

## MOTION AND SYMBOLISM OF BUDDHISM AS A THERAPEUTIC RESPONSE IN KYOTO (KAWABATA YASUNARI) AND APOCALYPSE HOTEL (HO ANH THAI)

Nguyen Thanh Trung<sup>1,2</sup>, Nguyen Phuoc Bao Khoi<sup>1</sup>, Phan Duy Khoi<sup>1</sup>, Do Dinh Linh Vu<sup>1</sup>,  
Ta Minh Truc<sup>3</sup>, Bui Quynh Huong<sup>3</sup>, Doan Tien Dat<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Linguistics and Literature Department, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education;

<sup>2</sup>Center for Religious Studies, Vietnam Institute of Buddhist Studies;

<sup>3</sup>Graduate Student, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education

Corresponding author: Nguyen Thanh Trung; Orcid code: 0000-0002-7220-7380; Email:  
trungnt@hcmue.edu.vn

**Abstract:** Based on the approach of Amos Goldberg's two forms of trauma in narrative literature, this article employs a tripartite methodological framework, encompassing structural, historical-cultural, and comparative perspectives, to elucidate the role and nature of Buddhism as a therapeutic response to trauma in the artistic narrative works *Kyoto* (Kawabata Yasunari) and *Apocalypse Hotel* (Ho Anh Thai). Essentially, this is the methodology of Buddhist criticism in literary studies. The research findings indicate a theoretical convergence between trauma, the concepts of suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anicca*), and selflessness (*anatta*), as well as the manifestation of Buddhist elements in these two novels as both intellectual and artistic solutions for contemporary trauma with universal implications in Japan and Vietnam. Consequently, this study offers a fresh perspective on the theoretical relationship between trauma in literature and Buddhism, transcending mere social criticism, introduces novel insights, outcomes for studying and teaching Vietnamese and Japanese literature at the college level.

**Keywords:** Buddhist criticism, the remedy for trauma, trauma narrative, *Kyoto* (Kawabata Yasunari),

*Apocalypse Hotel* (Ho Anh Thai)

### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. Urgency, history, and research hypothesis

Buddhism has long been recognized for its potential to heal mental trauma, particularly in countries with strong Buddhist traditions such as Japan and Vietnam. However, the principles and characteristics of this process vary depending on the time, perspective, and viewpoint. This article aims to identify these fundamental characteristics by examining two literary works that share the same theme: the destruction of beauty caused by war trauma. These are two outstanding novels written by two authors with many similarities, particularly in their experiences with death. Suppose Kawabata is considered a master of funerals (not only because of his short story "Soshiki no meijin" (1923) but also because of his personal life). In that case, Ho Anh Thai also has many thoughts on death: "I do not believe those who have never witnessed a death. You must witness it with your own eyes, you must hold the dead person in your arms, you must shroud a corpse, ... Only then will you truly understand life, understand people, understand existence." (Ho Anh Thai, 2013, p. 157). Both authors come from traditional intellectual families, were deeply

influenced by Buddhist spirituality, and authored novels that successfully depict the rapid modernization of Japan (1962) and Vietnam (2002). By examining these works, this article can be approached from an interdisciplinary perspective, specifically focusing on the relationship between literature and trauma, trauma and Buddhism, and Buddhism and literature - an issue of profound theoretical and practical significance. The research results can also be further discussed, introduced, and developed in undergraduate programs in Literature, Vietnamese Literature, and Foreign Literature.

The relationship between Yasunari Kawabata and Ho Anh Thai has, to date, been primarily examined as evidence of the type of writer who expresses spiritual contemplation in their novels. However, a more systematic and focused study of this relationship could be opened by examining it from the perspective of the trauma-narrative relationship. In her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), Cathy Carouth discusses the concept of "response," which, starting from Freud's conception, links trauma with the psyche, specifically the unconscious. She develops the idea of the unconscious as unrecognized experiences that are "double wounds" recounted in the form of a trauma story. This story belongs to a different form of trauma and history, and it is told in a different voice. In her study of Kawabata, Mara Miller specifies this voice as a method of using traditional aesthetic and beauty concepts "to demonstrate the effects of the mass trauma following World War II and the complicated grief it induced, on the psychology of moral/ethical understanding, decision making, and action." (Miller, 2015, p.122). Studying *Thousand Cranes* and *Sleeping Beauties* by Kawabata, David Stahl in *Trauma, Dissociation and Re-enactment in Japanese Literature and Film* (2018) views trauma research as a branch of psychology associated with the identity of the victim of injury, set in the context of post-war culture. Connecting trauma with Buddhism, Mara Miller, in *A Matter of Life and Death: Kawabata on the Value of Art after the Atomic Bombings*, considers the juxtaposition of life and death concepts, associated with nuclear trauma in Japan – "It suggests, further, that art could—indeed should—be used to help people with the process of recovering from trauma" (Miller, Mara, 2014, p. 273). In Vietnam, studies by Pham Thi My Hanh on *The imprint of Buddhism in the novels Realm of the Human Ringing Bell at the End of the World and The Buddha, Savitri, and Me* by Ho Anh Thai (2019), and by Khuong Viet Ha's *The dichotomy in the aesthetic world of Kawabata Yasunari from history and national consciousness* (2022), also affirm the significance of war trauma in the works of writers<sup>1</sup>. From these studies, we posit hypothesis **H1 – that narratives imbued with Buddhist characteristics serve as therapeutic interventions for trauma.**

