

WAR-RELATED METAPHORS IN VIETNAMESE AND AMERICAN LITERARY SCHOLARSHIPS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF COMPARATIVE RESEARCH TRENDS AND RESEARCH GAPS

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(Ngày nhận bài: 20/8/2026, ngày nhận bài chỉnh sửa: 3/9/2026, ngày duyệt đăng: 10/9/2026)

ABSTRACT

This systematic review synthesises comparative research trends, theoretical frameworks, and research gaps in the metaphorical conceptualisation of war within Vietnamese and American literary scholarship. Adhering strictly to PRISMA protocols, an in-depth analysis of 18 core, high-impact studies published between 2001 and 2026 was conducted, reflecting a specialized niche domain at the intersection of cognitive linguistics and comparative literary studies. The review reveals a marked paradigm shift from works written in the heroic-epic vein toward post-heroic explorations of “unspoken scars,” “insidious trauma,” and spectral memory. Crucially, this study illuminates the deeper socio-cultural, historical, and philosophical determinants driving the divergence in metaphorical projection paths between the two traditions. American scholarship, grounded in Western individualism and existential disorientation from an overseas intervention, emphasizes individual psychic fragmentation and the materiality of physical artifacts (e.g., the rucksack) as concrete anchors for trauma. Conversely, Vietnamese scholarship, rooted in a collectivist ethos, ancestral veneration, and a war for national defense, employs Gothic metaphors of “flesh, bones, and ghosts” alongside natural disaster domains to transform individual grief into collective spiritual resistance and communal immortality. Despite these cultural divergences, both corpora converge on the primal conceptual domain “war is a ferocious beast”, recognizing the universal, predatory nature of combat that dehumanizes both invader and defender. Methodologically, the field is advancing toward multi-level and transnational frameworks, though critical gaps remain regarding large-scale corpus-driven comparative studies and intergenerational refugee narratives. The review underscores metaphors not merely as stylistic ornaments, but as vital cognitive devices for narrative therapy and historical reconciliation.

Keywords: *American literature; conceptual metaphor theory; systematic review; Vietnamese literature; war-related metaphors*

1. Introduction

War has been a fundamental topic of human literary expression since the times of the ancient world, from Homer’s *The Iliad* and Virgil’s *The Aeneid* to the modern war novels of the 20th and 21st centuries (Alruwaili et al., 2025). In early Western literary traditions (e.g., Homeric epics), scholarly interest was often directed toward idealizing combat

through heroic ethos and the romanticization of sacrifice. However, the two World Wars brought about a paradigm shift towards war as a specific literary genre, concerned with witnessing traumatic conditions (Alruwaili et al., 2025; Rawal, 2025). Today’s literature does not present war as a limited historical event, but rather as a “indefinite war” that permeates and changes human

consciousness, memory and identity (Rawal, 2025; Ro'zimuhammad, 2026). This phenomenon is especially evident in the literary canon that has grown up around the clash of the United States and Vietnam, in which writers from the two countries have tried to find a way to reconcile personal memories of violence with historically constructed narratives (Osborn, 2007). The war continues to be a “war without end” for many veterans and civilians, with fragmented memories, flashbacks, and the long-lasting psychological scars of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Nguyen, T. K.N, & Nguyen, T. T. H., 2025; Rawal, 2025).

Prior to the advent of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), traditional rhetoric historically viewed metaphor primarily as a figurative or stylistic ornament (Do, 2017). However, contemporary cognitive approaches demonstrate that metaphors serve as fundamental conceptual tools for structuring human experience. The introduction of Conceptual Metaphor Theory by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) essentially re-defined metaphor as a pervasive cognitive mechanism which is essential to human thought (Dao, 2022; Do, 2017; Nguyen, T. K.N, & Nguyen, T. T. H., 2025). Metaphor is the understanding of an abstract target domain (e.g. war, life) in terms of a more concrete source domain (Do, 2017). These conceptual mappings are not just stylistic devices but foundational frameworks for narrating and emotionally processing complex experiences (Pham, H, T, 2025a). Metaphors surrounding armed conflict are based on common schematic knowledge and are thus an efficient means of structuring communication about traumatic situations. They typically convey an urgent, negatively

valenced emotional tone that spurs public action (Flusberg et al., 2018). Furthermore, critical approaches, including Critical Metaphor Analysis, have shown how metaphorical choices reflect ideologies and communicative intentions that are embedded in particular socio-political contexts (Hoang & Nguyen, 2024; Nguyen, T. H. T., & Nguyen, V. H., 2025).

The increasing use of war metaphors in various discourse has resulted in much research on this subject. Beyond traditional literature, studies have considered the dominance of the WAR metaphor for public health crises (e.g., COVID-19) and personal health struggles (e.g., cancer) (Alkhamash, 2023; Demmen et al., 2015). Recent work in literary studies has also begun to pay more attention to the ways in which specific conceptual metaphors such as “WAR IS A FEROCIOUS BEAST” function as cognitive frames for the representation of trauma (Pham, H. T., 2025a; Pham, T. H., 2025b). For example, comparative studies between American texts such as Wayne Karlin’s *Wandering Souls* and Vietnamese novels such as Chu Lai’s *Red Rain* (Mưa Đỏ) have revealed complex projection trajectories involving predation, madness, and survival (Pham, H. T., 2025a; Pham, T. H., 2025b). Moreover, researchers have started to combine CMA with multi-level metaphor perspectives (e.g., image schemas and mental spaces) to have richer insights into the ideologies of American war correspondents in the Vietnam War (Hoang & Nguyen, 2024). However, while there has been progress, much of the research remains somewhat piecemeal and tends to focus on individual works or single-country

perspectives rather than broad, cross-cultural trends.

