

Nature and interbeing: an ecocritical-postcolonial reading of Thich Nhat Hanh's poetry

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research article is to explore nature and interbeing in the poetic works of Thich Nhat Hanh within the context of ecocritical-postcolonial theories.

Design/methodology/approach – This research article is designed to discuss two key dimensions: nature as a witness to war and colonization, and interbeing as ecology's resistance to colonial violence. The descriptive, close reading and analytical approaches are implemented in this research to signify nature and interbeing in the poetry of Thich Nhat Hanh.

Findings – It was found that Thich Hanh's work, by addressing the psychological and physical fragmentation caused by war, offered a pattern for understanding how colonialism organizes space and power to control and damage land and bodies. Likewise, by exploring interbeing as a kind of ecological resistance to colonial ferocity, it appeared that Hanh called upon readers to raise the value of interbeing as a mode of nonviolent resistance. Hanh's work was also set as a literary model for understanding peaceful struggle and responsibility in contexts shaped by war, suffering and environmental crisis.

Research limitations/implications – The limitation of this research article is to explore nature and interbeing in the poetic works of Thich Hanh within the context of ecocritical-postcolonial theories.

Practical implications – The practical implications of this research article aim to analyze and examine nature and interbeing through close reading of some of Hanh's poems in terms of both Ecocritical and Postcolonial theories.

Social implications – The social implications of this research article have been revealed through discussion and close reading of Hanh's poetry, which highlights the significance of nature in human history as a living presence and how to value and preserve it through different circumstances, while also guiding people how to peacefully defend their countries, and to be united and interconnected.

Originality/value – The material and subject matters represented in this research article are original. They are carried out in order to hopefully add value to the literary field by highlighting Hanh's practice of interbeing as a model of the ideal relationship between humans and non-humans in the natural world and a new pattern of peaceful resistance.

Keywords Ecocriticism, Interbeing, Nature, Post-colonialism, Poetry

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Thich Nhat Hanh's poetry emerges from the realities of war, exile, spirituality and deep ecological awareness. As a Vietnamese Buddhist monk (1926–2022) who lived through the ruins of colonialism and the Vietnam War, Hanh's poetic voice reflects not only personal suffering but also the collective trauma of a wounded land. His poetry consistently reshapes the boundaries between human life and the natural world. It presents nature as a living entity that participates in history, pain and conflict; and thus there is a close relationship between ecology



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and historical experiences in Hanh's poetry. This correlation offers critical approaches that move beyond purely aesthetic interpretation.

This article applies ecocriticism and postcolonial theories to examine how Hanh's poetry represents nature in relation to conflict, displacement and resistance. Ecocriticism allows for an exploration of how the environment is portrayed as an active subject rather than a passive background on one hand. Postcolonial theory, on the other hand, situates the poems within the historical context of colonial violence, exile and cultural hostility. Central to this analysis is the Buddhist concept of interbeing. This concept challenges colonial hierarchies and anthropocentric thinking by emphasizing the interconnectedness among humans, nature and history.

By reading Hanh's poetry through these combined theoretical perspectives, this article argues that his work presents nature firstly as a witness to colonial violence. Secondly, it uses ecological interdependence as a form of nonviolent resistance.

Review of literature

The intersection of religious philosophy, environmental ethics and postcolonial identity has become a fertile ground for contemporary humanities scholarship. Within this framework, the work of Thich Hanh occupies a distinctive position. While there are extensive studies about his theology of engaged Buddhism and his political activism during the Vietnam War, there remains a lack of literary analysis that specifically interrogates his poetry through a combined ecocritical and postcolonial context. This review of literature examines existing studies across two primary domains: the philosophical framework of interbeing and engaged Buddhism, and the junction between Buddhist thought and ecocriticism in postcolonial Vietnamese literature. By combining these fields, this review identifies a critical gap that the proposed article seeks to fill in, which is the examination of Hanh's poetry as a setting of ecological witnessing and postcolonial peaceful resistance.

