

Ecological Education in Southeast Asia Ecocriticism: Ecocritical Approaches to Children's Literature in Vietnam

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[*Abstract*]

Since the last years of the twentieth century, the approach to children's literature from ecocriticism has been discussed in academic fora around the world, especially in the US and Europe. In Southeast Asia, with the foundation of the ASEAN Association of Environment and Literature in 2016, there have been scholarly discussions about the capacity of children's literature to enhance ecological awareness in the region. In Vietnam, since the early years of the 21st century, with the increasing reception of ecocriticism from outside, children's literary works have become the subject of ecocriticism. This article examines scholarly works approaching children's literature in Vietnam, pointing out how they elucidate messages about environmental education. By studying Vietnamese ecocritical scholarship of various types including research, commentaries, and criticism on children's literature, this article argues that ecological education is a prominent feature in the relationship between ecocriticism and children's literature in Vietnam. As such, Vietnamese ecocriticism of children's literature shares the prominent argument of international materials on children's literature and ecocriticism, particularly in Southeast Asia.

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Children's literature, since the last decades of the twentieth century, has become the subject of ecocriticism in Western contexts in the cause for ecological awareness education (Nualsiri 2018: 253-274). In Southeast Asia, with the foundation of the ASEAN Association of Environment and Literature in 2016, there have been scholarly discussions about the capacity of children's literature to enhance ecological awareness in the region (Sankaran and Lu 2018: 1-4). This paper examines ecological studies and ecological criticism of children's literature in Vietnam, asking how the Vietnamese ecocriticism approach children's literature. By studying theses, dissertations, research articles, commentaries, and criticism on children's literature from an ecological criticism perspective published in Vietnam, this article argues that ecological education is a prominent feature in the relationship between ecocriticism and children's literature in Vietnam. As such, research on children's literature from ecocritical perspectives in Vietnam further affirms ecological education as a prominent argument in materials on children's literature and ecocriticism, particularly in Southeast Asia.

I . Children's Literature and Ecocriticism in Southeast Asia

Since the last years of the twentieth century, the approach to children's literature from ecocriticism has been discussed in academic fora around the world, especially in the US and Europe. The starting point for these discussions was the topic "Children's literature and the environment" in the spring 1995 issue of the *American Nature Writing Newsletter* and the special topic "Ecology and Children" of the magazine *Children's Literature Quarterly* in the years 1994-1995. About 10 years later, in 2004, *Wild World: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism* by Sidney I. Dobrin and Kenneth B. Kidd offered a comprehensive scholarly study of children's literature and environmental education (Sidney and Kidd 2014). In 2009, an in-depth publication on the environment and children's

literature was launched; it was a thematic issue entitled “Deep into Nature: Ecology, Environment and Children’s Literature,” which included 24 articles, compiled in *iBbYlink* journal (volume 24 September 2009) (Harding et.al. 2014). Nearly 10 years later came *Critical Approaches to Children’s Literature*, edited by Nina Goga, Lykke Guanio-Uluru, Bjørg Oddrun Hallås, and Aslaug Nyrnes. It included chapters on Nordic children’s literature from ecocritical perspectives. Other scholars specializing in children’s literature contributed to the discourse such as Greta Gaard, Noel Sturgeon, Ambika Bhalla, Sandip Kumar Mishra, Kamala Platt, and Clare Echterling (Goga 2018).

The prominent argument shared among studies of children’s literature from an ecocritical perspective is the consideration of children’s literature as a means to educate children about environmental and ecological awareness, thereby contributing to the sustainable development of the community. In other words, most of studies, as observed by Clare Echterling, were explicitly educational in asking how literature can create future ecocitizens who ensure sustainable development of the community. Therefore, children’s literary works surveyed were mainly pastoral works, written about the non-human world and its relations to humans. This trend can be seen in the book by Nina Goga, Lykke Guanio-Uluru, Bjørg Oddrun Hallås, and Aslaug Nyrnes. The editor of the special issue on children’s literature and the environment in *iBbYlink* magazine maintains that children’s literature plays a very important role in helping young generations become aware of their role in protecting the environment. Researcher Ambika Bhalla summarizes her article with the observation that children’s literature, characterized by gentle references to ecology, will help raise awareness of the natural environment in future generations. With this approach, children’s literature becomes important for sustainable development. Bhalla writes that children’s literature, interwoven with ecological themes, can become a valuable medium for humanity in today’s context (Ambika 2012: 6). The environmental and ecological world in children’s literature is therefore approached as a non-historical, non-political world or, as Echterling puts it, ideal.