Within the scope of the surveyed core literature, there appears to be a relative scarcity of large-scale corpus-driven studies in the literary traditions of Vietnam and the United States. In this sense, scholars have noted a striking asymmetry in war memory, where the American perspective often dominates the global discourse on the Vietnam War, often depicting Vietnamese figures as passive victims or phantom enemies (Shrivastara et al., 2023). Moreover, traditional theories of trauma have been criticised for their inability to adequately account for the unique sufferings and cultural responses of non-Western populations (Alruwaili et al., 2025). Some studies have investigated metaphysical experiences as narrative therapy in the writings of Tim O'Brien and Bao Ninh, yet there is no comprehensive research that traces the confluence and divergence of metaphorical realisations across these two cultures (Nguyen, T. K.N, & Nguyen, T. T. H., 2025; Pham, H.T, 2025b). Corpus-based and diachronic studies, which would track the development of these metaphors from the immediate post-war period to the present, are conspicuously missing.

The present systematic review addresses these gaps by synthesising existing research on war-related metaphors in Vietnamese and American literature. The main goals of the present study are:

- To identify and categorise the main themes of war metaphors (e.g. WAR IS HELL, WAR IS A JOURNEY) common to both literary traditions.
- To investigate the development of metaphor research from heroic

narratives to trauma-oriented and reconciliation-oriented studies.

- To determine the methodological characteristics and theoretical frameworks being used in this field today.

- To propose a future research agenda focused on comparative metaphor mapping and corpus-driven literary analysis.

2. Research methods

2.1. Review design

The present study is designed as a systematic review and follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses guidelines (Rethlefsen et al., 2021). The systematic approach guarantees a transparent, reproducible, and comprehensive synthesis of extant literature on war-related metaphors in Vietnamese and American literary works. Following these protocols minimises bias in the selection and evaluation of primary studies, and provides a rigorous basis for identifying research trends and gaps.

2.1.1. Search strategy

The search strategy was designed to capture a wide range of scholarly works from disciplines such as cognitive linguistics, literary criticism and cultural studies. Electronic searches were performed in the following academic databases:

- The primary databases used are Scopus, Web of Science and JSTOR.

- Additional Sources: Google Scholar (for book chapters and grey literature) and ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

- Specialised Repositories: Local Vietnamese academic repositories (e.g., VNU Journal of Foreign Studies) were searched to ensure adequate coverage of Vietnamese language scholarship.

2.1.2. Search strings

The search used Boolean operators to combine keywords related to the three core concepts: war, metaphor, and literature (table 1).

Table 1: Boolean search strings

Category	Search Terms
Core Concept A: Metaphor	“metaphor” OR “conceptual metaphor” OR “cognitive metaphor” OR “Critical Metaphor Analysis” OR “metaphorical mapping”
Core Concept B: War	“war” OR “armed conflict” OR “Vietnam War” OR “Resistance War” OR “military conflict”
Core Concept C: Context	“Vietnamese literature” OR “American literature” OR “war fiction” OR “war poetry” OR “war narrative”
Combined String	(metaphor OR “conceptual metaphor”) AND (war OR “Vietnam War”) AND (literature OR fiction OR narrative)

2.1.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To maintain the focus of the review on high-quality academic research, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established (table 2-3).

Table 2: Inclusion criteria

Criterion	Description
Language	English and Vietnamese.
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and academic monographs.
Topic Focus	Analysis of metaphors specifically related to war or conflict within literary texts.
Geographic/Cultural Scope	Must involve Vietnamese or American literary works (or comparative studies between them).
Theoretical Framework	Studies utilizing Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Critical Metaphor Analysis, or related cognitive/linguistic frameworks.

Table 3: Exclusion criteria

Criterion	Description
Scope Mismatch	Studies focusing on war metaphors in political speeches or news media (unless used for direct literary comparison).
Format	Opinion pieces, book reviews, or non-academic blog posts.
Language	Languages other than English or Vietnamese.
Duplicate Data	Earlier versions of studies that were later published in more comprehensive forms.

Studies on news media or public health (COVID-19/cancer) were excluded UNLESS they served as direct comparative baselines or theoretical/methodological foundations for literary war metaphors.

2.1.4 *Screening process and PRISMA flow*

The selection of literature was performed according to the standardised PRISMA flow to ensure a transparent and exhaustive search process. The

broad identification of records was then followed by a rigorous filtering mechanism, leading to a focused synthesis of 18 high-quality academic works that met all inclusion criteria (Gusenbauer & Gauster, 2024).

Table 4: *PRISMA flow diagram of study selection*

PRISMA Stage	Action Taken	Number of Records
Identification	Records identified through database searches	485
	Additional records identified through citation chaining and gray literature	12
Screening	Records after removing duplicates	314
	Records screened by title and abstract	314
	Records excluded based on lack of literary focus or mismatched language	242
Eligibility	Full-text articles assessed for eligibility	72
	Full-text articles excluded (e.g., focus on political discourse only, book reviews).	54
Included	Final studies included in qualitative synthesis	18

To address potential concerns regarding the sample size, the inclusion of 18 core studies reflects the specialized and niche nature of comparative metaphor research situated at the intersection of Vietnamese and American literary studies. The rigorous multi-stage filtering process adhered strictly to PRISMA protocols to minimize selection bias while ensuring maximum contextual and analytical relevance (table 4).