Engaged Buddhism and the perception of interbeing

The concept of Interbeing is essential in any analysis of Hanh's work. Scholarly work by [King \(2005\)](#) establishes Interbeing not as a metaphysical concept but as an ethical imperative. [King \(2005\)](#) argues that Hanh's philosophy dissolves the subject-object dichotomy, speculating that the self is constituted by non-self-elements. This philosophical representation is crucial for ecocritical readings, as it prefigures the ecological understanding of interdependence. However, much of this scholarship focuses on Hanh's prose ([Hanh, 1996](#)). The poetic dimension of his work is often treated as didactic verse rather than complex literary text. While theologians have analyzed the recovering implications of Interbeing, few have explored how this philosophy is aesthetically rendered in his poetry to negotiate identity. The existing literature establishes the philosophy but has not fully examined the poetics of Interbeing as a tool for navigating displacement.

Buddhism and ecology

Another aspect of relevant literature concerns the relationship between Buddhism and environmentalism. The influential works of [Kaza and Kraft \(2000\)](#) and [Tucker and Williams \(1997\)](#) argue that Buddhist concepts of nonharming and dependent origination offer a vital framework for a deep understanding of ecology. [Kraft \(1992\)](#) suggests that Zen practice inherently cultivates an ecological sensibility by heightening awareness of the present moment and the material world. However, there is a critique within ecocriticism articulated by scholars like ([Harris, 2007](#)), who warns against romanticizing Eastern religions like Buddhism as inherently ecological and argues that without a political dimension, Buddhist ecology can become passive. This is where Hanh's engaged approach becomes vital. Recent studies by [Loy](#)

(2015) bridge this gap, suggesting that mindfulness must be coupled with social action to address the three poisons of greediness, antagonism and delusion, which are drivers of both ecological breakdown and colonial abuse. Nevertheless, these discussions still remain within the realm of ethics and philosophy. There is limited literary analysis examining how Hanh's imagery of nature functions as a resistance to the anthropocentrism inherent in colonial modernity.

Identification of the gap

The existing literature presents two distinct discussions: the first is theological and philosophical, focusing on interbeing and engaged Buddhism (King, 2005). The second is ecocritical which focuses on Buddhism and environmental ethics (Loy, 2015), and often lacks a postcolonial political edge. There is a significant gap in scholarship that integrates these two perspectives. In addition, there is no comprehensive study that reads Hanh's poetry as a hybrid text where ecological awareness serves as an instrument for postcolonial opposition. While ecocriticism has moved toward postcolonial ecocriticism (Huggan and Tiffin, 2015), applying this specifically to Buddhist poetry of exile remains unexplored. The current literature does not adequately address how the natural world in Hanh's poetry functions as an active agent of decolonization and not just as a setting. It also does not tackle nature in his verse as a space where the exile can reclaim agency outside the boundaries of the native land.

Therefore, this article seeks to intervene in the scholarly discussions of nature and interbeing. By using an ecocritical-postcolonial framework, it argues that Hanh's poetry offers a practice of nonviolent resistance that transcends geographic displacement. It builds upon the nature of being, interdependence and maintaining tradition groundworks laid by King (2005) and Hunt (2011). It also adopts the environmental ethics of Kaza and Kraft (2000) and Loy (2015) and moves further by placing the poetic text as the primary foundation in which nature, spirituality and political exile join together.

Nature as a witness to war and colonization

In Hanh's poetry, nature often functions as a silent witness to the destruction caused by war and colonial intervention. Rather than portraying landscapes as neutral scenery, his poems suggest that rivers, forests and villages captivate the memory of violence inflicted upon them. The land is marked by bombings, displacement and loss, reflecting the suffering of the people inhabiting it. Through this portrayal, environmental damage becomes inseparable from human pain (Woolbright, 2011), highlighting how colonial warfare extends its violence beyond human bodies to the natural world. An eco-critical reading reveals that nature is granted moral and historical significance (Runge, 2025), while a postcolonial perspective underscores how this damaged environment reflects the long-term consequences of imperial conflict (United Nations Environment Programme, 2019).

