

The Representations of Soldiers in Modern Vietnamese Short Fiction: A Typological Study

Tran Thi Hong Thi

Faculty of Comparative Literature and World Literature, Minnan Normal University, China

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.905000110>

Received: 24 April 2025; Accepted: 05 May 2025; Published: 02 June 2025

ABSTRACT

This article explores the evolving image of the soldier in contemporary Vietnamese war short stories written after 1975. Moving beyond heroic and idealized wartime depictions, postwar literature presents multifaceted, trauma-stricken, repentant, and resilient soldier figures. Through qualitative analysis of 33 selected texts, the study highlights a shift toward humanistic portrayals that emphasize psychological depth and moral complexity. These narratives reaffirm literature's role in confronting historical memory, fostering ethical reflection, and contributing to national reconciliation in the aftermath of war.

Keywords— Vietnamese short fiction, soldier representation, postwar literature, character typology

INTRODUCTION

In literary discourse, the character functions not merely as a narrative construct but as a pivotal conduit through which the author articulates ideological propositions and embeds artistic vision. Characters encapsulate aesthetic values and serve as dynamic embodiments of the author's philosophical outlook on human existence, sociocultural contexts and artistic orientation. Due to the inherent structural brevity and narrative conciseness of the short story genre, the role of the character becomes particularly crucial. The form's inherent conciseness necessitates a high degree of condensation, often situating the character within a critical temporal cross-section of life, thereby intensifying the psychological, emotional and symbolic resonance. Consequently, the efficacy and depth of a short story are inextricably linked to the complexity and expressiveness of its character construction.

Contemporary Vietnamese short fiction, particularly narratives engaging with the theme of war, has undergone notable transformations across aesthetic, thematic and ideological dimensions. Since the post-1975 period, amidst shifting cultural paradigms and a collective imperative to reassess the war through more nuanced and multifaceted lenses, writers have progressively reconfigured their narrative strategies. Moving away from monolithic, heroic depictions, contemporary authors foreground the quotidian, the psychological aftermath and the residual trauma of war. Whereas canonical wartime literature once glorified the soldier as an emblem of collective heroism and patriotic idealism, contemporary portrayals now depict this figure with heightened psychological depth and existential nuance. These characters frequently embody ambivalence, existential disquiet and moral introspection, revealing the dissonance between historical glorification and personal suffering.

This paper endeavors to delineate and typologize recurring representations of the soldier figure in contemporary Vietnamese short stories on war. By mapping these character archetypes, it seeks to illuminate the evolving artistic consciousness of postwar writers – marked by a departure from epic, didactic modalities toward individualized, introspective and humanistic portrayals. Such transformations not only signal a maturation of literary aesthetics but also underscore literature's critical role as a discursive space for therapeutic engagement, ethical reflection and cultural memory reconstruction in the aftermath of collective trauma.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis methodology, grounded in close reading and thematic

categorization, to investigate the evolving representation of soldier characters in contemporary Vietnamese short fiction on the theme of war. The research is interpretive in nature and draws from the frameworks of postwar cultural studies, narrative theory and character typology.

A purposive sample of 33 short stories written by Vietnamese authors from 1975 to the present was selected based on their thematic focus on war and the centrality of the soldier figure. Texts were chosen to ensure a diversity of authorial voices, including both male and female writers and to reflect a range of temporal, stylistic and ideological orientations. The corpus includes works published in reputable literary journals, anthologies and translated volumes.

The analytical procedure involved three key stages:

- 1- Textual Analysis: Each short story was subjected to close reading, with particular attention paid to narrative structure, character development and thematic motifs. Instances of direct and indirect characterization were documented to capture the nuances of soldier portrayals.
- 2- Typological Mapping: Characters were classified into recurring archetypes based on traits such as heroism, trauma, moral ambiguity and postwar disillusionment. This classification enabled the identification of thematic and ideological patterns across the corpus.
- 3- Contextual Interpretation: The study contextualized character portrayals within broader historical, sociopolitical and literary shifts in postwar Vietnam. The transition from collectivist, heroic discourse to introspective and individualized narratives was analyzed through the lens of literary modernism and postmemory theory (Hirsch, 2012).

To enhance the study's rigor, secondary sources including scholarly articles, critical essays and author interviews were consulted. Key theoretical perspectives on trauma, memory and postwar literature by authors such as Nguyen (2016), Caruth (1996) and Hirsch (2012) were integrated to enrich the analysis.