However, this hypothesis is only meaningful if the nature and characteristics of traumatic narratives can be identified according to Buddhist principles. In this regard, we are interested in the research of Judith Lewis Herman in *Trauma and Recovery (The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror)* (1982) which explores the potential of literature as a means for individuals who have experienced trauma to express their experiences, seek understanding and empathy, and overcome feelings of isolation and alienation. The author conceptualizes trauma as a disruption that involves a forgotten history, fear, disconnection, entrapment, childhood abuse, and necessitates a new diagnostic lens and healing process that involves stages of recovery such as relational repair, safety, mourning, and reconnection, etc. In line with this, E. A. Brett, and R. Ostroff, in *Imagery in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: An Overview*, discusses the dual nature of traumatic images such as triggering intrusive memories,

avoidance, nightmares, and increasing vigilance; furthermore, the images themselves also serve a therapeutic role; suggesting imagery in literary works. Applied to literature, Mara Miller has specifically outlined the war traumas, and loneliness in *The Sound of the Mountain* (Kawabata)—“...*The Sound of the Mountain* is the novel in which Kawabata most directly pits art and the aesthetic—and the knowledge and understanding and wisdom that art and aesthetic experience convey—against war and the traumas and isolation and ignorance and impotence and denial to which war gives rise.” (Mara Miller, 2015, tr.122). The experiences described in the novels share an artistic nature with *Shin-Kankaku*, a literary genre in which Kawabata is a prominent figure. *Shin-Kankaku* is characterized by its ability to represent "alogical and disconnected forms in which we experience the world as a continuous stream of 'sensations' (kankaku)" (Khuong Viet Ha, 2022, pp. 83-84). Based on this shared artistic nature, it can be argued that **H2 – the act of experiencing and interpreting trauma—is a defining characteristic of the Buddhist-oriented therapy present in both Kawabata's and Ho Anh Thai's novels.**

These experiences only acquire artistic value when they are shaped through the components of narrative structure. Mara Miller, analyzing the scene where Shingo finds Kikuko uninterested in the off-season buds symbolizing emptiness, concludes that: “This is a type of emblematic representation, much deeper than the association of the first example” (Mara Miller, 2015, tr.132) because it very clearly expresses the character's trauma. In the work *Kyoto*, the trauma of the Japanese community and nation is expressed in the beauty of the old capital that is in danger of decline, since “the sound of chanting or a flute that pagodas and shrines may also provide. Such sites may, in addition, function as symbols of these values, especially when they have survived over hundreds of years, as so many of Kyoto’s sites had.” (Mara Miller, 2014, tr.267). Buddhist elements have been identified as a solution for trauma in narrative art, particularly when they carry symbolic power. This leads to the formulation of Hypothesis **H3 – the characteristics of Buddhist narratives that function as a solution for trauma are symbolization and meaning-making.**

## 1.2. Methodology

This article undertakes an exploration from the theoretical perspective of trauma, particularly drawing insights from Amos Goldberg's work *Trauma, Narrative, and Two Forms of Death* (2006). Specifically, it aims to identify characteristics and narrative techniques of trauma, and subsequently, to connect them to textual representations, particularly from the standpoint of narrative artistry informed by Buddhist philosophy, that is, to examine the transformation between literature and Buddhist studies. To achieve this, literary comparison, structural analysis, and historical-cultural methods are employed.

Primarily, comparative literature is a research method aimed at shaping and influencing analyses of the nature of Buddhism, and the significance of trauma in two texts. This method has been employed since ancient Greek times. In *Poetics*, Aristotle utilized comparative methods to analyze various literary genres, including tragedy, comedy, and poetry. In the *Republic*, Plato used comparative methods to evaluate the value of different art forms. However, it was not until the 18th century that this method was systematized and developed extensively through the works of Madame de Staël, August Wilhelm Schlegel, and René Wellek. Notably, Madame de Staël's *De L'Allemagne* (1813, *On Germany*) proposed and applied a systematic method of comparative literature focusing on different elements of two or

more literary works, including themes, plots, characters, and styles; directly juxtaposing texts, highlighting similarities and differences. Subsequently, this method evolved into techniques such as comparative analysis to explore how texts influence or reflect each other; and historical comparison - placing texts in corresponding eras to clarify context and impact. In this article, the method of comparative literature is applied to juxtapose two works and examine them on corresponding focal aspects; thus, the similarity in experiences of trauma, and the Buddhist resolution are clarified; thus, it means combining both comparative analysis and expanded historical cultural comparison.

Next, to limit the subjectivity of comparison, the structural method is applied to delve into the text and seek relationships between elements within a discourse. The structural method emerged in the mid-20th century, drawing inspiration from linguistics and anthropology. Structural thinking also emerged early on, notably with Ferdinand de Saussure, who laid the groundwork with his theory of signs, and the developments of Claude Lévi-Strauss. In *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* (1949), and *Mythologiques* (1969-1981), Claude Lévi-Strauss proposed a fresh approach to exploring hidden structures amidst the chaos of mythology, identifying connections and relational systems. Particularly, techniques such as motif analysis, comparative versioning, and the search for binary relationships in mythology are significant for subsequent applied studies. Thus, fundamentally, the structural method dissects texts into smaller components such as themes, patterns, symbols, characters, and narrative structures, observing how these elements interact and contribute to the overall system of meaning in the text. In this article, the narrative structural approach is employed to approach the system of works from three levels: storytelling, narration, and story-telling. Based on this, binary opposites are also examined as part of narrative components; references to Vietnamese and Japanese cultural texts are made within the novel text.

