adding depth to their narratives and elevating them beyond mere “illustrative literature” (a term used by Nguyễn Minh Châu, referring to a tendency in Vietnamese literature before 1975).

2. Literature Review

2.1 War and the obsession with crimes

One distinctive feature of novels addressing the topic of border wars (including the Southwestern Border War and the Northern Border War) lies in their indirect portrayal of the enemy's crimes and the resultant suffering and loss. Instead of presenting these directly, the narratives revisit them through the unconscious minds of the characters. Sigmund Freud asserted, "*Repressed elements represent the archetype of the unconscious. However, we recognize two levels of unconsciousness: mental components that are hidden but can become conscious and repressed components-these, being suppressed and untethered, cannot return to the realm of consciousness*" (Freud, 2016, p.35). The war obsessions depicted in novels about the border wars belong to the latter level, as the horrific images of wartime atrocities inflicted by enemies remain entrenched in the unconscious of the characters, manifesting as psychological trauma.

Both Nguyễn Bình Phương and Nguyễn Đình Tú eschew traditional chronological war storytelling, where events unfold sequentially with an explicit depiction of warfare on the narrative's surface. Instead, they disrupt the linearity of time, blending past and present events. In *Hoang tâm*, events alternate between the present and the past, while in *Mình và Họ*, the boundary between the two is often indistinct. War obsessions serve as an invisible thread connecting different temporal dimensions. These obsessions originate in the past and persist into the present and, possibly, the future.

In *Mình và họ* (Nguyễn Bình Phương), the image of invaders during the 1979 Northern Border War evokes profound fear in the mind of the character "Anh," a soldier who was captured and brutally tortured by the enemy. Through the diary of "Anh," character Hiếu ("mình") retraces his brother's wartime journey across northern Vietnam, visiting sites like the Valley of Woes,

Bằng River, Nho Quế River, Quây Trà Mountain, and Tà Vàn Summit. Each location evokes memories of atrocities committed by the Chinese forces, either narrated by "Anh", a direct witness whose psyche was severely affected, or imagined by Hiếu, who learns of the events through fragmented diary entries. Instances include "*the massacre of an entire Hmong village at Nho Quế River*" (Nguyễn Bình Phương, 2019, p.128), "*the decimation of 'Anh's' company in the Valley of Woes, and even cannibalism committed by the invaders, such as consuming the liver of a captured French translator*" (Nguyễn Bình Phương, 2019, p.119). In *Hoang tâm* (Nguyễn Đình Tú), parallel storylines highlight the trauma of the protagonist Anh and his comrades during the Southwestern Border War. Anh's psychological scars, leading to physical manifestations such as the loss of sexual drive, are vividly depicted through Tú's incisive prose. The atrocities of the Khmer Rouge are presented in harrowing detail: "*mutilated corpses scattered across camps*" (Nguyễn Đình Tú, 2013, p.84), "*women killed in grotesque positions*" (Nguyễn Đình Tú, 2013, p.85), "*and a female squad slaughtered brutally, leaving behind dismembered body parts*" (Nguyễn Đình Tú, 2013, p.83). Such depictions not only haunt the characters but also leave a lasting impression on readers, illustrating the lasting impact of war atrocities.

The persistent war obsessions in these novels, often rendered through trauma discourse, reflect the physical and psychological damage inflicted by war. Sigmund Freud's trauma theory underpins this narrative approach, emphasizing that psychological injuries from war continue to haunt individuals long after the physical threats have ceased. These novels poignantly capture the enduring horrors of war on both participants, like Anh and "Anh" and non-participants like Hiếu in *Mình và họ*, who are indirectly affected through inherited trauma. The atrocities committed during the war are vividly depicted, such as the brutal massacre of Hmong people, where "*an entire*