The emphasis on ecological education in ecocritical studies of

children's literature reflects the movement of ecocriticism from the emphasis on the natural world of things in pastoral and nature literature to the relationship between environmental and ecological issues with historical and political issues. Some recent studies of children's literature from ecocritical theory have discussed historical and political issues such as race, class, and ethnicity, criticizing modernization and industrialization. Kimberly Reynolds is a professor of children's literature from Newcastle University and former president of the International Research Society for Children's Literature. In the book *A Very Short Introduction to Children's Literature* (2011), Reynolds observes that the eco-tragic master plot in children's literature encourages the public to ignore progress and reject new developments in science and technology. The ecological divide is, as Reynolds argues, associated with the social divide: the rich and powerful live in clean environments, enjoy fresh food, and access to greenery, while the poor live in "increasingly dark and squalid environment[s]" (Reynolds 2011: 114). Similarly, Kamala Platt, in her article "Environmental Justice Children's Literature; Depicting, Defending and Celebrating Trees and Birds, Colors and People," challenges idealistic analyses of ecological issues in children's literature based on an examination of Indian and Mexican children's literary texts. She asserts that ecological paintings in these children's works criticize agriculture in the hands of industrial corporations established by the Scientific and Technical Research Foundation in these countries (Kamala 2004). Clare Echterling (2016) further argues that it is time for ecocritical scholars to apply postcolonial and anti-colonial perspectives to approach children's works, especially those that provoke environmental consciousness. This is useful in studying children's literature in connection with environmental issues, given that it reveals the imperialist roots of environmental stories in children's literature.

Questioning the implicitly interwoven imperialism in children's ecophilic texts potentially fosters literature curricula that aim at recognizing and unsettling the imperial legacy in contemporary environmental and ecological problems. Many researchers especially in the Nordic region have tested and proposed ways to improve the effectiveness of literature teaching hours in forming and enhancing

thinking for sustainable development for pedagogical students. The article "Education for Sustainability: Developing Ecocritical Literature Circles in the Student Teacher Classroom" by Lykke Guanio-Uluru (2019) describes a project that seeks to help education students in Norway learn effective ways to encourage sustainable thinking and acquire the ability to work toward sustainable development. Similarly, Nina Goga and Maria Pujol-Valls (2020) identify the reasons why student teachers should experience an ecological approach to children's literature to support and develop behavior and thinking for sustainability. The two authors analyze pedagogical students' ecological exchanges about picture books being read. The analysis indicates that, as written, the ways of incorporating dialogical teaching, ecological thinking, and literary instruction in a classroom are useful for students to critically approach and discuss expressions of nature and ecological wisdom in assigned picture books. Thus, environmental education forms the aim of ecological studies of children's literature; teaching children's literature is to train a generation of "ecocitizens" or educators or trainers who think and practice for sustainable goals.

There is increasing attention in scholarship about the environment and literature in Southeast Asia in response to the rise in literary works centering on environmental concerns in the region (Pham, Sankaran, and Kaur 2019: 1-10). The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASLE-ASEAN) was set up in 2016 in Singapore, with the inaugural workshop being held in August 2016 at the National University of Singapore. ASLE-ASEAN's workshops, organized every two years, provide a broad insight into the ecological concerns of the region as depicted in Southeast Asian literature. While highlighting the mythic basis of much of the region's literature and their relationship to the environment, publications derived from ASLE-ASEAN workshops address institutional, economic, cultural, and political causes of ecological and environmental problems as demonstrated in literatures of the region (Yulianto 2021: 89-112; Santa Ana 2018: 61-86). The rise of Southeast Asian ecofiction and Southeast Asian ecocriticism as such definitely respond to pressing environmental concerns within the region. The Association of

Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN is increasingly paying attention to environmental issues. While, arguably, the region's most high-profile environmental issue has been tackling haze pollution, the twenty-first century is seeing other pressing environmental concerns such as deforestation, plastic waste pollution, extinction of flora and fauna, and garbage (Kaur 2017; Pham and Sankaran 2021: 1-10; Pham, Sankaran and Kaur 2019: 1-8).