This methodological approach not only allows for a nuanced reading of literary texts but also reveals broader transformations in Vietnamese literary consciousness regarding war, memory and the human condition.

FINDINGS

The confessional and penitent figure of the soldier

Contemporary Vietnamese war short stories portray a distinct type of character: the confessional and penitent soldier. War often reveals its demonic face, turning individuals into mere instruments for the execution of violence. The impulse to confess and repent typically arises in those who have committed mistakes or moral transgressions – wrongs that were, during wartime, widespread and pervasive. However, not everyone possesses the courage for introspection or the desire for spiritual redemption and inner peace following their misdeeds. These characters reflect the human capacity for moral orientation and the torment of conscience. Their repentance may unfold as an internal struggle or manifest through speech and action.

Most frequently, such figures are soldiers from the opposing side. For instance, in “The Jungle Fowl” by Doan Le, the narrator constantly confronts an invisible courtroom of conscience, having been pushed to the side of the Republic and forced into exile after liberation. Living in solitude in a foreign land, he only finds the courage to return home and confess to his wife and children near the end of his life. In the works of Phung Van Khai, repentance takes the form of an ongoing stream of guilt and traumatic memory – particularly in the portrayal of a white soldier whose cruelty during the war continues to strangle his remaining years. The longer he lives and reflects, the more he is tormented by remorse, haunted by questions with no answers and driven to the brink of suicide. This represents the psychological trauma experienced by many American soldiers after the Vietnam War.

Notably, confession is not limited to enemy soldiers. Revolutionary soldiers, too, are depicted in moments of

self-confrontation. In “The Sand Spirit” by Nguyen Hiep, a returning veteran appears as a guest, burdened by shame and guilt, admitting that he was not noble – he had abandoned the body of his lover for the sake of self-preservation. In “Reeds”, Luc confesses to having let petty vengeance lead a fellow soldier to an unjust death. Similar characters are found in other stories: the commando in “Evening Bells” by Le Hoai Luong; Thai in “Dream of Memory” by Phan Duc Nam; a John in “The Seventh Dwarf” by Luu Son Minh. These characters are united by their reflective engagement with the past and a desire to reveal hidden, shameful truths in order to dispel the lingering shadows of war. Repentance, in this sense, becomes an existential act – an attempt to unshackle the soul and pursue a more virtuous life. This emotional and moral trajectory becomes all the more significant for those who have lived through war or its aftermath.

The psychologically afflicted figure of the soldier

This character type, emerging from a renewed understanding of war, sacrifice and suffering as counterpoints to victory and heroism, embodies the profound human toll exacted by armed conflict. Thus, in the short stories of this period, the soldier emerges as a figure marked by loss, pain and lingering psychological scars. One such character is Quy in “The Woman on the Express Train” by Nguyen Minh Chau, who exits the war with indelible imprints on her memory, trapped in an unending state of somnambulism. The end of the war does not signify closure but instead opens up an aimless journey in peacetime. Another example is the narrator in “Nameless Dusk” by Hoang Dan, who falls into delirium upon encountering an image that recalls the sacrifice of his comrades – memories he had tried in vain to forget. Quang and his fellow veterans in “Washing Hands, Laying Down Arms” by Bao Ninh reside in a convalescent home plagued by nightmares from the war, preparing to return to a village where one learns his wife has left him for another man. After a decade of combat, the soldier is now faced with a new kind of wound and a future devoid of promise.

Peace, once imagined as the beginning of a long-awaited new chapter in life, turns out to be a continuation of suffering. Unlike the romanticized figures of wartime literature, this character type is grounded in a realist and humanistic perspective on war. Rather than focusing on communal destiny or grand narratives, literature now centers on the fragmented emotions, misfortunes and inner turmoil of individuals scarred by war. The soldier, entangled in trauma and existential tragedy, represents a narrative dimension largely absent in earlier literary works.

With this more empathetic and probing approach to the human condition, the soldier no longer returns in the aura of triumph but is instead reimagined as a spectral or surreal figure. These stories invoke the metaphysical return of a soldier’s soul—haunted, lingering and bound to the earthly world by unresolved longing. Such is the newly imagined legend of a soldier’s ghost transformed into a mournful night heron whose cry pierces the darkness as a lamentation for war’s sorrow in “The Cry of the Heron” by Pham Trung Khau. Another is the spirit of Lăng, a dead soldier whose soul wanders for years, seeking a way back home across the divide between the living and the dead in “The Mortal Shore” by Luu Son Minh. In “The Forest’s Voice” by Hien Phuong, the soldier returns to a windowsill and vanishes into the rain, hoping to see his lover once more. In “A Clear Sky on Grave-Sweeping Day” by Ma Van Khang), a martyr appears amidst incense smoke, with a tattered, wounded body, as his wife and children come to visit his grave.