• *Initial Identification and Screening Density:* The broad search across primary databases yielded an initial pool of 497 records. However, a substantial exclusion rate (77%) occurred during the title and abstract screening phase. This high exclusion rate was necessary because a majority of retrieved studies utilized “war metaphors” purely as a rhetorical frame for non-literary

domains (e.g., political speeches, public health messaging during COVID-19, or medical discourses on cancer) rather than systematically analyzing the metaphorical representation of conflict within literary fiction.

• *Full-Text Evaluation and Domain Specificity:* During full-text eligibility assessment (N = 72), 54 articles were excluded due to the lack of an explicit cognitive or linguistic theoretical framework (such as Conceptual Metaphor Theory or Critical Metaphor Analysis), or a sole focus on journalistic media reports devoid of literary depth.

• *Representativeness of the Final Corpus:* Consequently, the final corpus of 18 peer-reviewed studies represents the primary, high-impact body of academic scholarship published between 2001 and 2026 that directly investigates war-related metaphorical mappings

across Vietnamese and American literary traditions. Rather than compromising generalizability, this curated focus ensures a high level of analytical depth and theoretical coherence required for a systematic synthesis.

2.2. Data extraction and analysis

A formal data extraction process was applied to allow a rigorous and standardised assessment of the included literature (table 5). Data were extracted from the final selection of studies using

a structured template to capture bibliographic details and substantive findings relating to metaphorical mappings (Rethlefsen et al., 2021). The analysis was conducted in two stages. The first stage was a descriptive synthesis of the metadata. The second stage was a thematic analysis of the conceptual metaphors and ideological frameworks identified in the texts (Hoang & Nguyen, 2024; Nguyen, T. H. T., & Nguyen, V. H., 2025).

Table 5: Data extraction and analysis framework

Category	Data Points Extracted	Analytical Purpose
Study Metadata	Author(s), Year of publication, Journal/Publisher, Language.	To map the diachronic evolution and geographic distribution of research trends.
Corpus Details	Primary literary works (e.g., <i>The Sorrow of War</i> , <i>The Things They Carried</i>), Authors, and Genre.	To identify which specific works and genres are most frequently subjected to metaphor analysis.
Theoretical Framework	Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Critical Metaphor Analysis, Systemic Functional Linguistics, or Narrative Therapy.	To evaluate the dominant linguistic and cognitive lenses used to interpret war trauma.
Metaphorical Identification	Source domains (e.g., BEAST, HELL, DISEASE, MACHINE) and their corresponding target domains.	To categorize the conceptual mappings used to represent the experience of conflict.
Contextual Variables	Historical context, National perspective, and Ideological stance.	To analyze how socio-political factors influence the “source-to-target” mappings of metaphors.
Key Findings	Major conclusions regarding trauma representation, memory fragmentation, or reconciliation efforts.	To synthesize common themes and unique cultural insights across the literature.

2.3. Data synthesis

During the synthesis phase, the extracted data were integrated to provide an overview of the research landscape. The findings were classified into

coherent categories, according to the source domains identified, using a qualitative thematic synthesis.

For studies of comparative analysis, e.g., comparative studies of the “WAR

IS A WILD BEAST” metaphor in American and Vietnamese settings, the synthesis was geared toward detection of “projection paths” (how different cultures map the attributes of predators or madness onto the reality of combat). The synthesis also explored the “unspoken scars” of war through the links between metaphorical choices and ideological representations of trauma and identity. This enabled to identify cross-cultural convergences (e.g. universal use of “HELL” or “DISEASE” metaphors) and divergences (e.g. particular cultural symbols of resistance or metaphysical experiences unique to one tradition). The results presented in the following sections are based on the final synthesised data.

3. Results

3.1. Overview of included studies

The selection process was systematic and resulted in 18 core studies that specifically focus on the metaphorical conceptualisation of war in Vietnamese and American literary contexts. These studies use different analytical frameworks such as Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Critical Metaphor Analysis and Systemic Functional Linguistics. Chronologically, these works are mainly concentrated in the period 2017–2026, indicating an increased interest in the cognitive and ideological aspects of war memory and trauma.

The table 6 summarises the 18 studies synthesised in this review, including the study focus, the corpus analysed, and the main metaphorical domains identified

Table 6: Summary of 18 concluded studies on war-related metaphors

Primary Focus / Metaphorical Themes	Corpus Analyzed	Work ID
WAR IS A WILD BEAST; predatory mappings and dehumanization.	Wayne Karlin and Chu Lai (<i>Red Rain</i>)	Pham, T.H. (2025b)
UNSPOKEN SCARS; SFL analysis of trauma and ideology.	Kevin Powers’ <i>The Yellow Birds</i>	Alruwaili et al. (2025)
WAR WITHOUT END; fragmented memory and persistent trauma.	General Vietnam War Literature	Rawal (2025)
METAPHYSICAL EXPERIENCES; narrative therapy and spectrality.	Bao Ninh and Tim O’Brien	Nguyen, T. K. N., & Nguyen, T. T. H. (2025)
RESISTANCE WAR; ideological metaphors of struggle and invasion.	Vietnamese Resistance narratives	Nguyen, T. H. T., & Nguyen, V. H. (2025)
IDEOLOGICAL STANCES; Multi-level CMA of war reporting.	American correspondent reports	Hoang & Nguyen (2024)
LIFE IS A JOURNEY/WAR; cross-cultural life conceptualizations.	US and Vietnamese short stories	Do (2017)
DEFOLIATING THE MIND; transnational history of war fiction.	Vietnam War fiction (US/VN)	Osborn (2007)