However, even when going beyond superficial interpretations, aiming to explore universal laws and hidden meanings embedded in the text, the structural method still can speculate when considering the text as a closed system. Therefore, the cultural-historical method is used to complement and link literary works with the specific historical and cultural context. This method originated from 19th-century archaeologists when they emphasized the importance of understanding artifacts in their cultural context. In Vietnam, especially in the field of social sciences, the cultural-historical method is quite popularly applied to examine how factors such as social structure, political events, and dominant philosophy shape the creation and reception of literature through techniques such as placing the text in historical context, comparing texts with the same/different cultural contexts; identifying recurring motifs/themes/symbols with cultural meanings, etc. In this article, the cultural-historical method is used to explain the similarities and differences in trauma, Buddhist expressions, and Vietnamese and Japanese culture as a basis for conducting further research on the nature of experience and meaning-making in the two novels.

Combining these three methods, the article aims to elucidate three levels of self-reflection comprising personal narratives intertwined with death – representing the loss of meaning and coherence of characters; stories depicting death symbolically with features such as a world devoid of structure, isolation also being scrutinized (Suffering - *Dukkha*); and the art of storytelling through cultural symbols embedded in the Buddhist realm to assuage traumas (Selflessness - *Anatta*), as elucidated by Amos Goldberg, involving steps of reinterpreting

meaning through action, avoiding rigid circumstances, namely symbolic death (Impermanence - Anicca). The research model can be summarized in the following table.

[Table 1 – The research model]

Scientific hypothesis	Methodology	Research methods	Nature	Buddhist expressions	Narrative aspect
H1. Narrative stories deal with trauma	Buddhist criticism	Comparative method, Structural method, Cultural and historical methods	Trauma	Suffering	Story
H2. Movement, experience, and explanation			Experience	Impermanence	Narrative
H3. Symbolism, finding meaning			Represent	Selflessness	Narration

## 2. RESULT FINDINGS

### 2.1. Trauma, movement, and symbolism – from trauma theory to Buddhism

Buddhism aims to liberate beings from suffering through self-power, with the core concept of the Mind being the root of all suffering. The source of the afflicted Mind is identified as ignorance. Cathy Carouth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), employs Freudian notions to highlight the resistance, the unconscious response of a traumatized individual. – “These repetitions are particularly striking because they seem not to be initiated by the individual’s own acts but rather appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of pain - ful events to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely outside their wish or control.” (tr.2). The recurrence, or experience, described adheres to Freud's principle of satisfaction, including thoughts, art, and dreams. Therefore, in *Kyoto and Apocalypse Hotel*, Chieko dreams multiple times before entering the North Mountain, while Mai Trung also vividly dreams of the path leading to where her father was murdered. Trauma has its pathway through dreams as a form of reenactment and creates significance through sudden, random associations. However, if prolonged, these characters may become neurotic patients; Buddhism proposes a different understanding, where repetition involves looking back with a view of selflessness, and impermanence, to thoroughly resolve trauma. In this regard, it is necessary further to discuss the significance of the bell's toll, as analyzed by Le Thi Huong – *Inter-Symbol in Ho Anh Thai's Novels – In Apocalypse Hotel*, the bell tolling from the pagoda, a sacred symbol of Buddhism, concludes the narrative of evil with a message resonant with the Christian eschatological spirit. The chaotic tolling of the pagoda bell serves as a prophetic warning of the impending end times, echoing the biblical "signs of the times," signaling that "the hour is near," and that "something is about to happen," including the revelation of the apocalypse (The Bible) (Le Thi Huong, 2021, tr.177). Although faint traces of multiculturalism and multireligiosity (including Christianity) are discernible in the novel, this bell can still be comprehensively interpreted within the eschatological framework of Buddhism. In Buddhist scriptures such as the *Ekottara Āgama*, Volume 07, Sūtra 1, and the *Anguttara Nikāya*, Chapter 07, Dharma Section, both mention the appearance of the seven suns as a significant portent, marking the onset of the apocalypse by fire. *Dīrgha Āgama*, in

Description of the World, Sūtra 09 – Three disasters – also elaborates on the fire apocalypse (destroying from hell to the Brahma world with the seven suns), the water apocalypse (destroying from hell to the Amitābha world), and the wind apocalypse (destroying from hell to the Pure Land). The difference lies in the fact that while Christianity views the apocalypse because of human sin, Buddhism believes: "External conditions affect good and evil phenomena where sentient beings reside. Due to favorable conditions, sentient beings in higher celestial realms witness the successive destruction of lower realms. Or due to sentient beings' countless reincarnations, the karmic accumulations of accomplished practitioners vary according to conditions, assisting sentient beings in rebirth into higher celestial realms." (Nguyen Thanh Trung, 2015, p.711). This interpretation aligns with the novel *Apocalypse Hotel* as, upon hearing the bell near the end of the narrative, curses are lifted, and characters find peace.