Hmong village of more than forty households vanished”, “*their bodies were dismembered and submerged in the Nho Quế River*” (Nguyen Binh Phuong, 2019, p.128), and the annihilation of “Anh’s” battalion in the Valley of Woes. Most horrifyingly, acts of cannibalism are recounted: “*The liver of Haitce, a French interpreter in Móng Cái, along with his entourage, was roasted and consumed by the enemy right in the middle of the street*” (Nguyen Binh Phuong, 2019, p.119). In *Hoang tâm* (Nguyễn Đình Tú), the dual narrative threads featuring Anh, his comrades, and the enemy vividly portray a painful chapter in the nation’s history. The Southwestern Border War left Anh with deep psychological trauma, manifesting as physiological repercussions, such as “*loss of sexual drive*”, obliterating his capacity for intimacy. Through sharp and incisive prose, Nguyễn Đình Tú unearths the murderous crimes committed by the Pol Pot regime. Each detail in chapters four, six, and fourteen not only haunts the characters but also profoundly impacts readers with its graphic portrayal of bloodshed, death, guilt, and sacrifice. Examples include “*deformed corpses scattered in small camps*” (Nguyen Dinh Tu, 2013, p.64), Hằng’s death “*with her throat slashed, sitting lifeless*” (Nguyen Dinh Tu, 2013, p.81), and the massacre of a female youth volunteer unit, leaving behind dismembered body parts: “*strands of hair, patches of scalp, a severed arm, a disjointed leg, an eyeball, a piece of lip, an ear, the tip of a nose, a nipple, a slice of buttock*” (Nguyen Dinh Tu, 2013, p.83). Particularly harrowing is “*Gấm’s body, discarded near the camp, positioned grotesquely like a frog lying on its back, with a cassava root lodged in her private parts*” (Nguyen Dinh Tu, 2013, p.85). Pol Pot’s atrocities against innocent civilians in the southwestern border region were no less horrifying than those committed by the Chinese forces in the northern border conflict.

In addition to libido discourse, magical discourse, and polyphonic discourse, trauma discourse is prominently interwoven into the fabric

of *Mình và họ* (Nguyễn Bình Phương) and *Hoang tâm* (Nguyễn Đình Tú). Rooted in trauma theory developed in the 20th century and associated with Sigmund Freud, this discourse encompasses both physical and psychological trauma. War’s detrimental effects on human psychology often begin with fear, hatred, and enmity, later evolving into long-lasting psychological (and sometimes physiological) consequences, even after soldiers have escaped the perilous, deadly battlefield and returned to civilian life. The harrowing scars of war persist, haunting the post-war psyche. Furthermore, the obsessions of war extend to non-combatants, as exemplified by Hiếu in *Mình và họ* (Nguyễn Bình Phương). Phan Tuấn Anh observes that these constitute “*the profound psychological trauma endured by soldiers in the post-war period*” (Phan Tuan Anh, 2018, p.178). The more intense the wartime experiences, the graver the post-war trauma. Similarly, the themes of war obsession and psychological trauma resonate powerfully in other novels within the border war literature, such as *Bóng anh hùng* (Doãn Dũng), *Xác phàm* (Nguyễn Đình Tú), *Miền hoang* (Sương Nguyệt Minh), and *Dưới tán rừng thốt nốt* (Nguyễn Tam Mỹ), all rendered with poignant authenticity. It can be argued that the war obsessions portrayed in border war novels are far more intense and tormenting compared to those in literature about the resistance wars against French colonialism and American imperialism.

2.2 War and human loneliness

Exploring post-1986 Vietnamese novels, one often encounters characters marked by loneliness and alienation, whether on their native soil or amid crowds. In novels about border wars, particularly *Mình và họ* (Nguyễn Bình Phương) and *Hoang tâm* (Nguyễn Đình Tú), this theme of solitude pervades. During wartime, despite their fervent dedication to their homeland, soldiers keenly felt the isolation and estrangement of life on the frontiers. This was especially true for Vietnamese volunteer soldiers during the Southwestern Border War who after repelling the Khmer Rouge, extended their

mission into Cambodian territory to fulfill their internationalist duty. In unfamiliar lands with linguistic and cultural barriers, loneliness became almost unbearable, as reflected in characters like Tùng in *Miền hoang* by Sương Nguyệt Minh and Phiên in *Dưới tán rừng thốt nốt* by Nguyễn Tam Mỹ. Similarly, Anh, the protagonist in *Hoang tâm*, struggles with a profound sense of displacement, longing for the familiarity of home: “The soldier’s heartstrings resonate, leaving a lingering sadness” (Nguyen Dinh Tu, 2013, p.49). Unlike Anh, Hiếu’s elder brother in *Mình và họ* fought on home soil during the Northern Border War. Yet, “Anh” is not immune to the loneliness of war. In his memories, he frequently recalls crying during the conflict-tears of helplessness and solitude. “Anh” confesses to Hiếu, “I cried at the Valley of Woes” (Nguyen Binh Phuong, 2019, p.174), “where his company was nearly wiped out, and again when a political commissar was killed by shelling” (Nguyen Binh Phuong, 2019, p.223). The fragmented narrative and depiction of “Anh” highlight his rich and complex inner world, trapped in both personal and collective tragedy.