These characters arise from a literary trend that probes the mystical, spiritual and unspoken dimensions of human experience. They embody a different portrait of the soldier, part of the writer’s journey to uncover the diverse inner selves within each person, recreating what is obscured, invisible and elusive, yet still hauntingly present.

The trauma-enduring figure of the soldier

As individuals directly affected by war, soldiers, upon the restoration of peace, are forced to confront a new battlefield – one shaped by the psychological and emotional wounds left by conflict. The once-heroic soldier, passionately committed to idealistic causes, now faces profound tragedy and existential crisis. Yet despite loss, hardship and adversity, these characters evoke admiration and empathy as they quietly rise above their circumstances, reaffirming their moral integrity and inner strength.

One such figure is Luc, in “Reeds” by Nguyen Minh Chau, who was long presumed dead. His wife, children and

elderly father had since moved on, living with another man. Upon returning, Lực is placed in a morally and emotionally complex situation. He chooses to accept this reality, dedicating his life to locating the remains of fallen comrades and caring for his aging father. In this act of renunciation, the soldier sacrifices his personal happiness in peacetime for the greater good—demonstrating both decisiveness and compassion. Similarly, May in “The Woman at the Chau River Wharf” by Suong Nguyet Minh returns home with severe injuries, only to find that her lover has married someone else. She too chooses to accept the pain and quietly carries the burden of loss. Though the challenges awaiting returning soldiers range from quiet, lingering struggles to sudden, overwhelming crises, it is their wartime-forged resilience, moral strength and inner virtues that ultimately enable them to restore balance to their postwar lives.

In contrast to these resilient figures are characters who are unable to reconcile themselves with life after war. Thao, in “The One Left Behind in the Laughing Forest” by Vo Thi Hao), vanishes after realizing that happiness no longer belongs to her. General Thuan, in “The Retired General” by Nguyen Huy Thiep, remains trapped in a wartime mindset, unable to adapt to the realities of a market economy. Moc, in “The Dwarf Camp” by Bao Ninh, having lost all family, continues to live in isolation deep in the forest, long after peace has returned. These characters appear to be stranded in a time that no longer exists – peace, once their ideal, now alienates them.

In comparison with the previous character type, this contrast reveals a poignant truth: human beings have limits – not everyone is able to transcend the trauma of war. The dilemmas it presents often defy resolution.

The multifaceted figure of the soldier

In Vietnamese literature from 1945 to 1975, character construction was guided by the specific artistic perspectives of wartime, characterized by an epic orientation and a clear dichotomy between good and evil. As the central figure in this thematic domain, the soldier was depicted with heroic beauty, patriotism and selfless fighting spirit. In stark contrast stood the characters on the opposing side, symbolizing unjust and malevolent forces.

After 1975, particularly following the 1986 reforms, transformations in artistic thinking became increasingly evident, ushering in a creative orientation distinct from the previous period across all literary genres. The character became the focal point where changes in artistic perspectives on humanity were most clearly manifested. As writer Batsarop noted, portraying war solely through its heroic aspects while discarding all others means abandoning many of its lessons. Postwar Vietnamese writers endeavored to transcend the one-sided narratives of the earlier era. In contemporary war short stories, individuals have become the center of life, replacing events. Soldiers are portrayed more multidimensionally, with distinct personalities, private lives and flaws. Characters no longer appear monolithic but multifaceted, embodying various personas at different moments. Behind the heroic facade lies the portrait of an ordinary person with emotions such as joy, anger, love and sorrow. Alongside the shift in thinking and the demand for truthfulness, the image of the corrupted soldier has become more prevalent in literature in general and war short stories in particular – something rarely seen in the previous period.

