

# Natural Disasters, Survival Instinct and Psychological Trauma: Reading Natural Narratives About Landslides in Contemporary Vietnamese Literature

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## Abstract

Vietnam stands as one of the nations currently confronting a severe ecological crisis. Given its geographical location and topographical features, the country annually endures numerous typhoons and tropical depressions, accompanied by floods, landslides, and mudslides. While the motif of flooding has been a significant preoccupation in Vietnamese literature from folklore to modernity, narratives concerning landslides have only prominently emerged in contemporary literature, correlating with the environmental impacts of human activity and ongoing climate change. This paper, therefore, employs an ecocritical approach, specifically Global Warming Criticism, to examine several narratives concerning the phenomenon of landslide in contemporary Vietnamese literature, including *Núi lở* (Landslides) by Nguyễn Ngọc Tư, *Núi vỡ* (Broken Mountain) by Tống Ngọc Hân and *Núi lở* (Landslides) by Mai Thị Hồng Quế. These narrative prose works all depict the natural disasters of landslides/mudflows and the fragile insignificance of humanity in the face of nature's fury. These natural perils not only trigger the survival instinct but also expose issues morality, ethics, humanity, and inflict profound trauma on the surviving victims. This paper aims to explore the sense of place as well as human fear within the spirit of questioning the relationship between humanity and nature.

**Keywords:** natural disaster; narrative of landslides; survival instinct; Vietnamese literature

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## Introduction

Vietnam is a country with a long tradition of agricultural production; farmers depend heavily on the weather and pay close attention to daily weather fluctuations.

Due to the characteristics of the terrain and climate, every year Vietnam always has to endure many storms and extreme weather phenomena that cause serious consequences. Vietnamese literature from ancient times has always paid attention to the weather, describing the impacts of nature and weather on human life. Associated with agricultural culture, the image of floods is shown quite a lot in literature. There are many folk songs and proverbs about the weather and experience in preventing extreme weather, such as After lightning bolts strike comes a storm; Dark clouds on Tam Dao means flood will come; Long rainbow comes flood, short rainbow comes rain; Ants swarm in July, great flood arrives,... Vietnamese literature from folk to modern also has many works showing the impact of natural disasters on human life and how they experience natural disasters: From folk literature such as the legend of Son Tinh Thuy Tinh, to modern literature such as Dead or Alive, to your own devices (Pham Duy Ton), Dike Break (Vu Trong Phung), Sea Storm (Chu Van), Summer Rain (Ma Van Khang), A Time Far Past (Le Luu), The Mystery of The Waters (Bao Ninh),.... There are some works mentioning drought such as Toad sues the heaven (fairy tale), Endless Fields (Nguyen Ngoc Tu), Paris 11th August (Thuan) ... but in general, rain, storms, floods are mentioned the most, in which the image of floods and dike breaks is a haunting image that comes back again and again in Vietnamese literature.

Over the world, literature mentioning climate appeared early and is quite rich. According to Kathryn Schulz, "Since the end of the 20th century, climate novels have begun to go hand in hand with science fiction."<sup>1</sup> In Vietnam, the science fiction genre has also had some achievements, but has not really developed strongly and there are only still a few works in this genre that deal with climate change and the future of humanity.

Contemporary Vietnamese literature has many works that deal with the fates and unfortunate lives caused by natural disasters, floods or the consequences of deforestation and stone exploitation such as Where The Storm Passes Through (Nguyen Thanh Thuy), Mountain Scar (Nguyen Luan), Falling Mountain (Nguyen Bich Lan), Landslides (Nguyen Danh Lam), Broken Mountain Night (Nguyen Tran Be), Flowing Land (Nguyen Ngoc),... (in which Broken Mountain Night records the experiences of a journalist who witnessed scenes of people facing landslide disasters in the form of memoirs, while Flowing Land is an essay about landslide disasters in mountainous areas). In the scope of this article, we focus more on works that talk about landslide disasters such as Landslides (Nguyen Ngoc Tu), Landslides (Mai Thi Hong Que), Broken Mountain (Tong Ngoc Han). This article aims at texts that make us "think about fragility" base on Jonathan Bate's perspective in the essay on ecocriticism: "Criticism of global warming proposes a postulate about a natural world that is no longer seen as passive or arranged in a predetermined order and only knows how to obey. On the contrary, nature is seen as something uncertain, unpredictable and reacting to all our interventions, in ways that we cannot foresee or control. Recognizing the

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Schulz (USA), Weather and Literature, Vu Thi Hue translated from NewYorker.com, Van Nghe Newspaper (VN 10-2016).

surrounded, humanized, and therefore vulnerable ecological nature of nature, Criticism of global warming promotes the texts that, in Bate's words, make us “think about fragility”<sup>2</sup>.