Post-war, loneliness remains a persistent theme as soldiers attempt to reintegrate into civilian life. Having once felt isolated in foreign lands or amidst the chaos of war, returning soldiers now grapple with a new kind of solitude-being out of sync with a society at peace. The inability to reintegrate manifests in feelings of impotence, helplessness, and even *hysteria*. *Hysteria* is not a physical injury but a psychological state, a symptom of neurosis, pseudo-disease, or delusion that causes individuals to writhe in prolonged agony and become susceptible to misguided thoughts. Returning from the Northern Border War, the character “Anh” in the novel *Mình và họ* (Nguyễn Bình Phương) “bears no physical scars, but his mental world is entirely destroyed, leading to psychosis and denying him the chance to live a normal life like others” (Vu Thi Trang, 2020, p.327). As a soldier who fought against Chinese invaders, “Anh” becomes mute after his discharge:

“He would sit in the dark, his eyes wide open staring blankly or gazing through everything. His lips trembled but could form no words” (Nguyen Binh Phuong, 2019, p.172). He remains trapped in his painful yet heroic war memories. In “Anh’s” eyes, ordinary people who share the same skin color, language, culture, and homeland as him all become “Chinese invaders,” the aggressors from the border conflict. Each encounter triggers his hysteria, pushing him into a frenzy- “flailing limbs, frothing mouth” (Nguyen Binh Phuong, 2019, p.197) - and provoking him to attack. Even in the post-war era, “Anh” believes he is still living in the harrowing days of the nation’s history. He clings to “a tattered backpack filled with its contents spilling out” (Nguyen Binh Phuong, 2019, p.200) and continues military gestures like “saluting his commander with a hand to his forehead”, talking as though planning combat: “I need to go deep to hit those bastards. You go first, watch out for mines” (Nguyen Binh Phuong, 2019, p.200). The peak of this tragedy is “Anh’s” lonely, cold death by the roadside, his face disfigured by scavenging animals-a devastating portrayal of the soldier’s post-war plight. This haunting fate symbolizes a profound tragedy far heavier than any physical injury endured during the war.

Phan Tuan Anh states, “The depiction of post-war soldiers suffering from mental illness is quite common in the discourse of novels about border wars, owing to the profound psychological trauma they endured” (Phan Tuan Anh, 2018, p.178). After numerous confrontations with Pol Pot’s forces, the character Anh in *Hoang tâm* (Nguyễn Đình Tú) survives and returns from the Southwestern Border War. However, Anh frequently falls into a state of madness, hovering between reality and illusion, the present and the past: “Anh found himself standing amidst the most intense moments of the battlefield”, “A noose from somewhere was cast and wrapped tightly around him” (Nguyen Dinh Tu, 2013, p.45). Anh is acutely aware of his symptoms of mental disorder. Although the war is over, its lingering aftermath remains in

Anh's mind, causing him to “*speak incoherently, sometimes shouting without realizing it*” (Nguyen Dinh Tu, 2013, p.232). He feels sorrow for his wife, lamenting that she was “*unfortunate to have married a madman*”. The psychological trauma also leads to physiological repercussions, rendering Anh impotent and stripping him of the ability to feel excitement when close to a woman's body. Anh's family life disintegrates as he silently bears the pain of his broken marriage and the loss of his innate masculinity. Constantly withdrawn and timid around others, Anh's impotence becomes evident in an encounter with Son Phan, where his body fails to respond: “*Anh's member remained flaccid, drooping like a peeled banana hanging beside two shriveled lemons*” (Nguyen Dinh Tu, 2013, p.106). In other words, the character Anh in *Hoang tâm* embodies a profound castration complex, defined as “*the psychological and emotional state when an individual's instinctual needs are repressed, reflecting a complex internal conflict about one's existence when it fails to provide fulfillment*” (Van Thi Phuong Trang, 2016, p.77). The haunting trauma of the Southwestern Border War, combined with the subtle societal contradictions Anh witnesses upon returning from the battlefield, robs him of joy and pleasure, pushing him into a tragic cycle of anguish, suffocation, and despair.