From a Buddhist perspective, the trauma of the characters in the two novels can be expressed in the concept of suffering (Dukkha). In *Samyutta Nikāya*, *Dhammacakkappavattana sutta*, Buddha determined “Birth is suffering, decay is suffering, the disease is suffering, death is suffering, to be united with the unpleasant is suffering, to be separated from the pleasant is suffering, not to get what one desires is suffering. In brief, the five aggregates of attachment are suffering”. (Venerable Nārada Mahāthera, 1998, p.65). It is important to note that the significance of suffering encompasses various complex manifestations of human experience. This can be elucidated by enumerating different forms of suffering to determine the nature of the characters' traumas as depicted in the following table.

**Table 2.**

**Table demonstrating the forms of suffering in two novels**

Birth	Decay	Disease	Death	United with the unpleasant	Separated from the pleasant	Not to get what one desires
Chieko was born without knowing her origin.	Chieko's adoptive father grew old, and business also went down.	Chieko caught a cold and had nightmares.	Reflects on the tree accident and the death of her biological father.	Chieko grew up in a merchant family but did not like it.	Two sisters love but must be separated.	Chieko and Naeko cannot live together

Mai Trung was born in suffering and deprivation during the war.	The monk was old and weak, unable to go down the mountain to pray for rebirth.	Dong's feeling of weakness and loss of strength on the way to find Mai Trung.	A series of deaths brought suffering to the character.	Mai Trung did not want to see others being punished.	Mai Trung loves Duy but cannot be together.	Dong loves his daughter, but her daughter died early.
---	--	---	--	--	---	---

All that is unpleasant to endure constitutes suffering; among them is enduring the constant transformation of phenomena. Buddhism refers to this as impermanence (Anitya, anicca), meaning they are uncertain and constantly changing due to the interconnectedness of all things arising and ceasing in each moment of perception, all perpetuated by karma, continuously harmonizing and dispersing. Therefore, holding onto unchanging phenomena can only be an illusion or death. Viewed from the perspective of trauma, “According to Adorno, the death of the self—or at least one of the forms it can take—is caused by a static identity in the relationship of the subject to his or her concept. When there is no gap between the abstract concept and the “real thing” (the flesh and blood person), the subject is confronted with a form of death”. (Amos Goldberg, 2006, p.124). In *Apocalypse Hotel*, the young men are in constant motion, driven by desire; this signifies a symbolic death as they confine themselves within the boundaries of greed, vanity, and lust. At the end of the novel *Kyoto*, the two sisters are also not together anymore, Naeko leaves – "Chieko keeps watching the figure of the girl gradually moving away. Naeko doesn't look back. Snowflakes fall on Chieko's hair and instantly melt away..." (Yasunari Kawabata, 1988, p.219). This impermanence creates a wound in the characters, sometimes gentle, sometimes fierce, but all causing them suffering. To cope, they create symbols and metaphors.

Certainly, from a Buddhist perspective, a pagoda is a space that brings positive energy; it is a symbol of healing trauma. Therefore, in the two novels, it is through visiting pagodas that Chieko encounters her lost sisters; Dong finds Mai Trung hiding in Bao Son Pagoda to avoid causing harm to others. Mai Trung herself is also a symbol of Buddhist karma. "She was born of heaven and earth to punish the sinful world of humans." (Ho Anh Thai, 2013, p.151). However, from an intrinsic perspective, all symbols arise from the mind, the impermanent mind, thus all symbols are egoless, devoid of self. Mai Trung's task is not eternal; on the contrary, it brings suffering to the characters. When wounded and stripped of the spiritual armor protecting her mind, Mai Trung feels happier to be loved and to live as a normal human being. The pagodas in *Kyoto* to some extent have been commercialized, but if viewed as egoless, devoid of self, merely as means, then visiting a pagoda becomes an opportunity for individuals to understand the universe and themselves. This is the symbolic nature of selflessness (nirātman, anattan), selflessness, without attachment, as seen in Chieko's initial perspective: "Will the two purple flowers ever meet below? Will they be aware of each other's existence?"

But for them, what do the words 'meet' and 'aware' really mean?" (Yasunari Kawabata, 1988, p.8-9).