## Results and Discussion

### Landslides: a cry for help from humans or from the ecological environment

Landslides (also known as broken mountain) are understood as “the phenomenon of shifting soil and rock masses on a slope from top to bottom along one or several surfaces (sliding) or free fall (landslides, soil, rock falls, rolling)”. This is one of the manifestations of geological hazards (geological hazards/ geodisaster) - that is, dangerous geological phenomena, threatening human life, property, economy, society or the environment due to natural movements or as a result of human activities or a combination of both factors. Recently, landslides and mountain slides have appeared more and more in Vietnam, causing serious consequences and taking many lives<sup>3</sup>. As landslides appear more and more, environmental protection awareness is increasingly raised, and in literature there are works that directly mention landslides, mountain breaks and the relationship between humans and the environment. In the past, literature about mountainous areas often focused on expressing the mysterious and majestic beauty of wild nature, or the uniqueness of mountainous customs, which contained hidden dangers but did not directly depict disasters. There were stories about landslides that were present but events in the overall plot and were the consequences of resource exploitation (for example, Cao Duy Son's novel *Heavenly Orchestra* (*Đàn trời*)).

Works named "Landslides" or "Broken Mountains" and directly mentioned natural disasters, describing the image of mountains disintegrating, separating, and losing their tops with terrible destruction. In Nguyen Ngoc Tu's short story *Landslides*, the landslide described by Vinh was a terrible accident, the boy's family and the guests escaped and survived, but his grandfather remained forever in the mountains and in his memories. *Broken Mountain* (Tong Ngoc Han) is the story of the villagers in San Ho village who had to leave their village to avoid the risk of flooding due to hydroelectric exploitation, but for the villagers, the nightmare of the broken mountain always haunts them. The *Landslides* (Mai Thi Hong Que) tells the story of the lives of people suffering from serious illnesses as a result of the destruction of mountains for stone mining with

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Bate. *Green Romanticism*. Special issue of *Studies in Romanticism*, 35/3 (Fall 1996)

<sup>3</sup> For example, the landslide disaster caused by manganese mining in Kep Ky mountain (Quang Trung commune, Tra Linh district, Cao Bang province) took the lives of more than 500 miners. Source: <https://laodong.vn/phong-su/tro-lai-voi-tham-hoa-lo-nui-kinh-hoang-nhat-viet-nam-526954.lido>, The flash flood landslide in Nu village caused by heavy rains many days after the storm on September 10 flattened 33 houses, killing 52 people and leaving 14 missing. (<https://vnexpress.net/5-nguyen-nhan-khien-lu-quet-sat-lo-tan-pha-lang-nu-4793102.html>).

explosives, polluting water and air sources. Broken mountains, landslides, like other natural disasters, cannot be predicted, and when they happen, people can only run away. The works describe the helplessness and smallness of humans in the face of disaster. In the story *Landslides* (Nguyen Ngoc Tu), the boy ran to find his grandfather to urge him to leave the dangerous area, but his grandfather replied very calmly: "Well, the mountain collapsed, the mountain is also angry, isn't it?" (*Landslides* - Nguyen Ngoc Tu). For the grandfather, the mountain is not inanimate, and the mountain collapsed, simply because the mountain is "angry". In other words, humans have to suffer the wrath of nature. In the story of the contemporary writer about disaster, humans are victims of natural disasters, damaged property, casualties, and subsequent injuries. But from another perspective, mountains and nature are also victims of human exploitation and destruction. Although landslides are something that people do not know exactly when and where they will happen, there are always warnings coming from the reality of human activities.