In such a context and in aligning with the growth of eco-pedagogy and interest in teaching ecocriticism in Western contexts, children's literature in Southeast Asia has received special attention regarding its role in educating local populations about ecological awareness. At the founding conference of ASLE-ASEAN (2016), there were presentations discussing children's literature in the region from an ecocriticism perspective; some of them were published in "The Special Issue on Ecocriticism in Asia" in *Journal of Ecocriticism* Vol. 8 No. 1 (2018). In this issue, Apple Audrey L. Noda (2018) examines children's literature in the Philippine setting, uncovering how the literary images of nature's wildness influence the children's sense of self-discovery and individuation. The author particularly emphasizes connections between the effects of readers' encounters with the natural world through environmental children's literature and creative explorations of one's growth and sensibilities. Nguyen Thi Dieu Linh (2018) reads ethnic children's stories by Hoàng A Sáng in the setting of the northern highland of Vietnam. As narrated, the children's memory of a village elder telling stories about vivid trees, rivers, and streams in the past further depicts their disappearance from the earth and the condition of drying out in pain in the present time caused by humans' actions of digging through the mountains, felling the trees, and killing the fish in the stream. Here, Nguyen Thi Dieu Linh relies on accounts of childhood memories of pristine nature to stimulate young readers' critical thinking about modernization and industrialization projects that destroy woodland. Uma Jayaraman (2018), another contributor to the special issue, works on children's stories from Malaysia and Singapore. She emphasizes literary accounts of the dichotomy between school and Nature, encouraging "healthy ecologies" among learners and teachers for sustainable life on earth.

Beyond the ASLE-ASEAN circle, research by John Ryan (2017), a leading scholar of Southeast Asia ecocriticism, also demonstrates the potential of exploiting literature for children and young people to develop ecological awareness for regional sustainable development. In the Introduction to his *Southeast Asian Ecocriticism: Theories, Practices, Prospects*, Ryan points out that the collection of folktales for children, entitled *The Greedy Strike Snake-Headed Fish*, by the Lao author Outhine Bounyavong addresses environmental concerns and the wisdom of traditional Laos customs. The scholar reads that the selected stories convey moral lessons relating to nature, which demonstrates the capacity of literature for children and young adults (LCYA) to stimulate ecological awareness in Southeast Asia (11). In their co-authored chapter “Sowing Seeds: Phyto-criticism and the Botanical Dimensions of Indonesian Literature for Children and Young Adults,” Ricard Li and Paul Ryer (2018) include a balance of the zoological focus of children’s literature and critical appraisal of the genre, laying bare the potential combination between critical plant and LCYA studies. Here, the authors examine the representation of plants by contemporary Indonesian creators (authors, storytellers, illustrators, graphic designers, and photographers), emphasizing the use of children’s literature for botanical pedagogy, particularly to enhance public awareness about Indonesia’s botanical diversity and especially to “engender an understanding of vegetal ethics” (11). It is possible to see a shared eco-pedagogical practice in ecocritical studies of children’s literature in the world at large and in Southeast Asia in particular. Approaching children’s literature from ecocritical perspectives potentially appeals to the environmental readers’ and learners’ experiences, memories, and emotions.

II. Children’s Literature and Ecocriticism in Vietnam

In Vietnam, amidst the developing atmosphere of ecocriticism since the early years of the 21st century (Pham and Sankaran 2021: 1-10), children’s literary works have begun to be explored as a tool to evoke a public sense of and the first awareness of the central role of ecology and environment in the development of human spiritual

life. The translation of Ambika Bhalla's "Eco-Consciousness through Children's Literature – A Study" (2012) into the Vietnamese language indicates the rising interest in ecocriticism and children's literature in Vietnamese literary life. The translation is published online, making it widely accessible. This translation was used and quoted quite comprehensively by many Vietnamese ecocritics of children's literature, who came to an agreement that applying ecocriticism to the study of children's literature helps realize that children's literature plays an important role in educating children about environmental awareness (Nguyễn Hải Phương and Nguyễn Thị Linh Chi 2017: 755). Such a tendency is particularly the case given that in recent years, environmental education in Vietnam has been implemented by the government, ministries, departments, schools, and non-governmental organizations. A series of laws and policies promoting environmental education have been issued, such as the Law on Environmental Protection (passed by the National Assembly on December 27, 1993, and amended in parliamentary sessions, most recently in 2014), Decision No. 256/ 2003/QĐ/TTg of the Prime Minister on the National Environmental Protection Strategy to 2010 and orientation to 2020, Directive No. 02/2005/CT-BGD&ĐT on Strengthening Environmental Protection Education in the education system.. In the above context, there have been many research projects on integrating environmental education in schools in Vietnam; schools have conducted environmental protection education for students in the direction of integrating environmental education in teaching and extracurricular activities. This article examines scholarly works approaching children's literature in Vietnam, pointing out environmental education as the characteristic of this Vietnamese ecocritical studies of children's literature.