Hanh's poem "Please Call Me by My True Names" (Hanh, 2022, pp. 82–83) gives voice to refugees, bomb victims and violence, showing a land fractured by war and loss. Hanh does not name war directly in the opening section of the poem but the imagery gives deeper meaning when read against Vietnam's wartime reality: "Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow—even today I am still arriving" (Hanh, 2022, p. 82, lines 1–2). The speaker here challenges the idea of final departure. In a land wrecked by war, people are continuously forced to leave through evacuation, exile or death (Elsheikh and Ayazi, 2017). Nevertheless, the speaker insists on continuity and signifies that the people and spirit of the land are still present despite destruction. The word "arriving" resists the finality imposed by bombing and loss. The reader is asked to: "Look deeply: every second I am arriving" (Hanh, 2022, p. 82, line 3) and to see beyond surface ruin. War reduces land to craters and rubble, but Hanh urges for a deeper gaze that recognizes ongoing life beneath devastation. Therefore, he presents the land as living and changing, just as its people who are continuing to evolve despite pain and hardship.

In a bombed landscape, spring growth is unwarranted but meaningful: “to be a bud on a spring branch” (Hanh, 2022, p. 82, line 4). This sense of growing reflects civilians who are trying to rebuild ordinary life by planting, hoping and continuing despite the threat of violence. However, this attempt of renewal is fragile as symbolized by the word “bud” and “to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings/learning to sing in my new nest” (Hanh, 2022, p. 82, lines 5–6). This image, which strongly evokes the sense of displacement as the “new nest,” suggests the forced relocation of refugees who are rebuilding homes after villages are destroyed (Harild *et al.*, 2015). The “fragile wings” also mirror traumatized survivors and especially children who learn how to live again in unstable environments. Readers are requested to imagine how: “to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower” (Hanh, 2022, p. 82, line 7) as the caterpillar hidden inside the flower suggests life that exists within vulnerability. Flowers which are easily destroyed by bombs or fire become symbols of villages and farmland; and the caterpillar represents people living quietly inside threatened spaces and who survive within beauty that may not last (Kinzy, n.d.).

Beneath the hardened surface of a war-torn land lies human dignity, memory and cultural richness: “to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone” (Hanh, 2022, p. 82, line 8). The word “stone” may also echo debris, ruins or hardened trauma within which human worth still exists. This line indicates that there are buried values and unseen sufferings in such a land and that is why Hanh insists on highlighting the full emotional life of people in war zones: “I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry” (Hanh, 2022, p. 82, line 9). Those people are not only victims as they continue to feel joy and grief and their land too holds both beauty and sorrow by having rice fields alongside graves. This combination reflects the psychological reality of living under bombardment: “to fear and to hope” (Hanh, 2022, p. 82, line 10). This line also captures the emotional landscape of civilians whose lives fluctuate between anxiety for survival and hope for peace (Peck, 2025).

The speaker’s heartbeat becomes something common, aligning personal life with collective suffering: “the rhythm of my heart is the birth and death/of all that are alive” (Hanh, 2022, p. 82, lines 11–12). In times of war, birth and death are intensified and accelerated as the land itself becomes a witness to repeated cycles of human loss followed by renewed beginnings of life. Hanh employs natural and transformational imagery to convey impermanence and continuity: “I am a mayfly metamorphosing/on the surface of the river” (Hanh, 2022, p. 82, lines 13–14). The mayfly is a powerful symbol of brevity and ephemerality, as it lives for only a very short time. It also evokes the fleeting nature of life and echoes lives which are cut short by war. The act of metamorphosing suggests change, rebirth and transformation; and emphasizes life as a continuing process rather than a fixed state. In Vietnam, while rivers functioned as routes for transportation, refuge and warfare, life shortly emerges from such waters which are marked by suffering (Vietnam News, 2025).