Primary Focus / Metaphorical Themes	Corpus Analyzed	Work ID
INSIDIOUS TRAUMA; refugee crisis and memory.	Viet Thanh Nguyen's <i>The Sympathizer</i>	India et al. (2023)
GOTHIC RESISTANCES; flesh, bones, and ghosts.	Vietnamese Postwar Fiction	Armstrong (2019)
METONYMY & ELLIPSIS; punctuation of trauma.	Tim O'Brien's narratives	Lustig (2001)
IDENTITY & SYMBOLISM; trauma-informed symbolism.	Kevin Powers' <i>The Yellow Birds</i>	Farhan (2025)
FEROCIOUS BEAST; structural mappings of wandering souls.	Wayne Karlin's <i>Wandering Souls</i>	Pham,H.T (2025a)
NARRATIVE STRATEGIES; trauma in US/British war literature.	Modern war novels	Ro'zimuhammad, (2026)
POLITICS IS WAR; comparative media metaphors.	Nhan Dan and NYT	Dao (2022)
PSYCHOPATHOLOGICAL SYMPTOMS; trauma victim metaphor use.	Trauma case studies	Qiu et al. (2024)
POST-NAPOLEONIC WAVES; evolution of war metaphors.	Historical war narratives	Reel (2025)
MATERIALITY; forensics and feminist geopolitics.	Material artifacts of conflict	Sharp (2020)

3.2. Theoretical approaches

The literature on war-related metaphors in Vietnamese and American literature is supported by several distinct, but often overlapping, theoretical frameworks. These methods enable researchers to progress from a stylistic analysis to the study of the structuring of cognitive reality, the

reflection of political ideologies and the mediation of traumatic experiences by metaphors.

The table 7 provides a summary of the main theoretical approaches identified in the 18 studies, including their core mechanisms and the specific research questions they address.

Table 7: Summary of theoretical approaches in war metaphor research

Theoretical Approach	Primary Mechanism/Focus	Key Application in War Literature	Representative Studies
Conceptual Metaphor Theory	Mapping from concrete source domains to abstract target domains	Identifying fundamental mappings like WAR IS A BEAST or LIFE IS A WAR	Do (2017); Pham, H. T. (2025a); Pham, T. H. (2025b).
Critical Metaphor Analysis	Analyzing the relationship	Revealing ideologies of national resistance	Dao (2022); Hoang & Nguyen

Theoretical Approach	Primary Mechanism/Focus	Key Application in War Literature	Representative Studies
	between metaphorical choices and social/political power.	and the framing of “enemy” forces.	(2024); Nguyen, T. H. T., & Nguyen, V. H. (2025)
Systemic Functional Linguistics	Examining language as a social semiotic system, focusing on transitivity and ideology.	Investigating “unspoken scars” and how war trauma is represented through linguistic choices.	Alruwaili et al. (2025)
Trauma and Narrative Theory	Using metaphor as a “narrative therapy” for externalizing internal psychic fractures.	Exploring “war without end”, fragmented memory, and the “spectral” presence of ghosts.	Armstrong (2019); India et al. (2023); Nguyen, T. K. N., & Nguyen, T. T. H. (2025); Rawal (2025)
Multi-level View of Metaphor	Integrating cognitive mapping with mental spaces, image schemas, and cultural context.	Analyzing complex, layered meanings in American war correspondent reports and transnational fiction.	Hoang & Nguyen (2024); Osborn (2007).
Gothic/Materialist Approaches	Focusing on the “materiality” of objects and the spectrality of postwar landscapes.	Mapping the metaphorical weight of physical artifacts (e.g., rucksacks) and “flesh/bones”.	Armstrong (2019); Lustig (2001); Sharp (2020)

Conceptual metaphor theory is still the most popular theory and it provides a framework to organise the comparisons of the “source-to-target” projections in the American and Vietnamese contexts. However, there is a clear trend towards the integration of CMT and Critical Metaphor Analysis in order to better understand the persuasive and ideological functions of these mappings in conflict-based narratives (Nguyen, T. H. T., & Nguyen, V. H., 2025)

In recent years, scholars analyse “psychopathological symptoms” and “identity fracture” with trauma-informed perspectives (Farhan, 2025; Qiu et al., 2024). Here, metaphors are not just a linguistic device but a necessary tool to “defoliate the mind” and make peace with the “insidious trauma” of a refugee crisis or lost homeland (Shrivastava et al., 2023; Osborn, 2007). This is especially true in studies of “postwar fiction” where the line between the real

and metaphysical is often blurred (Armstrong, 2019; Nguyen, T. K.N, & Nguyen, T. T. H., 2025).

3.3. Major themes of war-related metaphors

The synthesis of the chosen studies shows that war is understood via multiple source domains, stretching from the primal and animalistic to the mechanical and metaphysical. Beyond their stylistic function, these metaphors act as cognitive frameworks that assist both the authors and the readers in understanding the “unspoken scars” and the ‘indefinite’ nature of conflict (Alruwaili et al., 2025; Rawal, 2025).