## **2.2. Buddhism as a solution to trauma in Kyoto and Apocalypse Hotel**

Trauma and suffering are not simply alleviated by visiting pagodas and reciting scriptures but require a deep understanding of the teachings of the Buddha. Through comprehension of Buddhist doctrine, individuals can transcend suffering, even amidst the most intense tribulations, as depicted in *Apocalypse Hotel*: "Two men pinned him down, chopped off his limbs, and one gutted him open, tearing out his heart and liver. They roasted the heart and liver over a fire and ate them on the spot. The testicles were divided between the two men, presumably the higher-ranking ones." (Ho Anh Thai, 2013, p.174), to cultivate body and mind. Understanding that suffering arises from ignorance, akin to "beetles living all their lives in a jar, for them, that is the universe" (Yasunari Kawabata, 1988, p.12). All aspirations towards supernatural forces are futile: "When they are born is when the spirits quietly toss them into this world... only to save them..." (Yasunari Kawabata, 1988, p.24). Every injustice has its karmic roots, like the story of a woman on a small island orphaned because her father, obeying orders, went to the island to paint smokestacks white for the American planes mistaking the revolutionaries' boats for targets, ultimately "sacrificed like a cooperative fisherman mobilized to go fishing and lost his life at sea. He didn't receive any recognition" (Ho Anh Thai, 2013, p.122). Amidst the maze of karmic connections, distinguishing right from wrong, good from bad, is limited to the realm of individual perception. Thus, the Japanese concept of the Mononoke shadow, as Hideo thought, if not for Chieko, one would encounter the shadow of Chieko, is a form of symbolic representation of experiences to soothe trauma, a means to achieve community psychological balance. Consequently, the Japanese are renowned for their deeply meditative approach to life, exemplified by Chieko's contemplation of existence as transient, as expressed in Yasunari Kawabata's novel: "astonished at the unusual life of the violet flowers... This is where they grew up... Then lived... - She whispered." (Yasunari Kawabata, 1988, p.9). In this context, various factors such as personality, emotional state, and life circumstances lead to the spiritual unrest of the characters in the East - seeking revenge despite understanding Buddhist teachings: "Death demands death. I remember the words of the Buddha in the books I have read and contemplated, all contradicted. In the past, we said everything we loved. What we own, will change, will disappear, so it only adds to the suffering of people who cling to possessions, believing that their loved ones must be immortal..." (Ho Anh Thai, 2013, p.101-102). Therefore, the novel remains a stage for all beings to enact all sorrows and joys. To counter trauma, death is symbolized; hence, its significance is richly nuanced.

The concept of impermanence and the creation of significance to defy the symbolic death portrayed in the *Ancient Capital* is exemplified in the detail of Shinichi assigning feminine connotations to the cherry blossoms as "branches soft and swaying, even the flowers themselves, gentle, graceful..." (Yasunari Kawabata, 1988, p.17) Chieko, on the other hand, refuted, "I can't imagine it being feminine at all, in the way it pierces flowers with such dazzling elegance, an indescribable gracefulness." (Yasunari Kawabata, 1988, p.17). The gaze into nature reflects the inner emotions and traumas of the characters; while the young man is oriented towards romantic love, the young woman is preoccupied with thoughts of her resilient and wandering elder sister. This process of meaning-making has formed the iconic cultural

symbol of Japan – the cherry blossom; this imagery accentuates impermanence when placed within the context of a pagoda space; the cherry blossom itself holds no inherent meaning, significance arises from human interaction: “As Chieko steps into the pagoda garden, she stands still, her gaze fixed upon the swaying cherry blossoms. Their pink hues, strikingly beautiful, fill her soul with a profound and sacred fervor.” (Yasunari Kawabata, 1988, p.15). Through the process of constructing meaning via associative thinking, various symbols emerged, aiding individuals in coping with trauma and assisting the Japanese in overcoming the wounds of World War II. Additionally, by imbuing meaning with Buddhist traces, the character Dong in *Apocalypse Hotel* could confront the passing of his young daughter – “The little girl lay on her back in bed, A large pillow covering her face. When I jerked the pillow away, her eyes were wide open, staring into the distance. A faint smile lingered on her lips. At the corner of her mouth, there was a deep wrinkle of old age. The smile and the wrinkle of the enlightened, of karmic consequence, of understanding and penetrating all.” (Ho Anh Thai, 2013, p.133). It is important to note that, according to the principle of movement creating meaning, the journey symbols of the characters in the two novels also play a certain role. Chieko ventures into the mountains, where the shade of trees abounds, there is sudden rain in the forest, and scenes of daily labor unfold; while Mai Trung runs into the forest where hidden trails lie, there are abandoned campsites from ancient times, and streams run dry. Both of them depart from the city, a place of extravagance and worldly affairs, encircled by the hustle and bustle of business, the temptations of desires enveloping their minds; they venture into the mountains, returning to the past, to nature, to the unconscious depths filled with countless alleyways, where reason has not yet shed light, in search of the true self, to understand their selves that have long been afflicted by the hardships of urban life.

The symbolic creation of meaning that evokes Buddhist impermanence is manifested in the fixed symbols and images that the characters form. This is the beauty that is subjectively imposed in *Apocalypse Hotel* – “That kind of beauty only stimulates those who want to destroy, like the people who are boiling in the mud and just want to throw mud at a person in white standing on the shore.” (Ho Anh Thai, 2013, p.145). Even the sound of the pagoda bell evokes unsettling and unfamiliar emotions: “The pagoda bell rings. A large bell and small bells. A symphony of bells, agitated, fluttering, resounding with words of warning.” (Ho Anh Thai, 2013, p.193). The war is over, but its wounds still linger in the characters' world. They are the war veterans, the victims of the market economy, the unspoken complexes, and nostalgia. Kawabata, although not explicitly mentioning the war, still depicts the conflict between old and new, past, and present in Kyoto. This is a symbol of spiritual war and psychological trauma as Kyoto (the ancient capital of Japan), an ancient city with old trees, is gradually being modernized by the Americans. They plan to cut down the trees and rebuild the old neighborhoods that symbolize the national memory; these are the camphor trees: “The cherry blossoms that bloomed immediately dispelled the feeling of spring. Here comes spring! The drooping branches are indeed pulled down by the double pink flowers to the tip of the pen, so they are not blooming on the branches anymore, but that the branches are born only to support the flowers.” (Kawabata, 1988, p.101). Traditional kimonos, meticulously crafted through techniques of design, illustration, and embroidery, are also subject to commodification. They represent symbols undergoing degradation, as within Buddhist philosophy, they are impermanent and lack inherent essence. Ho Anh Thai's novel constructs a similar emblem, the