Vietnamese ecocritics have been attempting to identify abilities to implement ecocriticism to interpret Vietnamese children's literature. Ecocritic Đỗ Văn Hiếu (2016), in his elaborate article on possible topics in approaching Vietnamese literature from ecological criticism, affirms that children's literature in the period 1945-1975 had many works about attachment to Vietnamese literature. bond between humans and nature in the countryside. The authors Nguyễn Thị Hải Phương and Nguyễn Thị Linh Chi (2017) realize that many

Vietnamese authors are “truly conscious of contributing to educating children on ecological ethics”; their literary works intentionally foster children’s awareness of preserving and protecting the environment,” “arouse in them a love for nature,” and know “how to immerse themselves in nature” (754). They observe that in the development of Vietnamese children’s literature by modern authors such as Đoàn Giỏi, Ma Văn Kháng, and Võ Quảng as well as by contemporary, the most present-day authors such as Nguyễn Nhật Ánh, Nguyễn Hương, Võ Diệu Thanh, Phong Điệp, Nguyễn Thị Kim Hòa, nature is always described having its way of operating, thus people need to respect nature and know how to harmonize and be friendly to nature (756).

Moreover, Vietnamese eco-critics also try to identify typical children’s ecological literary works and authors in Vietnamese children’s literature history. Classic eco-fiction for children is identified including *Đất rừng phương Nam* (Southern Forest Land) by Đoàn Giỏi and *Góc sân và Khoảng trời* (Yard Corner and Sky Space) by Trần Đăng Khoa. The most notable contemporary Vietnamese eco-writers for children include Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and Nguyễn Ngọc Thuần. Nguyễn Nhật Ánh, with works such as *Tôi thấy hoa vàng trên cỏ xanh* (I See Yellow Flowers on the Green Grass), *Bảy bước tới mùa hè* (Seven Steps to Summer), *Ngồi khóc trên cây* (Crying on a Tree), *Chúc một ngày tốt lành* (Have a Nice Day), and *Chú chó nhỏ mang giỏ hoa hồng* (Little Dog Carrying a Basket of Roses) bring children a new natural world that is romantic and full of dreams, contributing to fostering children’s love for animals, plants, and living in harmony with nature. Similarly, Nguyễn Ngọc Thuần’s works such as *Vừa nhắm mắt, vừa mở cửa sổ* (Closing Your Eyes and Opening the Window), *Một thiên nằm mộng* (A Heavenly Dream), *Giăng giăng tơ nhện* (Spreading a Spider Web), and *Trên đồi cao chăn bầy thiên sứ* (On a High Hill Tending Angels) recount nature as truly living beings who has soul, destiny, personality, emotions, and their laws of movement. Other female eco-authors for children include Nguyễn Thị Kim Hòa whose works are *Cuộc phiêu lưu của bé nhựa* (The Adventure of a Plastic Kid) and *Cút cà cút kít* (imitated sound) and Hà Thị Cẩm Anh who wrote *Chẫu chàng, cóc tía, và những cư dân xóm bờ ao* (Tree-Toad, Purple Toad, and Residents of the Pond’s Neighborhood), *Những đứa trẻ mồ côi*

(Orphans), *Lão thần rừng nhỏ bé* (The Little Old Satyr), and *Người anh hùng và con cọp* (The Hero and the Tiger). In these, child characters are highlighted with their ability to sympathize, communicate, and listen to the voice of nature, and understand the feelings of nature, which helps readers' hearts and minds become gentle and peaceful when immersed in pure natural worlds (Nguyễn Thị Hải Phương and Nguyễn Thị Linh Chi 2017; Đỗ Văn Hiếu 2016; Lê Tú Anh et.al. 2022)

Vietnamese literary scholars agree about the important role of children's literature in educating children about ecological awareness, which is, given children commonly supposed the future of the nation, the foundation of sustainable development. In other words, the highlight and overarching point in the articles implementing ecocriticism in children's literature is the emphasis on the education of ecological awareness. Dr. Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt (2021) in the article "Educating Ecological Awareness through Literature" specifically emphasizes children's literature as one of the effective tools for educating ecological consciousness. The researcher asserts that "for young children, environmental education through literary works sounds very natural" (Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt 2021). The author especially emphasizes the role of fairy tales in educating children's ecological awareness. Fairy tales such as *Cái Tết của mèo con* (The New Year of Kittens) by Nguyễn Đình Thi, *Câu chuyện của Vãn Ngan tướng công* (The Story of General Muscovy Duck) by Võ Quảng, *Cây lá trong vườn* (Trees in the Garden) by Vũ Tú Nam, and works that adapt from folk tales such as *Ngày hội cuối cùng* (Last Day of the Festival) by Tạ Duy Anh and *Bầy chim chìa vôi* (The Wagtails) by Nguyễn Quang Thiều, comprise ecological stories for children. These works nurture children's love for the animals and plants around them. Contemporary writing for children should include environmental warnings to educate children's responsibility to the earth (Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt 2021). Similarly, Trần Mạnh Tiến (2017) discusses the research direction of understanding ecological consciousness in world children's literature. He quotes the article "Ecocriticism in Children's Literature: An Analysis of Amit Garg's *Two Tales*" by Sandip Kumar Mishra and emphasizes the need to awaken ecological consciousness in children and humanity at large.