Immediately after the war, characters with masks, multiple faces and ambiguous identities began to emerge, such as Tri in “Two Men Return to the Regiment” by Thai Ba Loi. Essentially deceitful, cunning and opportunistic, he concealed his past, crafted a virtuous facade and ascended to the position of regiment commander. The painter in “The Painting” by Nguyen Minh Chau, while in the battlefield, promised to fulfill a soldier’s request but, once out of the war zone, fabricated excuses to avoid it. He perceived within himself both dragons and serpents, angels and demons. Post-liberation, this was the first character to exhibit internal division and a struggle between light and dark aspects. Long in “Time” by Cao Duy Thao was a loyal soldier in the eyes of his family and comrades but, at a critical moment, became someone on the other side. Over time, short stories have increasingly featured such characters. They possess good qualities, have periods of goodness, or skillfully disguise themselves to appear virtuous, yet they also harbor negative traits, extremities, or undergo negative transformations over time. This has led to a more complex and realistic character system, distinguishing them from wartime short story characters. Examples include Hoa in “The Woman on the Express Train”, Luc in “Reeds” and Toàn in “The Season of Star Apples in the South” by Nguyen Minh Chau; Lam in “The Legend of Quan Tien” by Xuan Thieu;

the unnamed character in “They Became Men” by Pham Ngoc Tien. Such characters are not entirely evil; their darker sides only manifest in certain scenes of life’s stage. Therefore, they do not evoke a bleak perception of soldiers but rather expand the reflective scope on humans in war. No longer products of heightened idealization, they appear in their most ordinary human states, with mistakes, flaws, personal biases and instincts overriding reason – mysterious individuals often misaligned with their societal roles.

This broadened perspective on humanity has introduced new elements into short stories about soldiers on the opposing side. Characters embodying cruel and barbaric missions no longer frequently appear. As writers moved beyond binary thinking and the atmosphere of warfare receded, such characters gradually faded into the crowd, obscured by the dust of battle. Instead, many characters emerged with understanding and empathy. They recognized the irrationality of their actions; some found a better path, others never had that chance and many were pushed into war, falling into tragedy. They were merely tools of the invaders, subject to destruction at any moment due to the rulers’ calculations. Examples include the white soldier in “Repentance” by Phung Văn Khai, who was cold and ruthless during the war but later tormented by his inhumane actions and his deformed children due to his own contamination; Phuc in “The Weather of Memory” by Bao Ninh, who, after serving time for working with the Americans, lived a solitary life, aware of his daughter’s existence but lacking the courage to meet her; John Smith in “The Seventh Dwarf” by Luu Son Minh, who, despite executing war orders, was always confused about his reasons for fighting and haunted by the war’s brutality and his friends’ traumas. Other notable characters include Huynh and Phan in “Warm Land” by Do Van Nham, Thai in “Dream of Memory” by Phan Duc Nam, the unnamed character in “Aspiration” by Van Xuong and Hai Hien in “Mother’s Children” by Thien Di. These characters lead readers to profound reflections on war: not all on the enemy side are belligerent, bloodthirsty, or cruel; regardless of the front, they are human, subject to loss, suffering and tragedy, often without the right to choose. After the war, most live in a state of inner conflict and unease, reflecting the conscience of those who still possess humanity.

Soldiers on the opposing side are also portrayed with humanistic beauty. Despite serving in enemy ranks, they experience emotions, feelings and compassion like ordinary people. This hidden aspect was not explored in earlier short stories. Examples include Duy in “A Letter from Quy Suu” by Bao Ninh, who wrote to a Viet Cong member before battle, expressing caution and empathy like a brother; Smith, who cried during the funeral of a soldier named Hòa, saved Kiệt despite knowing he was an undercover Viet Cong (“The American Quarter” by Thu Tran); Xon, who was sent to fight in Vietnam but maintained his passion for photography. After the war, there have been profoundly humane gestures – such as returning the photograph of Mr. Ba and rebuilding the wooden house of a war-devastated family (as portrayed in Mr. Ba of Rach Dung by Duong Duc Khanh). One of the most recent stories, The Smoke Peak by Nguyen Thi Kim Hoa, features Philip, an American soldier who develops a deep affection for Nam Thuy, a single Vietnamese mother. Amidst the chaos of the war’s final days, he remains true to his word, returning to take her and her child with him. Similarly, Paul de’ Alzon, a dreamy French soldier, is depicted with poignant introspection as he gazes at clusters of floating water hyacinths (Lavender by the Suong River by Nguyen Thu Hang). This body of characters reflects a renewed literary consciousness – one that approaches the theme of war with objectivity, compassion and a deeply humanistic lens. As such, they fill the representational void left by earlier wartime literature, offering readers a more optimistic, forgiving and open-minded perspective on soldiers from the opposing side.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of contemporary Vietnamese war short stories reveals a notable diversification in the literary representation of the soldier figure. Unlike the monolithic, heroic portrayals prevalent in literature from 1945 to 1975, the post-1975 period has witnessed the emergence of multifaceted, introspective and humanized soldier characters. This shift reflects not only changes in narrative technique and aesthetic sensibility but also deeper transformations in cultural memory and collective consciousness regarding the war.