During war, even though there is always loss, survival often means benefiting from other’s loss: “and I am the bird/that swoops down to swallow the mayfly” (Hanh, 2022, p. 82, lines 15–16). The speaker is expressing his participation in the cycle of life and death as this metaphor introduces the painful truth that life feeds on life. Hanh here does not moralize war but he shows how violence traps everything including people, land and even history and the necessity of accepting both creation and destruction within existence. He assures that there are moments of peace that still exist despite devastation: “I am a frog swimming happily/in the clear water of a pond” (Hanh, 2022, p. 82, lines 17–18). This image restores calmness and innocence and represents “clear water” contrasting with polluted and bombed environments, emphasizing the idea that land itself retains a sense of peace even when that peace is temporarily felt (Fiala, 2016). Therefore, nature here is a witness to life in both its original and disturbed state.

Innocent lives in the context of war are consumed by forces beyond their control such as armies, colonizers or mercenaries: “and I am the grass-snake/that silently feeds itself on the frog” (Hanh, 2022, p. 82, lines 19–20). The snake symbolizes death and violence within nature, showing that destruction is a natural part of life. As the pond remains a silent observer, land and water witness both the temporary joy of the frog swimming in the clear pond and its

suffering of being preyed upon. This also shows nature as recording human and ecological violence (Knittel, 2023).

Human suffering and famine are the regular consequences of war, colonization or political exploitation: “I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones/my legs as thin as bamboo sticks” (Hanh, 2022, p. 82, lines 21–22). This glaring visual imagery emphasizes nature, which is here the land of Uganda, as a silent witness to the starvation and destruction brought upon the innocent people. The comparison of the child’s skeletal figure to bamboo evokes fragility and resilience at one and the same time; and thus linking human vulnerability to the vulnerability of ecosystems under conflict (Rafiee and Karimi, 2025). There are always external forces fueling violence: “And I am the arms merchant/selling deadly weapons to Uganda” (Hanh, 2022, p. 82, lines 23–24). The arms merchant represents colonial powers, foreign intervention and the commerce of death.

Nature witnesses immense suffering: “I am the twelve-year-old girl/refugee on a small boat/who throws herself into the ocean/after being raped by a sea pirate” (Hanh, 2022, p. 82, lines 25–28). The ocean here symbolizes the vastly enduring distress of the people and thus nature holds memory of the seas which see refugees fleeing violence, bodies cast into its depths and histories of colonization that forced migration. This image links human tragedy to natural landscapes as being silent spectators of atrocities (Orjuela, 2020). This also means that acts of cruelty occur within the natural world which witnesses both evil and ignorance: “And I am the pirate/my heart not yet capable/of seeing and loving” (Hanh, 2022, p. 82, lines 29–31). The pirate represents perpetrators of violence and thus matches predators in nature, emphasizing Hanh’s concept of interbeing. It is the same reality encompassing both victim and perpetrator, where nature’s witness of hardened heart and moral blindness stresses the continuity of life beyond even moral binaries (Wolfendale, 2005).

Violence is not individually practiced, but it is also institutional: “I am a member of the politburo/with plenty of power in my hands” (Hanh, 2022, p. 82, lines 32–33). This shows how humans exercise control over others while at the same time other elements of nature such as rivers, mountains and land are silent witnesses to the policies and wars orchestrated by powerful humans: “And I am the man who has to pay/his ‘debt of blood’ to my people/dying slowly in a forced-labor camp” (Hanh, 2022, p. 83, lines 34–36). This imagery evokes oppression, revenge and systemic physical and moral cruelty. The enduring landscape contrasts with human fragility, highlighting its role as a silent recorder of pain and endurance (Macpherson, 2007). Therefore, nature, in the context of colonization or authoritarian rule, records the consequences of political decisions on human and ecological life.