From the perspective of psychoanalytic criticism, we can delve into the unconscious worlds of the characters in the novels *Mình và họ* (Nguyễn Bình Phương) and *Hoang tâm* (Nguyễn Đình Tú), as well as border war-themed literature in general. This approach reveals and explains the human experiences of loneliness, alienation, helplessness, and hysteria. Together, these elements contribute to shaping the portrayal of post-war individuals in Vietnamese literature after 1986.

2.3 Subjective narrative techniques

In the realm of novels addressing the theme of border wars, a significant number employ

subjective narrative techniques. These include works such as *Miền hoang* by Suong Nguyệt Minh, *Mùa xa nhà* by Nguyễn Thành Nhân, *Hoang tâm* by Nguyễn Đình Tú, *Bóng anh hùng* by Doãn Dũng, and *Mình và họ* by Nguyễn Bình Phương... The two novels under examination *Mình và họ* and *Hoang tâm* exemplify the use of subjective narration. This approach deeply immerses readers in the characters' inner worlds, evoking their obsessions while also modernizing the storytelling style and aligning Vietnamese literature with global literary trends.

According to Lại Nguyên Ân, narration encompasses “*the textual components attributed to the author, narrator, or a narrative persona (distinct from characters' direct dialogue)*” [2:410]. There are two primary modes of narration: objective and subjective. In objective narration, the story unfolds from an external perspective, with the narrator appearing omniscient about the story's events and essence. Conversely, subjective narration presents the story from an internal viewpoint, where characters participate in the narrative. In *Mình và họ* (Nguyễn Bình Phương), the characters “anh” and “mình” (Hiếu) alternate in narrating the story of war and its aftermath. The narrative predominantly comprises “mình's” perspective, interwoven with fragments from “anh”. Sometimes their perspectives are sequentially presented, while at other times, they intertwine within a single segment. This narrative layering creates a textured and interconnected narrative fabric. The firsthand accounts of “mình” and “anh” lend credibility to the story and vividly reveal the characters' psychological traumas. In *Hoang tâm* (Nguyễn Đình Tú), the narrative unfolds mainly through the perspective of Anh, unlike the alternating voices in *Mình và họ*. Nguyễn Đình Tú structures two interwoven storylines across distinct timeframes, with odd-numbered chapters portraying Anh's post-war life and even-numbered chapters revisiting his experiences as a soldier in the Southwestern Border War. This approach allows Anh to openly share his psychological and

physiological struggles after returning from the battlefield. By narrating from the perspective of a participant, the novel conveys the raw intensity of war and the profound mental anguish endured by soldiers as they navigate the peace they once yearned for.

The differing narrative perspectives in *Mình và họ* and *Hoang tâm* reflect the diversity of subjective narrative techniques. In *Mình và họ*, the story is narrated from the first-person perspective, with “mình” (Hiếu) and “anh” alternating roles as narrators. “Anh” recounts his firsthand experiences of wartime suffering, while “mình” shares his interpretations of the aftermath, combining these with his imagination. This juxtaposition underscores the fragmented lives of post-war characters. In contrast, *Hoang tâm* adopts a third-person perspective, though the narrative closely aligns with Anh’s experiences and emotions, making it almost indistinguishable from first-person narration. Through these subjective techniques, the authors successfully depict the harsh realities of post-1975 border wars while also illuminating the deep-seated trauma and personal struggles of their characters. This narrative choice enriches the depiction of war and its aftermath, fulfilling the literary mission of preserving the essence of wartime experiences for future generations.

3. Conclusion

In summary, psychoanalytic theory provides a powerful lens for delving into the inner worlds of characters in novels addressing border wars, particularly *Mình và họ* (Nguyễn Bình Phương) and *Hoang tâm* (Nguyễn Đình Tú). Applying psychoanalysis to explore these narratives proves both feasible and meaningful, shedding light on the brutal realities of Vietnam’s struggles against the Khmer Rouge and Chinese forces. Through these novels, the authors construct profound representations of revolutionary soldiers and Vietnamese volunteer troops. Beyond collective wartime trauma, each character in this literary

genre embodies unique individual suffering, adding layers of depth to the shared anguish caused by war. Psychoanalytic theory serves as a “light” to illuminate the characters’ unconscious, unveiling their war obsessions, guilt, and psychological wounds. Through this lens, the authors also bring forth their characters’ simple yet profound dreams and aspirations during and after the war. Despite the passage of time, novels about the border wars retain their enduring value. Literature has faithfully fulfilled its mission of preserving the legacy of past wars, allowing younger generations to take pride in a heroic era of the nation’s history while cherishing the peace of the present.

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