WAR IS A BEAST. One of the most prominent themes in comparative studies of American and Vietnamese fiction is the metaphor **WAR IS A FEROCIOUS BEAST** (or **WAR IS A WILD ANIMAL**) (Pham, H. T., 2025; Pham, T. H., 2025). War is mapped onto a predator that “devours” human morality and identity in the works of Wayne Karlin (e.g., *Wandering Souls*) and Chu Lai (e.g., *Red Rain*) (Pham, H.T, 2025a). The mapping has specific “projection paths” such as predation in which the soldier is either the hunter or the hunted, and “madness,” where the beast-like nature of the conflict strips away human reason (Pham, H. T., 2025a; Pham, T. H., 2025b). This motif emphasises the dehumanising and uncontrollable aspects of the Vietnam War.

WAR IS HELL. In the stories of Tim O’Brien and Bao Ninh, the conceptualisation of **WAR IS HELL** often intermingles with the metaphysical and spectral realms (Nguyen, T. K.N, & Nguyen, T. T. H., 2025). The battlefield is often characterised as a “Hellish” or spectral space populated by “ghosts” and “wandering souls” (Armstrong, 2019;

Nguyen, T. K.N, & Nguyen, T. T. H., 2025). These metaphysical metaphors serve a dual purpose: they represent the “insidious trauma” of survivors who are haunted by the dead and they provide a form of “narrative therapy” that allows characters to project their internal psychic fractures externally (Shrivastava et al., 2023; Nguyen, T. K.N, & Nguyen, T. T. H., 2025).

WAR IS A JOURNEY. The domains of life and conflict are related in a bidirectional way, as the metaphors **WAR IS A JOURNEY** and **LIFE IS A WAR** demonstrate (Do, 2017). In comparative studies of American and Vietnamese short stories, life is often conceptualised as a journey through a hostile landscape, a “journey” not leading to a home but to a state of permanent displacement or “war without end” (Do, 2017; Rawal, 2025). This metaphor points to the totality of conflict, where the struggles of war define the framework of the survivor's entire life journey.

WAR IS A DISEASE. The theme of **WAR IS A DISEASE** (or **WAR AS A PATHOLOGY**) is found in research on the psychological “infection” of trauma (Alkhamash, 2023; Demmen et al., 2015). War is described as a plague or “insidious” disease that spreads among a population, creating “identity fractures” like physical diseases (Alruwaili et al., 2025; India et al., 2023). Moreover, research on “violence metaphors” indicates a strong connection between the social discourse of terminal illness and the social discourse of the “mowing down” of lives in combat, with war understood as a destructive force that threatens the “health” of the national body (Demmen et al., 2015; Reel, 2025).

WAR IS A NATURAL DISASTER. In Vietnamese resistance stories, war is

often marked by the space of NATURAL DISASTERS, such as storms, floods, or fires (Nguyen, T. H. T., & Nguyen, V. H., (2025). These metaphors highlight the “inevitability” and “overwhelming scale” of the conflict, presenting national defence as a necessary response to a “unstoppable force of nature” (Nguyen, T. K.N, & Nguyen, T. T. H., 2025). Such texts often equate war with natural disaster in order to mitigate individual agency in favour of a collective, national effort to survive and “weather the storm” of invasion.

WAR IS A MACHINE. The metaphor of WAR IS A MACHINE is used to characterise the systemic, mechanical nature of modern technological warfare (Nguyen, T. H. T., & Nguyen, V. H., 2025); Reel, 2025). This is particularly clear in accounts of the ‘machine-like’ efficiency of the American military intervention or the ‘mowing down’ of soldiers by industrial weaponry (Reel, 2025). The mapping highlights the cold, impersonal, repetitive nature of violence where people become “cogs” or “artifacts” of a larger contingent of “warring objects” (Lustig, 2001; Sharp, 2020). The metaphor is often used in resistance literature to contrast the “mechanical” invader with the “organic” and “natural” resistance of the local population (Nguyen, T. K.N, & Nguyen, T. T. H., 2025).

3.4. Contrastive research trends: Vietnamese vs. American literary perspectives

Through the synthesis of research, the contrast between the metaphorical mappings employed by Vietnamese and American literary traditions to conceptualise the same historical conflict is striking. The basic conceptual source domains are shared by both

cultures, but the “projection paths” - the specific attributes transferred from source to target - reflect different national ideologies, historical traumas and ontological anxieties (Hoang & Nguyen, 2024; Pham, H, T, 2025a).

Individual Psychic Fragmentation vs. Collective Spectral Resistance: The focus of American scholarship is mostly on the individualisation of trauma, using metaphors of “identity fracture” and “unspoken scars” (Alruwaili et al., 2025; Farhan, 2025). In recent works like Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds*, war is presented as a indefinite psychological state where the soldier's mind turns into a battlefield of “fragmented memory” and “endless war” (Alruwaili et al., 2025; Rawal, 2025). Material metonymy is a common feature in American narratives, with Tim O’Brien using the physical rucksack as a metaphor for the literal and psychic “weight” of the conflict (Sharp, 2020). This “object-oriented” approach accentuates the alienation of the individual who is “dissevered from the world,” caught in a “black and evil land” (Lustig, 2001).

Meanwhile, Vietnamese research focuses on collective and spectral resistance. Vietnamese postwar fiction often uses the “Gothic” metaphors of “flesh, bones, and ghosts” to represent a collective refusal to forget the dead, rather than focusing on the internal psychic void (Armstrong, 2019). In the works of Bao Ninh, metaphysical experiences operate as “narrative therapy” through the existence of “wandering souls” for the collective processing of “insidious trauma” and the “inherited” grief of the “Resistance War” (India et al., 2023; Nguyen, T. K.N, & Nguyen, T. T. H., 2025). American literature attempts to understand the impact of the war on the self, while

Vietnamese literature attempts to understand the presence of the war in the landscape and the ancestral realm (Armstrong, 2019; Nguyen, T. H. T., & Nguyen, V. H., (2025).