Yet again, even among acts of war and colonization, nature witnesses the resilience of life and the capacity for regeneration: “My joy is like spring so warm/it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth” (Hanh, 2022, p. 83, lines 37–38). The natural blooming of flowers symbolizes hope, continuity and the recurrent restoration that mirrors human recovery after suffering. Human suffering is also explicitly linked to nature by presenting rivers and oceans as repositories of collective sorrow: “My pain is like a river of tears/so vast it fills the four oceans” (Hanh, 2022, p. 83, lines 39–40). Similarly, the speaker integrates all aspects of existence such as oppression, violence, joy and renewal by invoking his true names: “Please call me by my true names/so I can wake up/and the door of my heart/could be left open/the door of compassion” (Hanh, 2022, p. 83, lines 41–45). Nature here is portrayed as mediator and witness in this process, holding the full spectrum of human experience within its continuity (Richardson, 2024). The rivers, ponds and oceans symbolically bear these “names” and experiences, while exemplifying memory and interconnection.

The final plea of the speaker: “Please call me by my true names/so I can wake up” (Hanh, 2022, p.83, lines 41-42) signals awakening to interbeing, recognizing that humans and nature are attached. The awareness of this interconnected suffering and joy mirrors nature’s silent witnessing of human history: “and the door of my heart/could be left open/the door of compassion” (Hanh, 2022, p. 83, lines 43–45) and continues to urge recognition and ethical

responsibility. While natural landscapes carry the memory of human atrocities, they also witness grief and endurance across time and space (Griffiths, 2021).

Therefore, Hanh, through his natural imagery in this poem, presents the land not merely as a battlefield but as a living body that observes aggression, absorbs trauma and continues to breathe. Violence, displacement and loss are presented implicitly, shaping a world where survival is not guaranteed but interconnected with nature. The poet does not reduce the land or its people to victims; instead, he portrays endurance, memory and moral complexity deeply rooted in the wounded earth itself. Nature witnesses and silently absorbs the consequences of human greed and war. The juxtaposition highlights the interconnectedness of oppressor and oppressed within the natural world (Kesikkulak, 2022).

Additionally, Hanh's poem "Structure of Suchness" (Hanh, 2022) is also a kind of critical intervention in the discourse surrounding the Vietnam War, offering a combination of Buddhist perception, ecological integrity and anti-colonial opposition. The poem challenges the rationality of war and defies the destructive logics of imperialism. Nature is framed not as a passive background but as an active eyewitness and participant in the ordeal of colonization (Olivadese, 2025).

The poem starts with an imperative to create an ethical boundary between the human and the non-human: "Do not scold the little birds/we need their songs" (Hanh, 2022, p. 28, lines 1–2). In a war zone, the mechanized noise of artillery and aircraft dominates the landscape. To "scold" the birds is to impose human and martial order upon the natural world. In an anthropocentric framework, birds are often dismissed as noise or pests but Hanh considers them as meaningful essential contributors to the ecosystem. Birds are needed for "their songs" which represent cultural and natural continuity that war seeks to mute. This aligns with the ecocritical concept of voice granting agency to the non-human (Freeman *et al.*, 2011) where the birds here are not objects of observation but subjects of communication.

In the context of the Vietnam War, bodies were reduced to figures of body counts or collateral damage and that is why Nhat Hanh commands a reclamation of the body: "Do not hate your own body/It is the altar for humanity's spirit" (Hanh, 2022, p.28, lines 3–4). To hate one's body is to accept the colonizer's attempts of devaluing the native's life (Blackwell, 2023). Fanon (1961/2004) describes how colonization creates a zone of non-being for the native, often inducing self-alienation and "self-hatred" (p.305). By calling it an "altar", Hanh restores dignity and sanctity to the Vietnamese body by equating it with a sacred space. He marks the physical form, where the spiritual and material come together, as a site of resistance rather than a site of victimhood.