He writes that life on earth is at stake. If we want to change perspective, we must learn to value our nature from childhood. If not, we will have to pay the cost of our environment: “The time has come to see the nature of our survival. This needs to be spread among children for a sustainable future” (Trần Mạnh Tiến 2017: 448).

Vietnamese literary theorists have pointed out the genre characteristics of children's literature that make this part of literature a viable and meaningful research object for ecological criticism. Lê Tú Anh and her co-authors (2022) affirm that children's literature normally has age-appropriate content: writing about children and feeling the world through children's eyes. Regarding the purpose of creation, children's literary works often aim at intellectual education and personality formation for children. In the goal of intellectual education, in addition to providing more knowledge about people and the world, children's literature also helps develop language competence, including vocabulary, grammar, and expressions for children. Because children are still cognitively, intellectually, and emotionally immature, in terms of form, children's literature needs to ensure writing style/expression that is concise, clear, easy to understand, and easy to receive. Language in children's literature needs to be rich in images, associations, and emotions to evoke interest in young readers. Trần Mạnh Tiến (2017) also emphasizes the advantages of children's literature in educating citizens about the environment and ecology come from genre characteristics. Children's literature “is fun, interesting, imaginative, and creative. Comics have an effective impact in stimulating environmental understanding” (448).

Many other ecocritical works on children's literature emphasize the significance of this approach in educating children about ecological awareness. Nguyễn Văn Hùng, a literary theorist, describes that children's literature raises ecological awareness for children by reflecting the lively and diverse animal world and the natural environment with new and attractive things. With its wide scope of reflection, children's literature not only expands children's understanding of society, customs, and traditions but also expands their understanding of the natural world. Children's literature is also

a reflection of the ecological environment issues around them; it educates children about the benefits of nature, trees, and the living environment, helping them love nature and protect their habitat and primeval forests in the face of human destruction (Nguyễn Văn Hùng 2020: 42-48). Cao Thị Hào, an expert in Vietnamese children's literature, focuses on the process of nurturing ecological awareness in learners through teaching literature from perspectives of ecocriticism. She writes that in the process of exposing children to literary works, they arouse excitement and interest in literary imaginations of non-human worlds, potentially encouraging them to develop and follow environmental ethics. Characters of children like little girls and little boys and of animals like buffalos, bees, dogs, wolves, pangolins, and crows convey ecological messages, educating readers on awareness of protecting nature and the environment. Cao Thị Hào particularly emphasizes that children's literature's way of endangering ecological awareness is through cultivating and fostering children's intimate feelings towards literary images of non-human beings, which is the premise for building and forming standard ecological behavior in children (Cao Thị Hào 2016: 28).

Not only in theoretical but also in practice, Vietnamese scholars of literary studies highlight environmental education in the connection between ecocriticism and children's literature. They analyze children's literary works in Vietnamese language and other languages from perspectives of ecocriticism, considering how these works reflect and evoke, indirectly or indirectly, ideas, intellectuals, and feelings about the ecological and environmental issues of Vietnam and the world at large. Specifically, Vietnamese scholars assert that children's literature emphasizes harmony or the primordial connection of humans with nature. This argument is apparent in the research article by Nguyễn Thị Hải Phương and Nguyễn Thị Linh Chi (2017) about works by Nguyễn Ngọc Thuận, an internationally and nationally recognized children writer in contemporary Vietnam. Nguyễn Ngọc Thuận's works are read as contributing to fostering a sense of preserving and protecting the environment for children. The article analyzes natural worlds such as gardens, field flowers, forests, and rivers; non-human beings such as crickets, lizards, chickens, and spiders that appear in Nguyễn

Ngọc Thuận's children's literary texts. The two authors focus on how the children's stories by Nguyễn Ngọc Thuận create a fresh and vibrant natural world in which nature is a friend to children while children cherish and protect nature. What is interesting is that the authors emphasize the characteristics supposedly typical of a child—the sophistication, the sentimentality, and the clarity—in the expressions about nature in the children's works. On the other hand, children are read as the ones who can communicate with nature, understand nature, and listen to the voice of nature. On the other hand, the two scholars affirm the educational value of nature-consciousness in Nguyễn Ngọc Thuận's works for children. They believe that Nguyễn Ngọc Thuận's works encourage children to further cherish and protect nature, which forms their rich and meaningful spiritual life. "Nature will give wings to children's dreams, nurture young souls so that they can be more appreciated with what that nature has granted them (Nguyễn Thị Hải Phương and Nguyễn Thị Linh Chi 2017: 764).