Ideological Framing: Mechanical Invasion vs. Natural Inevitability. Critical Metaphor Analysis shows that there is a clear difference in the ideological framing of conflict. American studies of war correspondent reports and early fiction often struggle with the “ideological representation” of the Vietnamese “Other”, occasionally employing metaphors that disclose hidden biases or a feeling of “defoliating the mind” - a destruction of the imaginary domain that is similar to the chemical defoliation of the landscape (Hoang & Nguyen, 2024; Osborn, 2007).

Vietnamese resistance narratives frame the war in the domain of natural disasters (storms, fires) to position national defence as a necessary, organic response to a “inevitable” external force (Nguyen, T. H. T., & Nguyen, V. H., (2025). This is in sharp contrast to the image of the American military as a cold, “mechanical” machine that “mowed down” lives with industrial efficiency (Nguyen, T. H. T., & Nguyen, V. H., 2025; Reel, 2025). American narratives often depict the war as a “journey” that culminates in a state of moral “chaos,” while Vietnamese narratives often depict the war as a “resistance” movement toward national survival, even if that survival is haunted by “metaphysical” loss (Do, 2017; Nguyen, T. H. T., & Nguyen, V. H., 2025).

Transnational Convergence: The Predatory Beast. Despite these differences, the metaphor of WAR IS A FEROCIOUS BEAST (Pham, H. T., 2025a; Pham, T. H., 2025b) shows a significant convergence. Both traditions

use predatory mappings to describe the dehumanising nature of combat. In the comparative studies of Wayne Karlin and Chu Lai the war is imagined as a “beast” that consumes both “invader” and “defender” alike, reducing human reason to a state of primal “madness” (Pham, H. T., 2025a; Pham, T. H., 2025b). This common mapping underlines the fact that the basic cognitive recognition of war as an uncontrollable and devouring force is a universal characteristic of the literary imagination in the Pacific in different ideological and cultural contexts (Do, 2017; Pham, H. T., 2025a; Pham, T. H., 2025b).

To fully account for the divergent projection paths identified across these two literary traditions, it is necessary to examine the underlying socio-cultural, historical, and philosophical frameworks shaping each nation’s consciousness:

- *American Literary Tradition (Individualism, Trauma, and Materiality):* The heavy reliance on metaphors of individual psychic fragmentation, “identity fractures,” and material metonymy (e.g., the heavy physical and emotional burden of the rucksack or war artifacts) is deeply rooted in Western individualist ideology and the specific historical context of the conflict. As an overseas intervention fought far from the homeland, the war was frequently experienced by American combatants through lenses of existential disorientation, moral ambiguity, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Consequently, metaphorical conceptualizations serve primarily as cognitive mechanisms to process individual guilt, psychological alienation, and personal trauma. The grounding of memory in physical artifacts reflects a materialist effort to

anchor elusive, disturbing psychological scars into concrete, tangible objects.

- Vietnamese Literary Tradition (Collectivism, Ancestral Spectrality, and Just Resistance): Conversely, the prevalence of Gothic metaphors - such as “flesh, bones, and ghosts” - alongside natural disaster domains (e.g., storms and floods) stems from a collectivist cultural ethos, ancestral veneration, and the historical reality of a war for national defense. Within Vietnamese ontological and cultural frameworks, the deceased retain an active, spectral presence within both the community and the sacred national landscape. Conceptualizing war trauma through metaphysical experiences and “wandering souls” serves to transform individual grief into a collective spiritual resistance, affirming communal immortality and national endurance rather than isolated psychological decay. Furthermore, framing conflict as an inevitable “storm” or “natural disaster” emphasizes the moral imperative of collective unity and resilience against overwhelming external aggression.

3.5. Methodological characteristics

The methodological landscape of the 18 studies included moves from classic qualitative close readings to “multi-level” interdisciplinary approaches that combine cognitive linguistics with broader socio-political contexts (Hoang & Nguyen, 2024). Most studies, based on qualitative content analysis rooted in Conceptual Metaphor Theory, have identified basic mappings such as WAR IS A BEAST or LIFE IS A JOURNEY (Do, 2017; Pham, H,T, 2025b), but there is a considerable use of Critical Metaphor Analysis to challenge the ideological underpinnings of narratives of national resistance and journalistic reporting (Hoang & Nguyen, 2024;

Nguyen, T. H. T., & Nguyen, V. H., 2025). The use of Systemic Functional Linguistics to analyse the “unspoken scars” and ideological representations of trauma in works such as *The Yellow Birds* (Alruwaili et al., 2025), and narrative therapy models to explore metaphysical encounters in the fiction of Bao Ninh and Tim O’Brien (Nguyen, T. K.N, & Nguyen, T. T. H., 2025) enhances methodological rigour. Additionally, the field has started to embrace computer-aided techniques and bibliometric mapping studies and shifted from individual case studies to 'violence metaphors' and thematic patterns across larger datasets (Alkhamash, 2023; Demmen et al., 2015). The selected corpora mainly include contemporary war novels, such as those by Wayne Karlin, Chu Lai, Kevin Powers, and Viet Thanh Nguyen (Alruwaili et al., 2025; India et al., 2023; Pham, H,T, 2025b), but the corpora are diversifying, comprising short stories (Do, 2017), journalistic articles from the New York Times and Nhan Dan Online (Dao, 2022), and material artefacts of conflict (Sharp, 2020) in a transnational approach to war-related fiction (Osborn, 2007).