As the relation between man and the universe is corresponding "The parallel quest through macrocosm and microcosm has been shown to be an interrelated experience" (Jones, 1970, p. vi), the microcosm of the individual, according to Hanh, contains the macrocosm of the ecology: "Your eyes contain the trichiliocosm/and your ears have sovereignty over the birds" (Hanh, 2022, p. 28, lines 5–6). The word "trichiliocosm" is a Buddhist term for a vast universe of three thousand worlds located within the eyes. The "sovereignty" of the ears does not imply domination over the birds, but rather the capability of holding them within one's mindfulness. It is an authority of reaction and reception. In a colonized country, sovereignty is often stripped away, but Hanh transfers it to the senses of the individual. The ears maintain autonomy even if the land is occupied. This internal sovereignty is a form of psychological decolonization, stating that "The 'native' has but one choice: servitude or sovereignty" (Fanon, 2004, p. 47). This sense of independence asserts that the imperial power cannot control how the subject perceives or values the world.

The blending of the natural phenomena of springs, tide and the cultural artifacts of composers such as Beethoven, Bach and Chopin along with the intimate human sounds of the baby's cries reflects an environmentally "inclusive practice of eco-logical musicking" (Thorpe, 2019, p. 6) where culture is not separate from nature: "the springs, the rising tide/ Beethoven, Bach, Chopin/the cries of the baby/and the song that lulls her to sleep" (Hanh, 2022, p. 28, lines 7–10). The "rising tide" suggests the powerful forces of the natural world that

mirror human emotion. The inclusion of Western composers together with the “cries of the baby” is substantial. It resists the native’s rejection of the colonizer’s culture and proposes a hybridity through which Western art is absorbed and contextualized within the reality of Vietnamese survival. However, the “cries of the baby” ground the existence of the high art of the West in the instinctive reality of war. It proposes that the value of a lullaby is greater than the symphonies of the colonizer’s standard.

The interbeing of human and plant life is reinforced by a biomimicry which “studies nature’s models and then imitates or takes inspiration from these designs” (Benyus, 1997, p. 7). In this biomimicry, there is a metaphor which equates human limbs with flora: “Your hands are flowers of love/that need not be picked by anyone” (Hanh, 2022, p. 28, lines 11–12). The hands are referred to as autonomous expressions of love. The Hands which are typically tools of labor or violence are reimagined as blossoms which are elements of beauty and life. The phrase “need not be picked” is a compelling anti-colonial statement where occupation is an act of picking or extracting resources, labor and land. Soldiers seem to be “picked” for mobilization and resources are also “picked” for war machine. It is a declaration of the native’s cleverness to keep the body intact, integrated and decolonized territory as “the colonized acquire a peculiar visceral intelligence dedicated to the survival of body and spirit” (Fanon, 2004, p. 9). Nhat Hanh here asserts bodily sovereignty against the logic of imperialism.

The forehead, which is the center of thought and consciousness (Cleveland Clinic, 2022), is likened to the daybreak: “and your forehead/is the most beautiful morning of all mornings” (Hanh, 2022, p. 28, lines 13–14). This simile links human body and consciousness to the cyclical renewal of the earth. As war brings darkness, curfew and night raids, the forehead is claimed as a morning promising of a future beyond the conflict. This is the true nature of reality and the inherent balance of the ecosystem that must not be terminated: “Do not destroy the structure of suchness within you” (Hanh, 2022, p. 28, line 15) because destroying it violates the natural law (Kowalska, 2023). The imagery here is a description of an aesthetic resistance, finding beauty in the self when the external landscape is disfigured by bombing and violence. It confirms the belief that the peaceful, “dreaming, imagining” (Fanon, 2004, p. 21), inner life of the colonized subject is superior to the harsh external forces of the occupier. Hanh warns that if the colonized people internalize hatred, division and war, their true nature or structure of suchness will be destroyed, which instead must be preserved.