Nguyễn Ngọc Thuận's works appear most often in works approaching children's literature from ecological perspectives in Vietnam and suggest different environmental and ecological ethics lessons to Vietnamese ecocritics. Nguyễn Thùy Trang (2018) reads the lesson of the primordial unity and connection of humans and nature in Nguyễn Ngọc Thuận's writing for children. Characters in his *Open the Window, Eyes Closed* offer lessons about the appreciation for the harmony of feeling and intuition with nature. Nguyễn Thùy Trang delves into accounts of human characters' sensory experiences towards the natural world: closing their eyes, and concentrating all senses of hearing, touch, and smell will promote humans' internal power to capture nature. In the novel, the first and most important lesson that the father character teaches his son is to close his eyes and walk towards nature, "the flowers will show you the way, a safe and fragrant path" (quoted in Nguyễn Thùy Trang 2018: 137). Nguyễn Thùy Trang highlights children's literature writers' belief in the children's untainted senses, minds, and hearts that help them have a close, friendly relationship with nature. It appears that the critic Nguyễn Thùy Trang also strives to teach her readers through the examined children's work: children

can touch the most subtle sound frequencies of the universe, of nature, and of life through their imagination, and the vibrating senses and feelings (Nguyễn Thùy Trang 2018: 137).

Bùi Thanh Truyền (2017), a leading expert in children's literature in Vietnam, lists a series of children's literature about animals in southern Vietnam including *Ó ma lai* (Malai Ghost) and *Đội quân hoa và cỏ* (Army of Flowers and Grass) by Hoàng Văn Bôn; *Tôi là Bé tó* (I am Betho), *Đảo mộng mơ* (Dream Island), *Có hai con mèo ngồi bên cửa sổ* (Two Cats Sitting by the Window), *Ngồi khóc trên cây* (Sitting Crying on a Tree), *Chúc một ngày tốt lành* (Wishing a Good Day), and *Con chó nhỏ mang giỏ hoa hồng* (Little Dog Carrying a Basket of Roses) by Nguyễn Nhật Ánh; *Tiền của thần cây* (Money from the Tree God) by Võ Diệu Thanh; *Mật ngữ rừng xanh* (Green Forest Secret) and *Cuộc phiêu lưu kì thú của rừng xanh* (The Amazing Adventure of the Green Frog) by Lê Hữu Nam; *Lắng nghe muôn thú* (Listening to the Animals), and *Những cuộc phiêu lưu của Mũi đỏ và Răng Thỏ* (The Amazing Adventures of Red Nose and Little Teeth) by Nguyễn Trần Thiên Lộc. According to Bùi Thanh Truyền, these fairy-tales depict the sympathy and sociability of children. The interweaving of realism and fantasy in children's stories about animals is useful in conveying ecologically educational messages such as “loving and protecting all species is also cherishing is also to preserve people's living environment;” and “living in peace and in harmony with creation and with all other living beings to have a better life” (Bùi Thanh Truyền 2017: 501). It is through the lens of fantasy that makes these children-oriented ecological lessons become sympathetic to and understood even by adults (Bùi Thanh Truyền 2017: 502).

Vietnamese eco-critics pay special attention to the significance of ecological education in works written for children by ethnic minority authors. Two ethnic minority authors for children are often mentioned, Hà Thị Cẩm Anh (Tày ethnic) and Mã A Lềnh (Hmong ethnic). Lê Tú Anh and her co-authors (2022) conducted research understanding the issue of educating ecological awareness in children's stories by Hà Thị Cẩm Anh. This research points out that works by Hà Thị Cẩm Anh explicitly aim to educate ecological awareness, and the spirit of protecting and preserving a healthy,