Three dominant character archetypes emerge from the corpus: the multidimensional figure, the psychologically afflicted figure and the resilient yet burdened figure. These categories are not rigid classifications but heuristic tools for understanding how contemporary Vietnamese writers grapple with the complexities of war and its aftermath.

The multidimensional soldier breaks away from simplistic binaries of good versus evil. This character type often embodies both heroism and vulnerability, moral strength and emotional fragility. Through nuanced portrayals of these figures, authors interrogate the idealized narratives of the past and propose a more realistic and ethically complex view of the individual in wartime. The inclusion of soldiers from both sides of the conflict – North Vietnamese and American, Viet Cong and ARVN – contributes to a more inclusive literary discourse that acknowledges the shared suffering and moral ambiguity of war.

The psychologically afflicted soldier brings to the fore the long-term mental and emotional consequences of war. These characters often experience trauma, guilt, hallucinations, or spiritual fragmentation, signaling the inadequacy of previous literary models to address postwar realities. The presence of ghostly, surreal, or symbolic elements (e.g., wandering souls, haunted memories) reflects a broader tendency in postwar Vietnamese fiction to explore the metaphysical dimensions of pain and healing. In doing so, these narratives not only humanize the soldier but also critique the cost of violence on both individual and societal levels.

In contrast, the resilient yet burdened figure underscores the tension between external peace and internal unrest. These characters return from war only to face emotional alienation, fractured families, or societal displacement. Yet, unlike those who succumb to despair or isolation, they strive to rebuild their lives, often through acts of service, compassion, or quiet endurance. By choosing to care for aging parents, recover the remains of fallen comrades, or accept personal sacrifice, these characters exemplify the enduring ability of humans to act ethically in the face of suffering.

Collectively, these character types reflect a significant reorientation in Vietnamese war literature. They mark a departure from collectivist, heroic propaganda and move toward individual-centered narratives that prioritize personal conscience, memory and reconciliation. The emergence of confession and repentance, in particular, illustrates an ethical turn in postwar writing. By confronting their past – through verbal confession or inner reflection – soldiers illustrate how literature contributes to processes of national reconciliation and the cultivation of historical consciousness.

Moreover, this diversity in representation invites readers to move beyond rigid nationalist frameworks and approach the war through a more humanistic lens. By exposing the personal costs of conflict, Vietnamese short fiction contributes to a broader regional and global dialogue on post-conflict trauma, forgiveness and peacebuilding.

In sum, the soldier in contemporary Vietnamese short stories is no longer a static symbol of glory or victimhood, but a dynamic figure through which literature interrogates the ethics of memory, the burden of history and the possibility of redemption.

CONCLUSIONS

The image of the soldier in contemporary Vietnamese war short stories has expanded in both depth and diversity. Heroism stands alongside vulnerability and personal suffering is no longer overshadowed by collective triumph. Trauma, repentance, inner conflict and moral resilience appear as recurring dimensions in the postwar literary imagination. This evolution in character construction marks a decisive shift in narrative focus. Human complexity replaces ideological clarity; emotional truth supplants political symbolism. The soldier becomes a site of memory, conscience and existential struggle. Through this transformation, the short story asserts its place at the center of literary renewal. It restores voice to the silenced, exposes the costs of conflict and reclaims the ethical weight of remembering. In these portrayals, the scars of war are neither erased nor glorified – they are named, faced and carried.

REFERENCES

1. Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
2. Hirsch, M. (2012). *The generation of postmemory: Writing and visual culture after the Holocaust*.

Columbia University Press.

3. Karlin, W., Nguyen, T. H., & Nguyen, Q. H. (Eds.). (2020). Other moons: Vietnamese short stories of the American War and its aftermath. Columbia University Press.
4. Nguyen, V. T. (2016). Nothing ever dies: Vietnam and the memory of war. Harvard University Press.
5. Waugh, C., & Lien, H. (Eds.). (2010). Family of fallen leaves: Stories of Agent Orange by Vietnamese writers. University of Georgia Press.