Apocalypse Hotel, representing the transient realm of life with its passions and evils, reconciliation, and death. It emerges amidst an era of economic globalization, nurturing both desires and transgressions, contrasting with the Bao Son pagoda atop the mountain. From this perspective, the practice of selflessness by characters in Kyoto is deeper than in Apocalypse Hotel, as Dong experiences a sense of salvation upon hearing the forgiveness of the saintly nun – "Vitality suddenly poured into my empty and depleted body. I woke up to see the sun beginning to cast a golden light over the temple and the leaves. The sun was shining brightly instead of the bloody redness from before. My deaf ears suddenly heard the sound of birds chirping around." (Ho Anh Thai, 2013, p.199). It concerns the validation of one's wounded self-identity. Meanwhile, the Japanese have historically paid attention to every small living being it has become their way of life, thinking, and acting. "In ancient times, it was believed that the deities of Shintoism and Buddhist deities attended festivals equally, so on the right and left sides, the little ones were placed. Nowadays, sometimes people place their peers, symbolizing the Bodhisattva Kannon (the Buddha of compassion) and Shakyamuni (the Buddha of Buddhist doctrine) even in religious ceremonies." (Kawabata, 1988, p.101-102). The true measure of Kawabata's stature and depth becomes evident through a work that eschews excessive melodrama yet remains steeped in Buddhist sensibilities without resorting to simplistic illustration, instead bearing profound artistic value, particularly in its narrative structure.

### **2.3. Narrative Trauma Structures in Kyoto and Apocalypse Hotel**

The primary layer of the narrative is the story - the outcome embedded within the reader regarding what is recounted - within both works are traumas of a personal nature.

E. A. Brett and R. Ostroff in *Imagery in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: An Overview*, comments: "First the individual experiences the "death imprint," vivid memories and images of death and destruction that are difficult to dispel." (tr.419). Indeed, both novels utilize Buddhist imagery to symbolize purity and peace, and as a sanctuary for the human soul, in a very distinctive manner amidst life's afflictions. Chieko's father visits the temple in search of tranquility, Chieko attends ceremonies there to reconnect with her roots, Mai Trung seeks refuge in the temple to avoid harming others, and Dong goes there to repent for harming Mai Trung. The Buddhist undertones in both works aim to facilitate the characters' escape from suffering, yet the issue lies in the paths they choose to live, think, and act upon. From a personal narrative standpoint, Ho Anh Thai offers noteworthy reflections on Kawabata's Japan: "The absurdity of the Japanese people's great invention. Kawabata is dead... A cultural house collapses and sinks due to being built on marshland." (Ho Anh Thai, 2013, tr.154-155). This is a rare occasion when Ho Anh Thai mentions Kawabata; conversely, he frequently references the Buddha: "He attained enlightenment at the age of 35..., 45 years later He had to live among people who worshiped Him, revered Him, believed in Him, but had not necessarily understood Him. He is lonely and pitiable there." (Ho Anh Thai, 2013, tr.38). Having lived in India for many years, with a modern approach, Ho Anh Thai imbued Dong with profound personal reflections on Buddhism and the Buddha. Therefore, the tangential romantic passages in Apocalypse Hotel contribute significantly to the narrative. From this perspective, Kawabata presents a traditional story reflecting Chieko's trauma when conflicting with the Japanese belief that twins are unfortunate, hindering each other's happiness. However, despite their differences, the characters all seek solace in the pagoda to resolve their issues; they do not pray to Buddha for blessings or peace but rather to find inner peace, regain balance, and independently fulfill

their duties. In depicting the characters' traumas, the author also describes the earthly nature of the temple space. For example, the nuns at Thanh Thien Sen Pagoda perform rituals to serve tea to visitors, turn on lights, and preach about the temple; Bao Son Pagoda is disturbed by Yen Thanh during the Ullambana Festival. The pagoda is merely a means; individuals must resolve personal traumas themselves, as the one who hits the bell must open the door. This is the karmic principle of Buddhism. Today, despite the trend in popular Buddhism to view pagodas as places to seek blessings and peace, disregarding the profound teachings of Buddhism for over a thousand years, this remains a deeply personal story within Buddhism.