“nutritious” living environment with the hope of a better future for the children (Lê Tú Anh et.al. 2022: 13). The central characters in Hà Thị Cẩm Anh’s children’s stories are often unfortunate children and the non-human beings. Such a character choice is suitable for the young audience and is useful in explaining in a very natural way the love of nature and awareness of preserving the ecology of children and teenagers. Such lessons about ecological ethics come from an innocent, natural, attachment to the non-human worlds and a natural love of nature; in other words, those ecological lessons are brought about by personal circumstances, not because of any forced constraints. Moreover, Lê Tú Anh and her co-authors focus on children’s actions to protect the forest in Hà Thị Cẩm Anh’s stories, exploring a very magical communion between nature and humans. In this ethnic female author’s writing for children, nature protects and nourishes people; people care for and love the animal world and appreciate nature. Therefore, not only animals are given their lives back, but people are also given the strength to overcome loneliness, suffering, and unhappiness (Lê Tú Anh et.al . 2022: 20). Nguyễn Thùy Linh (2023) in her MA thesis *Approaching Mã A Lênh’s Children Work from Perspectives of Ecocriticism*, focuses on animal species falling into the danger of extinction due to humans’ exploitation. Wild animals and rare birds become lucrative prey for hunters and merchants and become medicine for the sick. The problem of hunting rare animals is presented in the short story Ma A Lênh in the words of adults to children and the questions of children to adults. Nguyễn Thùy Linh also explores direct criticism against acts of violence against nature in Mã A Lênh’s writing. His narrator addresses those who earn a living in trading wild animals as those who “have humans’ faces but wolves’ souls.” This narrative guides the readers, especially children, to be alert towards acts of animal cruelty. Mã A Lênh’s images of children are mostly susceptible to non-human beings’ wounds and usually have direct statements about not destroying natural resources and not killing living things. Nguyễn Thùy Linh argues such Mã A Lênh’s writing strongly draws young readers into ecological lessons and adjust their habits to live peacefully with the animal world.

The connection between eco-education and the approach to

children's literature from an ecological perspective in Vietnam is most clearly shown in the fact that the scholars of this approach are all educators teaching at universities, training students taking bachelor's degrees in pedagogy throughout Vietnam. For example, the monograph *Rừng khô, suối cạn, biển độc ... và văn chương* (Dry Forests, Empty Streams, Poisonous Seas... and Literature, 2017) is authored by Dr. Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy, a lecturer at Hue University of Education. This research clearly states the connection of ecological criticism with current issues of social and political life. Such a definition of ecological literature shows the scholar's emphasis on the social commitment of this body of literature. "Eco-literature demonstrates ecological responsibility and ecological ideals"; it is supposed to criticize dark sides of civilization, reflecting ecological risks and the social origins of those risks (Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy 2017: 93). The contributors of *Phê bình sinh thái với văn xuôi Nam Bộ* (Ecocriticism with Southern Prose, 2018) also clearly demonstrate the viewpoint of "social engagement" and "social responsibility" in their approach to literature from ecocritical perspectives. The contribution of Dr. Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt, lecturer at Duy Tan University, explores southern literature in connection with a series of socio-historical events (war, industrialization, modernization). In this volume, researchers and educators Bùi Thanh Truyền and Phạm Ngọc Lan also explore how southern literary works reflect and warn people about the consequences of global climate change, deforestation of watersheds, destruction of protective forests due to human's "bottomless greed" of property. Professor Nguyễn Đăng Điệp's opening speech for the international conference *Ecocriticism: Global Voices, Local Voices* emphasizes the role of ecocriticism in making it possible for literature to "contribute to changing public awareness, correcting harmful misunderstandings about the ecological environment, thereby creating behavior consistent with nature, knowing how to listen to the voice of nature for the goal of sustainable development" (Nguyễn Đăng Điệp 2017: 24).

There have been many efforts by Vietnamese eco-critics, who are also ecological pedagogues, to bring ecological content into the teaching of literature in schools at all levels. Google online database