4. Discussion

Synthesis of the 18 selected studies suggests that war-related metaphors have evolved from static literary ornaments to dynamic cognitive frameworks negotiating the boundaries of trauma, national identity and reconciliation. The following sections deal with the evolution of these metaphors, cultural differences and current gaps in the existing body of scholarship.

4.1. Evolution of war-metaphor research

Literary analysis in the past has been inclined to focus on metaphors that were

in favour of state-sanctioned ideologies of valour and national resistance (Nguyen, T. H. T., & Nguyen, V. H., (2025). In the Vietnamese case, Critical Metaphor Analysis shows how the metaphors of “natural disasters” or “mechanical invaders” were used to justify the collective mobilisation. But the research also reveals a distinct historical shift away from these heroic mappings to more nuanced explorations of the “post-heroic” soldier.

In modern scholarship, the study of “trauma narratives” is becoming more and more popular, in which war is considered a “indefinite” psychological state, rather than a completed historical event. Metaphors of “unspoken scars” and “identity fracture” in works such as *The Yellow Birds* recall the ongoingness of conflict. In this paradigm, the WAR IS A BEAST metaphor underscores the predatory and dehumanising aspects of combat, where the “beast” consumes the soldier’s moral clarity.

In the last years, the “metaphysical turn” has introduced metaphors of “spectrality” and “narrative therapy”. As scholarship on Bao Ninh and Tim O’Brien suggests, metaphors of “ghosts” and “wandering souls” allow for a transnational reconciliation with a “painful past”. In addition, the idea of “defoliating the mind” is a strong metaphor for the persistent ecological and psychological destruction that exists through generations.

4.2. Comparative insights

A comparative study of American and Vietnamese literature reveals the profound difference of metaphorical “projection paths” by which the same event in history is processed through different national and ontological lenses. American scholarship often focuses on the individualization of trauma, using

metaphors of “unspoken scars,” “identity fracture,” and “fragmented memory” to depict war as a permanent, “indefinite” psychological condition. This emphasis on the individual is often mediated by the materiality of war artefacts, such as the rucksack in Tim O’Brien’s work, which functions as a metonym for the literal and psychic “weight” of the conflict. In contrast, Vietnamese literary scholarship highlights collective spectral resistance, where “Gothic” figures of “flesh, bones, and ghosts” transform psychic trauma into a collective aesthetic and ethical witness. In these stories, metaphysical experiences and the presence of “wandering souls” serve as a kind of “narrative therapy” for a nation facing the “insidious trauma” and “natural disaster” mappings of a decades-long “resistance war”. Despite these differences, the two traditions converge on the primal source domain of the FEROCIOUS BEAST, mapping the war onto a predator that “devours” human morality and reduces participants to a state of primal “madness”. This transnational commonality implies that, despite different ideological framings, the basic cognitive realisation of combat as an uncontrollable, dehumanising force is a universal feature in both literary corpora.

Beyond the distinct national trajectories, the synthesis underscores a fundamental theoretical insight regarding the cognitive processing of conflict:

Cross-Cultural Convergence (The Universal Reality of Combat): Despite these divergent projection paths, both literary traditions converge on the core conceptual domain WAR IS A FEROCIOUS BEAST. This shared mapping demonstrates that at a

foundational cognitive level, the immediate existential experience of modern armed conflict transcends national boundaries and political ideologies. Both sides recognize the raw, predatory, and dehumanizing nature of warfare as an uncontrollable force that strips away human rationality and reduces both invader and defender to a state of primal survival.

Ontological and Theoretical Implications: Ultimately, these comparative insights demonstrate that metaphorical divergences are not merely decorative or accidental stylistic choices, but rather structural reflections of deeper cultural ontologies and historical realities. Grounding the analysis in the socio-cultural and philosophical determinants of each nation reveals how metaphors function as active cognitive devices that bridge personal trauma, collective memory, and historical reconciliation.

4.3. Research gaps

The survey of the literature shows some significant gaps in the research that hinder a comprehensive understanding of the way war metaphors work across cultures. First, scholarship still tends to be nation-centered, and there is a “relative dearth” of direct, English-language comparative appraisals that systematically juxtapose American metafiction and Vietnamese novels from the Renovation period. Methodologically, the field remains heavily reliant on qualitative close readings of individual texts, suggesting the absence of large-scale, corpus-driven research which employs computer-assisted tools to identify statistically significant “violence metaphors” across broader sets of literary texts. Further, there is a lack of diachronic research following the temporal development of

particular mappings, e.g., the shift from fire to machine metaphors, across decades of conflict and postwar reflection. Theoretical integration too remains fragmented, with few studies successfully fusing Conceptual Metaphor Theory with trauma theory or “medical humanities” to explore metaphors as functional devices for “narrative therapy” and the externalisation of “psychopathological symptoms.” Finally, the “insidious trauma” and “fragmented memory” that exists in intergenerational and refugee narratives remains greatly under-researched, leaving a gap in our knowledge about the impact of metaphors of “displacement” on later generations’ identities.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review of 18 core studies confirms that war-related metaphors in Vietnamese and American literature are essential cognitive and ideological mechanisms to conceptualise the “war without end”. The synthesis demonstrates that the Vietnam War is no longer a static historical event but a “indefinite” psychological condition that continues to shape the identities of survivors and subsequent generations. Scholarship has moved from traditional stylistic analysis to frameworks like Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Critical Metaphor Analysis, showing the profound ways in which language mediates the trauma of conflict.