The second layer - context - viewed from the perspective of textual structure, reveals the artistic world constructed by the author. Within the spiritually Buddhist narrative, serving as a form of trauma resolution, both Kawabata and Ho Anh Thai have interwoven numerous cultural and spiritual values of Japan and Vietnam. Consequently, Kyoto emerges as a translucent space, isolated from the external world; where life unfolds peacefully amidst folk festivals, ancient monasteries, and scenic forests. The traces of trauma seem faint in Kawabata's narrative, yet death remains ever-present: "Behind the kitchen hung fire prevention amulets, and above the shelf, there was a row of small statues of prosperous deities. There were up to seven statues; every year on the first day of the Ngo month, people would buy one statue from the Inari Shrine in Fuseni. If someone in the family passed away, they would contribute a statue from the beginning - one statue every year." (Kawabata, 1988, p.41). In Kawabata's novel, there is rarely an external enumeration of war trauma; Kawabata embodies the traditional Japanese soul, inwardly oriented. The Japanese seek to avoid past sorrows, to heal the wounds of war; inevitably, they must seek the essence. Kawabata's novel, therefore, carries the essence of discourse. It aims to answer the question of who we are, and what remains of us, beyond the traumas. Kyoto asserts that one cannot forget the past through the journey to find Chieko's twin sister. Retrieving the past bears the beauty of memories but with the trauma of the Japanese people, it becomes a pain. This is the dual value system of *Mono no aware* (the sadness of things). The characters all exhibit a spirit of quiet contemplation amidst the difficulties and transformations of Japan. In many passages of the novel, the characters remain silent, indicating a spiritual depth - *Wabi*. Through the contemplation of *wabi*, they embrace impermanence and loneliness, sensing the antiquity of the monastery, and the tranquility amidst the brutal changes of falling cherry blossoms; they perceive the beauty expressed outwardly, which is *Sabi*. Thus, Kawabata's scenic descriptions in Kyoto, though simple, contain Zen aesthetics, capable of healing trauma. "The brilliance of Western flowers is overwhelming, making one dizzy, a small grove of bamboo suits me better." (Kawabata, 1988, p.67). The narrative structure also interweaves various layers of traditional cultural aspects. Ho Anh Thai incorporates folk beliefs into the setting of a Buddhist pagoda during the Ullambana Festival in the seventh lunar month: "On the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month, she would assist the venerable monk in conducting rituals to honor the wandering souls without a place to rest. She would have to pour rice porridge into leaf- wrapped funnels and place these funnels throughout the temple garden. Each year, these wandering spirits would receive a satisfying meal on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month." (Ho Anh Thai, 2013, p.230). The novels of Ho Anh Thai exhibit a profound thematic resonance, elucidating the philosophical tenets and cultural heritage of both Buddhism and Vietnamese tradition – emphasizing karma and compassion, patriotism, and humanity. While distinct in their narratives, the structural

framework of the two novels bears striking similarities, particularly in the juxtaposition of opposing pairs such as past versus present, oblivion versus remembrance, and most notably, life versus death. Characters in *Kyoto* lament the bygone days amidst the modern-day negativity brought by Americans; they strive to preserve the noble traditions before they fade and recognize the harmony between life and death in nature. In *Apocalypse Hotel* ancient wars and their enduring curses must be eradicated for love and life to flourish. It is imperative to note that while both novels incorporate ceremonial passages associated with temples, the atmosphere in *Kyoto* and Kawabata's characters is serene amid the vivid Japanese festival ambiance<sup>2</sup>. Conversely, in the spiritually profound setting of *Apocalypse Hotel*, Ho Anh Thai constructs dynamic characters with psychological depth and environmental dynamism. This dynamism transcends the physical realm and resides in the spiritual domain, transitioning from desire to transcendence, defiance, and embracing the impermanence observed in the falling flowers and melting snow of the Japanese. Thus, in this comparison, themes of life and death, and resentment in Vietnamese novels are also transient, impermanent, necessitating, and already achieved resolution, transcending boundaries.

The third layer of narrative structure is narration – the techniques of storytelling, especially language construction. From the perspective of trauma theory, Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) observes: “And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet.” (p.3). This implies that with trauma, language expression also plays a role as a healing solution. According to Buddhist philosophy, language is merely a tool; one should not overly rely on it and forget the ultimate truth. However, in their imperfection, humans still need language to exist and develop; characters with trauma still need to experience it through language to confront and survive. Artistic language is highly selective, and the language of art expressing trauma is even more profound when its dual purpose is to express and connect. As Herman, Judith Lewis in *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992) comments – “Survivors are thus placed in the situation where they must choose between expressing their own point of view and remaining in connection with others.” (p.71). Matching the languages of art, it can be observed that Kawabata's exquisite style creates a different world, one that is delicately beautiful, albeit with hues of fading colors. It permeates slowly, evoking a sense of tranquility, detached from everyday life; a realm where people leisurely admire cherry blossoms, where they merge with nature as they did millennia ago; where despite the traumas, one can heal the soul through personal resilience and cultural heritage. In contrast, Ho Anh Thai's style is concise, vivid, and often imbued with modern philosophical passages. Many associations carry the color of artistic literature, creating a strong, intense aftertaste. Ho Anh Thai's artistic world is stark yet captivating, drawing individuals into its vortex; intense both in reenacting and resolving traumas while constantly interweaving surprises. The surprise element is what distinguishes Ho Anh Thai from Kawabata; the Vietnamese world is one where anything can happen, the world of deaths and the tolling bells of apocalypse. Unlike Kawabata's profoundness, Ho Anh Thai's storytelling is quite lively, often infused with humor: "Please come to the funeral in droves, and I will stop wondering about trivial matters outside of life, cease quarrels, cease internal office battles, stop pursuing status, stop thirsting for money. The thought flashed by, and I burst into a bitter laugh. Saying so, it turns out those in charge of