shows many documents, in the form of research and pedagogical articles that propose the connection between teaching literature and improving environmental awareness for children. Examples of such kind of article are “Prospects of Ecocriticism in Researching and Teaching Contemporary Southern Literature” (translated from Vietnamese title) by two educators and researchers Bùi Thanh Truyền and Nguyễn Tịnh Thy (2019) and the piece entitled “Literature for Educate Children to Love the Environment” (translated from the Vietnamese title) by the Trần Xuân Tiến (2019). Trần Xuân Tiến (Ph.D, Hue University) once won the Top 50 best projects of the Vietnam Education Exchange 2020 Education Forum of the Creative Teacher Community Vietnam VIEF (Vietnam Innovative Educator Foundation). He tries to dictate ecological messages to his students while teaching classic children's literature in school which looks “as if an old flower has been coated with a layer of fresh, fragrant scent” (Trần Xuân Tiến 2019). Tô Hoài's novel *Đế mèn phiêu lưu kí* (The Adventures of Cricket) is quoted in high school Vietnamese literature textbooks. Trần Xuân Tiến suggests that this work could be taught about living in harmony with nature; teachers should help students learn that humans are simply a part of the vast and great natural world and that destroying the environment is destroying the lifeblood of all species. Vi Ngọc Anh (2023), rector of a public high school in Phú Thọ, a mountainous province in northern Vietnam, also provides educational messages in his MA thesis studying children writer Trần Đăng Khoa's works from the perspectives of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism, when used to approach children's literature, will contribute to educating children about love of nature, nurturing and cultivating love for nature in their souls, helping them not only know how to love nature but also conducting actions to protect nature from an early age. Vi Ngọc Anh writes that way of teaching literature from perspectives of ecocriticism, generations of students will learn of nature as a friend, a living environment, not a place to possess or exploit. He sees children's literature as one of the most effective media in influencing children's awareness to arouse in children a sense of responsibility for preserving and protecting the environment.

Lê Trà My's research, entitled “*The Grizzly King* by Curwood

James Oliver and the issue of ecological awareness education for children” (translated from Vietnamese titles) is the most explicitly pedagogy-oriented. Lê Trà My is a professor at Hanoi National University of Education. Her research largely discusses the capacity of assigned high school literary works to educate students’ ecological awareness. Lê Trà My defines ecological awareness as people’s self-conscious awareness of nature, their position and role in nature, and their responsibilities and obligations in protecting nature. Like other Vietnamese educators, mentioned above, Lê Trà My affirms that it is important to nurture ecological awareness in children from an early age because it is the time for the forming of ecological ethical sensibility, actions, and behaviors. She requires that “for children, ecological awareness needs to take into account the physiological and psychological characteristics of their age” (845); such type of education should find ways to affect emotions, creating real vibrations through symbolic thinking first instead of conducting didactic, coercive teaching. The way of ecologically educating students through literary images “is a path of profound education” because it constructs “ecological intuition, experience, consciousness, and intelligence” in children. According to Lê Trà My’s survey, the 6th-grade literature program includes a famous text about land exchange attributed to a Seattle Indian leader (The Indian Chief’s Letter) in response to the 14th US President Franklin Pierce. This text, as Lê Trà My argues, potentially teaches children about the connection between humans and the living environment—the sacred mother earth, thus suggesting ecological and environmental lessons for present-day readers. Regarding the *Grizzly King*, Lê Trà My asserts this work is suitable for imbuing students of all ages ecological awareness, especially those that are in late elementary and early middle school grades. Lê Trà My recounts that *The Grizzly King* is written in a beautiful style, using mainly narrative, descriptive, and expressive passages, typical for the writing program of high-school classes. Such a way of writing facilitates an awakening in children “the ability to empathize with animals and the ability to feel delicately about nature” (845). *The Grizzly King’s* use of imagination in creating the psychological life of animals contributes to constructing children’s empathy with animals, and their ability to imagine and share thoughts and emotions with them.

Thus, children's works such as *The Grizzly King* encourage children to talk to non-human beings such as animals, trees, and objects around them. Lê Trà My argues that ecological literary works not only help students absorb lessons about nature but also aim at nature communication skills as the prerequisite of social communication skills for existence and a better life.

The educational nature of the practices and theoretical elaboration of ecocriticism and children's literature in Vietnam is typical of the Vietnamese literary theory tradition that considers literature as a tool that can have an impact on reality. Ecocriticism is received in Vietnam as a tool for teachers and pedagogues—and also researchers—to explore literature in participating in and reflecting on environmental and ecological issues in the country and beyond. In other words, ecocriticism for Vietnamese educators is not only a tool to access literature but also a tool for teachers who are literary researchers to contribute to raising students' environmental awareness among students and staff in particular and the Vietnamese community through literary works. Literature educators anticipate that the work of approaching and teaching literature in the orientation to ecocriticism will “contribute to changing community awareness, correcting harmful misunderstandings about the ecological environment, and thereby creating behavior following nature and listen to the voice of nature for the goal of sustainable development (Nguyễn Đăng Điệp 2017: 24). As such, the Vietnamese ecocriticism of children's literature shares the prominent argument of international materials on children's literature and ecocriticism, particularly in Southeast Asia. In other words, approaches to children's literature in Vietnam and beyond emphasize the educational nature or usefulness of that literary approach in training ecological educators and pedagogues who have ecological education skills and awareness in designing their literature lessons.

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