Mai Thi Hong Que's *Landslides* is a different situation. The mysterious Song Mountain associated with the childhood of two friends Lam and Hai has now become eroded due to stone exploitation, and more and more children in the village are infected with a deadly disease. The landslide here is entirely caused by humans: "The top of Song Mountain has been cut off, revealing a patch of jagged color." Song Mountain is likened to "A Song fish struggling with its fins stained with blood on the rice fields" as evidence of nature being damaged. In this short story, there is no angry nature harming humans, it is humans who, while persecuting nature (destroying mountains), persecute each other: the air in the village "in the middle of June, the sky was as hazy as fog", "Convoys of trucks rushed in and out, engulfing the small village in a layer of dust", "dust flew like a whirlwind after each roar of explosives", "rocks still collapsed, dust still rolled up like a whirlwind, the acrid smell of explosives still rushed into the village". In the writer's description, the heavily polluted environment can be seen (smoke and dust), can be smelled (the acrid smell of explosives) and even invisible things (poison seeping into the soil and water, silently killing humans).

In Tong Ngoc Han's *Broken Mountain*, the villagers of San Ho live on the mountain but have to move to another place to avoid the risk of the hydroelectric lake breaking. However, even after they reach their new place, they still can't get used to it. There's still no electricity, the children are still sick and crying, the grown-up daughters still leave the village and disappear, and the nightmares of the broken mountain still haunt them: "The hydroelectric plant has not yet provided electricity but has taken away so many things from San Ho. It has taken away the gentleness, diligence, and hard work of San Ho's daughters. It has taken away the warmth of husband-and-wife love. No one can see those things. They just sigh and point to the forest. There, big trees fall on small trees. Big forests fall; small forests fall. The tree sap is black in the whole area. I heard Chinh say that this area has five lakes like that. Wherever the lakes go, the forests there are dirty, jagged, and destroyed. The picturesque villages had to be evacuated because they were in the danger zone. The terraced fields that people poured so much sweat and tears to make shiny Even so, it was plowed and leveled.

When planting, there was not enough water. However, when harvesting, the flood swept away, washing away houses and doors. Everyone knows that San Ho forest is a sacred forest. No matter how sacred, it will die." The story does not describe the disaster of the mountain breaking but only mentions the risk of disaster and in reality, it only stops at the disappearance of the sacred San Ho forest and the floods that swept away houses, the impacts on people's psychology.

All three cases are cries for help from the natural environment when it is exploited, destroyed, and devastated by humans. But the authors also open up dialogue and warnings about the choice between economic development, between making a living and preserving nature: building motels on the mountains, destroying mountains to mine stones, building hydroelectric power plants. Not only is it a trade-off with the loss of landscape, loss of peace of mind, and loss of family harmony, people also have to trade-off with their lives.

Scientists have clearly pointed out the consequences of natural exploitation activities that humans must bear. Adding a voice of literature to this issue, in the essay *Flowing Land*, Nguyen Ngoc analyzed: "Floods are when the natural forest is lost, only a few sparse bushes remain, with grass, rubber, acacia, coffee... spreading everywhere, are types of trees that do not have roots to retain water (which reports and statistics keep falsely calling "coverage"), 95% of rainwater flows into waterfalls on the ground, sweeping away everything, villages and people. (...) But this year is different: This year, it is not just the water pouring down in floods. This year, something completely different, new, and very basic has happened: THIS YEAR IT IS THE TURN OF THE FLOWING LAND." From the actual observations in the Central Highlands and throughout the country, the writer explains: "The life-and-death relationship of Earth and Water is tightly bound together by Forests. For the past fifty years, with insatiable greed, regardless of all desperate cries for help, we have severed the life-and-death link: FORESTS. We have completely destroyed the forests. Without forests, natural forests, MOUNTAINS FLOW OUT like water. This year, it is not mainly water floods, but land floods. That is the fundamental change this year, and in my opinion, from now on." (*Flowing Land*, Nguyen Ngoc). Nguyen Ngoc's analysis explains the deep roots of landslides and mountain slides, partly from humans.