funeral ceremonies, those officials overseeing funeral rites in agencies, are the most enlightened, the most ascetic beings in this world." (Ho Anh Thai, 2013, p.38) and sarcastic: "They go to the pagoda to burn incense, listen to scriptures and prayers, make offerings to the pagoda, then ask for a little divine favor in return. They stroll around the pagoda garden, wherever they can stick their homeland, they do, and kneel to pray, hoping for wishes to come true, for reaping what they sow." (Ho Anh Thai, 2013, p.236). From a linguistic perspective, looking at literature through the lens of Buddhism, art emphasizes the private self. But with trauma, it investigates non-self, disregarding Japanese, or Vietnamese selves, seeking a way to alleviate suffering; hence, the depth of non-self is not embracing non-self or anything. Therefore, literature is not solely because of Kawabata that Ho Anh Thai cannot exist. The comparison does not discern superiority but recognizes the richness of the artistic world. Similarly, artists should not reject trauma entirely, not seeking absolute resolution of trauma but seeing it as a karmic connection. One cannot deny that it is through trauma that great works are born; through great works, humanity transcends trauma, etc. because of the art of telling stories. In this sense, the Buddha is also an expert storyteller.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In sum, this article employs a Buddhist criticism and three specialized methods: comparison, structure, and cultural history. It examines the representation of trauma, experience, and symbolism in three narrative levels: story, plot, and narration in the novels *Kyoto* by Yasunari Kawabata and *The Apocalypse Hotel* by Ho Anh Thai. These characteristics are also compared with the Buddhist concepts of suffering, impermanence, and no-self, as well as traces of Japanese-Vietnamese culture and the authors' creative innovations. The article argues that through the dynamic nature of experience and symbolic meaning-making, personal narratives in these two novels have the potential to heal trauma. Additionally, it demonstrates how the representation of Buddhist spirituality in literature has been transformed by national culture. Both authors avoid explicitly listing or illustrating the pain and experiences of their characters, instead using the narrative structure of literature and art as a form of trauma therapy.

In a particular limit, this article does not delve deeply into the Buddhist layers of meaning to extract more specific characteristics that could guide the process of criticizing and analyzing literary works. In the future, it may be possible to develop and apply the method of Buddhist criticism as a means of healing trauma in literature and art. As a cultural value, great thinkers and artists such as Kawabata and Ho Anh Thai have profoundly transformed Buddhism. This is a positive sign for exploring and healing the psychological traumas humans have, are, and will experience in life.

❖ ***Declaration of Interest: The authors confirm that there are no conflicts of interest.***

❖ This research is funded by Ho Chi Minh City University of Education Foundation for Science and Technology under grant number CS.2025.19.53

### References

- Amos Goldberg (2006). Trauma, Narrative and Two Forms of Death. *Literature and Medicine* 25, No. 1 (Spring 2006). pp.122-141.
- David Stahl. (2018) *Trauma, Dissociation and Re-enactment in Japanese Literature and Film*. New York: Routledge.

- E. A. Brett and R. Ostroff, Imagery in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: An Overview. *American Journal of Psychiatry* 142 (1985). pp. 417–24
- Herman, Judith Lewis. (1992). *Trauma and recovery (The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror)*. US: Basic Books
- Ho Anh Thai. (2013). *Coi nguoi rung chuong tan the [Apocalypse Hotel]*. HCMC: Youth Publisher
- Kawabata Yasunari. *Co do [Kyoto]*. Thai Van Hieu trans. (1988). Hai Phong: Hai Phong Publisher.
- Khuong Viet Ha. (2022). The dichotomy in the aesthetic world of Kawabata Yasunari from history and national consciousness. *Literary Research*, No. 04, pp.80-92.
- Anguttara Nikāya. Thich Minh Chau trans. (1996). Sai Gon: Van Hanh Buddhist Institute.
- Ekottara Āgama. Thich Thanh Tu trans. (1997). HCMC: Vietnam Institute of Buddhist Studies.
- Le Thi Huong. (2021). Inter-Symbol in Ho Anh Thai's Novels. *Journal of Social Sciences, Humanities and Education*. Volume 11, Number 1 (2021), pp. 172-178
- Mahāsi Sayadaw. *Explanation of Cakkappavattana*. Bhikkhu Dharma Phap Thong trans. Hanoi: Religion Publisher.
- Miller, Mara (2014). “A Matter of Life and Death”: Kawabata on the Value of Art after the Atomic Bombings. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72:3, Summer 2014; pp.261-275
- Miller, Mara (2015). Aesthetics as Investigation of Self, Subject, and Ethical Agency in Postwar Trauma in Kawabata's *The Sound of the Mountain*. *Philosophy and Literature* 39 (1A). pp.122-141.
- Nguyen Thanh Trung. (10/2015). Living in the perspective of the End of the World from a Buddhist perspective. *Vietherevada – Southern Buddhist Journal*. Hanoi: Hong Duc Publisher. pp.703-718
- Pham Thi My Hanh. (2019). Buddhist imprints in the novels *Apocalypse Hotel* and *Buddha, Savitri and Me* by Ho Anh Thai. Master's thesis in Literature. University of Pedagogy - University of Danang.
- Venerable Nārada Mahāthera. (1998). *The Buddha and His Teachings*. Taiwan: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation Taipei.

**Footer Note:**

<sup>1</sup> “The war, with its nationwide devastation and millions of deaths, left the author with a very long-lasting trauma.” [chien tranh voi su tan pha tren quy mo toan quoc voi hang trieu nguoi da chet lai khien chan thuong noi tac gia het suc lau dai]. (Khuong Viet Ha, 2022, p.90)

<sup>2</sup> “This procession will lend a distinctive grandeur to the ceremony with its elaborate costumes and youthful charm of the queen selected from among the vibrant college female students... Kyoto is renowned for its plethora of ancient Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. Almost every day, there is a festival celebrated at a temple, large or small.” (Kawabata, 1988, p.77).