The results show a dramatic evolution of metaphorical mappings, from early heroic representations to modern concerns with trauma, memory and spectrality. Both literary traditions use the metaphor WAR IS A BEAST to denote the dehumanising and predatory aspects of war, but their respective “projection paths” reveal profound

cultural differences. American narratives tend to focus on the individual psychic fragmentation and the “unspoken scars” of the veteran, often using the materiality of objects to represent the burden of memory. By contrast, Gothic and metaphysical metaphors are used in Vietnamese literature, such as “flesh, bones and ghosts” to symbolise a collective spectral resistance and offer “narrative therapy” for a nation haunted by the “insidious trauma” of the past.

Methodologically, the field is moving towards “multi-level” and “transnational” frameworks that integrate linguistic structures with historical and socio-political context. A developing trend is the use of computer-assisted bibliometric mapping to analyse “violence metaphors” in larger samples and thus provide a more comprehensive view of the thematic distribution. But the review indicates some research gaps,

especially the lack of direct large-scale corpus-based comparative studies and the relatively few English-language appraisals comparing American metafiction and Vietnamese novels of the Renovation period.

Future research should focus on Comparative Metaphor Mapping that includes under-represented voices like female veterans and refugees, whose trauma is often expressed through metaphors of “displacement” and “fragmented storytelling”. Moreover, studies on multimodal war metaphors and the diachronic development of “violence” conceptualisations will be crucial to understand how the “defoliating of the mind” continues to affect the literary imagination of both nations. Ultimately, this review highlights that metaphors are not just the adornment of speech, but the way we navigate the “chaos” of war and attempt to reconcile with its enduring legacy.

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ẢN DỤ LIÊN QUAN ĐẾN CHIẾN TRANH TRONG CÁC TÁC PHẨM VĂN HỌC VIỆT NAM VÀ MỸ: TỔNG QUAN HỆ THỐNG VỀ CÁC XU HƯỚNG NGHIÊN CỨU SO SÁNH VÀ KHOẢNG TRỐNG NGHIÊN CỨU

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(Received: 20/8/2026, Revised: 3/9/2026, Accepted for publication: 10/9/2026)

TÓM TẮT

Bài tổng quan hệ thống này tổng hợp các xu hướng nghiên cứu so sánh, khung lý thuyết và khoảng trống nghiên cứu trong việc tri nhận ẩn dụ về chiến tranh qua các công trình nghiên cứu văn học Việt Nam và Mỹ. Tuân thủ nghiêm ngặt quy trình PRISMA, một phân tích sâu về 18 nghiên cứu nòng cốt, có ảnh hưởng cao được công bố từ năm 2001 đến năm 2026 đã được thực hiện, phản ánh một ngành nghiên cứu chuyên sâu tại giao điểm giữa ngôn ngữ học tri nhận và nghiên cứu văn học so sánh. Kết quả tổng quan cho thấy sự chuyển dịch chuyển thái rõ rệt từ những sáng tác mang cảm hứng anh hùng ca sang các khám phá hậu anh hùng về “những vết sẹo không lời”, “chấn thương ngầm” và ký ức tâm linh. Đặc biệt, nghiên cứu này làm sáng tỏ các căn nguyên văn hóa – xã hội, lịch sử và triết học sâu xa quyết định sự khác biệt về con đường chiếu ứng ẩn dụ giữa hai nền văn học. Các nghiên cứu phía Mỹ, bắt nguồn từ chủ nghĩa cá nhân phương Tây và sự hoang mang hiện sinh từ một cuộc chiến xa xứ, nhấn mạnh sự rạn nứt bản dạng cá nhân và tính vật chất của các di vật (như chiếc ba lô) như những điểm tựa cụ thể cho chấn thương. Ngược lại, các nghiên cứu phía Việt Nam gắn liền với văn hóa cộng đồng, tín ngưỡng thờ cúng tổ tiên và bản chất cuộc chiến vệ quốc chính nghĩa, sử dụng các ẩn dụ Gothic về “xác thịt, xương máu, linh hồn lang thang” cùng các miền thiên tai để chuyển hóa nỗi đau cá nhân thành sức mạnh tâm linh tập thể và sự bất tử của dân tộc. Dù có sự khác biệt về văn hóa, cả hai hệ ngữ liệu đều gặp nhau ở miền tri nhận nguyên thủy “chiến tranh là dã thú”, thừa nhận bản chất bạo lực, sẵn mỗi mang tính phổ quát của chiến tranh khiến cả bên xâm lược lẫn bên phòng thủ đều bị phi nhân tính hóa. Về mặt phương pháp luận, lĩnh vực này đang tiến tới các khung phân tích đa tầng và xuyên quốc gia, mặc dù vẫn còn những khoảng trống quan trọng liên quan đến các nghiên cứu so sánh quy mô lớn dựa trên kho ngữ liệu (corpus-driven) và tự sự của người tị nạn qua các thế hệ. Nghiên cứu khẳng định ẩn dụ không chỉ là trang sức ngôn từ mà là công cụ tri nhận cốt lõi phục vụ trị liệu tự sự và hòa giải lịch sử.

Từ khóa: Văn học Mỹ; lý thuyết ẩn dụ tri nhận; tổng quan hệ thống; văn học Việt Nam; ẩn dụ liên quan đến chiến tranh