In that explanation, we can see the continuity of natural disasters: landslides and mountain slides are caused by prolonged heavy rains, due to climate change, but climate change is not simply a natural factor: in that process of change, humans are not innocent. And so, everything is somehow connected, human and nature, nature and nature, human and human. As Kate Rigby notes: In this context, the question of cultural negotiations with what has come to be called 'natural disaster' has acquired an unprecedented directness. Because of the overwhelming attention to 'environmental' issues rooted in socio-cultural factors, the literature of 'natural' disaster remains an understudied area within ecocriticism. Yet the excessive opposition between

'environmental' and 'natural' disaster is itself symptomatic of a modern mindset that seeks to separate absolutely human causes and effects from non-human causes and effects. In addition, the persistent attribution of today's climate-related disasters to a violent, immoral (and often feminized) "distant" nature, as Timothy Morton puts it, obscures both the human contribution to extreme climate warming and the role of socio-cultural factors in determining the vulnerability and remarkable resilience of settled communities in different places."<sup>4</sup>

### Survival instinct and human crisis

Disasters push people into dangerous situations and face death. That is the situation that makes the survival instinct rise most strongly but is also the moment that challenges humanity the most. In Nguyen Ngoc Tu's *Landslides*, the film that Vinh imagined about the landslide revealed many tragedies. The first scene after the mountain's shaking is the image of a woman standing there, stunned, watching her lover hastily start his motorbike and drive down the mountain alone in the misty rain and the roar of the falling rocks, leaving her behind. Then the drama is pushed up another notch: The hotel's owner and his wife climb on a motorbike and run away, taking the female guest with them, but leaves his father on the mountain, because according to the wife's quick calculation: "Dad is old. If you leave that girl to die here, you will go to jail." The landslide, in Nguyen Ngoc Tu's expression, is "the rock's precarious separation", "The rock is sliding on the rock, the rock bids farewell to the rock in a mournful sound", but it is also the eternal separation of fatherly love, of passionate love, of innocent childhood. The image of the landslide as if cut off by a knife, its "bare, bald" top is not only the collapse of humanity but also the collapse of sacred feelings. Thai Son Mountain (Vietnamese folk song: Father's merit is like Thai Son Mountain) in Vietnamese folk songs, a symbol of the lofty fatherly love, was pulled down by the son and his wife. In Vinh's account, those who survived the landslide were "those who were screaming with joy at escaping but were already dead": the death of humanity. The disaster is terrible for humans, but the survival instinct that destroys humanity is even more terrible.

From another perspective of humanity, in *Landslides* (Mai Thi Hong Que), in contrast to the dusty and smelly village of explosives is the house of Nhan - the owner of a stone quarry with a luxurious living room and elegantly dressed guests laughing and talking. The sound of joyful meditation music in that luxurious space is also completely opposite/distant from the village where children are getting serious illnesses and dying one after another. But as a contractor who makes money from stone quarrying, Nhan only needs to know: "breaking stones is a legal contract". The question of ecological ethics here is that stone quarrying is permitted by law, but can it be done in spite of the fact that it pollutes the environment, harms health, and affects human life? The sound of meditation music in Nhan's house is like a satire, because meditation

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<sup>4</sup> Kate Rigby. *Confronting Catastrophe: Ecocriticism in a Warming World*. Published in Louise Westling (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Environment*, Cambridge UP, 201: 212 -25

music is for the peace of mind and peaceful meditation, but can one be peaceful and serene when economic profits are exchanged for the lives of villagers?

In Tong Ngoc Han's *Broken Mountain*, Chinh, a commune official who persuaded people to relocate to serve the hydroelectric power plant, also asked himself lingering questions that he could not answer: "It's a pity, my village is so beautiful. Hydroelectric power plants can be built anywhere, why must they be in such a beautiful place like this? A place where the whole world knows and comes to admire the picturesque beauty of mountains and rivers. But why, instead of making five small lakes, don't they make one big one? Either way, they'll push people into the deep forest or up the cliff, so they'll push them all at once. Either way, they'll wipe out a cultural land, wipe it all out." The torment of the San Ho people when witnessing the sacred forest gradually die is an ecological awakening: "When the forest is alive, the forest provides firewood, wood for houses, medicine, water for farming... When the forest is being destroyed, everyone ignores it. No one dared to speak up. The character Cay loved the land and village where he lived, loved the sacred San Ho Forest and could not bear to leave, but when he saw with his own eyes the immense bag of water hanging on the roof of the village, he had to leave his familiar place and could not stop blaming himself for not speaking up when the forest was being destroyed. Behind the call of survival instinct in Cay and Chinh, there was still a pain with the call of the forest, of nature and of humanity.

### **Topophobia and psychological trauma**

Landslides and mountain collapses cause trauma to nature. Mountains in literature are a symbol of solidity, strength, and protection for people, a symbol of longevity. Mountains also have the meaning of sacred origins. People climb high mountains to feel the vastness and openness, to be in harmony with the earth and sky. Landslides are the collapse and fragmentation of the rocky mountain entity, the fragmentation of sacred symbols. In Vietnamese literature from traditional to modern times, nature has always been both an entity and a symbolic meaning. For example, storms and floods in literature before the August Revolution (1945) often highlight the contrast between the miserable, hungry people and the indifferent officials who "live and die, let them". In literature during the resistance period, even though natural disasters and storms were fierce, they could not subdue the will and strength of people. As mentioned above, landslides and mountain breaks cause natural trauma: the Song Mountain range is like a fish struggling with its fins stained with blood on the rice fields, the sacred San Ho Forest is dead, the mountain after the landslide becomes bare as if its top has been cut off. But that environmental trauma always goes hand in hand with psychological trauma.

Facing a disaster, standing on the line between life and death, people throw away all their shells to fight for survival. Having survived a terrible experience, each person falls into a different fear of places and psychological trauma. Vinh in *Landslides*

(Nguyen Ngoc Tu) confessed to his friend: “I know the details and images by heart, if I tell them, I have to tell them from beginning to end. You don’t know, I see it every night. The branches of the Lagerstroemia were thrown around, making the Lagerstroemia flowers fly in disarray.” (Nguyen Ngoc Tu - *Landslides*). On the surface of the story, Vinh is a passionate scriptwriter with a rich imagination, every little detail is described carefully, “Vinh is holding the script in his hand and reading in the red light of a duck egg bulb”. But listening to Vinh’s story and observing Vinh’s mood, this is not the story of an outsider. From the point of “Vinh still lying curled up, his hands seemed to be between his thighs, eyes half-closed and half-open”, Vinh’s emotions when imagining the story being made into a film, his mood followed the story and was pushed to the climax, “Vinh suddenly lost his breath, where can we find actors who can portray the mood of someone who was screaming with joy at escaping but was already – dead, sir? Vinh’s back was cold, he seemed to be shaking. The old, rickety bed had a fever. I frantically threw my blanket over Vinh, and while covering him up to his neck, I painfully realized that the blanket was unnecessary. Oh my god, I need something to wipe my tears.

That boy really hasn’t ended yet.” (Nguyen Ngoc Tu)

Through Vinh’s story, every detail is clearly shown, Vinh’s emotions and moods as if “possessed”, it can be seen that the memories of the previous landslide still haunt Vinh like the confession “I see it every night”. It seemed to be a great shock that caused psychological trauma for Vinh.

In the *Broken Mountain* (Tong Ngoc Han), although the event of the broken mountain has not happened in the story, the haunting thought of it every night is an equally terrifying psychological trauma: “Every night, after the hardships of making a living, people are still startled by the panicked cries for help. The water has broken... run, everyone. Every time he heard that, Cay broke the door and rushed out. The moon was trembling and rising like water in the valley”. The lives of the displaced people, besides the pain of losing the sacred forest, the pain of having an entire cultural land wiped out, also include the haunting nightly mountain breaking, and the heartache when the girls left home. Ecological trauma and psychological trauma are inseparable, as a reminder of human moral responsibility to the inhuman world, as Kate Rigby notes: The constant attribution of today’s climate-related disasters to a violent, immoral “distant” nature also has the potential to fuel ecological fear, further reinforcing the dualism of culture-nature at a time when, more than ever, we need to break down the mental walls of separation and acknowledge both the responsibility of the material world for the extreme escalation of climate and the moral responsibility of humans to the inhuman Other.”<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

The three short stories are different cases of landslides and mountain collapses,

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<sup>5</sup> Kate Rigby. *Confronting Catastrophe: Ecocriticism in a Warming World*. Published in Louise Westling (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Environment*, Cambridge UP, 201: 212 -25

in different situations and due to different causes, but all show the fragility of humans before the wrath of heaven and earth. But humans are not completely innocent. Natural disasters cause the survival instinct to rise, at the same time revealing the crisis of humanity and are the root. The works raise ecological ethics but also question human behavior towards nature, aiming at ecological awakening. This is an important step forward for Vietnamese literature in the context of the current environmental crisis.

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