Nature is personified as a nonsilent witness advocating for ecological balance and peace (Simangan *et al.*, 2022). The poet in this metaphor attributes speech and political stance to non-human entities: “The corn, the grass, and the fragrance of the night/have all spoken out for peace” (Hanh, 2022, p. 28, lines 16–17). The poet’s ecocritical move grants the landscape agency and aligns it with anti-war resistance in the sense that the land rejects war, becoming a witness against it rather than a neutral battlefield. However, acknowledging the vulnerability of life and the possibility of death is not a sign of defeat (Springhart, 2017), but a realistic confrontation with the violence of occupation: “I know a bullet may strike/the heart of the little bird this morning/the bird that is celebrating life with all its might” (Hanh, 2022, p. 28, lines 18–20). The word “bullet” embodies the incursion of industrial means of death into the organic cycle of life. It is the ultimate symbol of colonial power and the ability to extinguish life at a distance. The “little bird” refers to the vulnerable civilian population. The contrast between the bullet and the “celebrating” bird highlights the absurdity of violence against natural life.

However, the speaker reflects the resilience of the Vietnamese people against the threat of death and creates a collective subject that includes humans, plants and cosmic bodies for mutual preservation: “The corn, the grass, the fragrance of the night/together with the stars and the moon—all of us are doing our best” (Hanh, 2022, p. 28, lines 21–23). The “stars and moon” which witness the war from a cosmic perspective create what seems like a celestial coalition against the war initiated by the colonizer. This suggests that anti-colonial struggle is aligned with the fundamental forces of the universe. “Doing our best” indicates sharing the process of survival.

The poem ends with the notion that human survival is dependent on ecological support (Fedele *et al.*, 2021): “We are doing everything we can/to keep you alive” (Hanh, 2022, p. 28, lines 24–25). The pronoun “we”, which includes the elements of nature, acts to save the human highlighted by the pronoun “you”. The final two lines reverse the traditional agent model in which humans are usually tasked with saving nature. It is a message of profound solidarity, implying that nature itself protects its people from the erasure attempts by the colonizer (Pettersson, 2023). The speaker aligned with nature declares to the addressee or the colonized people that they are not alone. Those people may be soldiers, civilians or even diverged human souls. Therefore, Hanh submits that survival is a collaborative act between the body, the spirit and nature, assuring that the human body and the natural environment are constitutive foundations of sovereignty (Walewicz, 2023). He reframes sovereignty, which emerges through interdependence rather than isolation.

Interbeing: ecology as resistance to colonial violence

The concept of interbeing plays a crucial role in Hanh’s poetic response to colonial violence. According to Hanh, it is “a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix ‘inter-’ with the verb ‘to be’, we have a new verb: inter-be” (Hanh, 2017, p. 21). It is a philosophy coined by Hanh “which he employs to explain the interconnectedness of all things in the universe” (Koizumi, 2012). His poetry rejects rigid binaries such as human versus nature or oppressor versus victim, which are often reinforced by colonial ideologies. Instead, he presents all forms of life as interconnected and mutually dependent. This worldview functions as smart and powerful form of resistance. Instead of confronting violence with further aggression, Hanh’s poems emphasize compassion, awareness and shared existence. From a postcolonial standpoint, interbeing challenges systems of domination by refusing hierarchy, while ecocriticism highlights how ecological harmony becomes an ethical alternative to exploitation and control.

Hanh’s poem “Walking Meditation” (Hanh, 2022, p. 208) forms a critique of colonial violence not as a historical system of domination, but as a mode of being which is usually characterized by separation, extraction and dehumanization (Fanon, 2004, p. 49). It is frequently categorized as an instructional text for mindfulness practice, which is defined as “a heightened state of involvement and wakefulness or being in the present” (Langer and Moldoveanu, 2000, p. 2). However, when situated within the historical context of the Vietnam War and the broader course of Western imperialism, the poem emerges as a profound political and ecological statement. The poem’s text is examined through the framework of Interbeing, which is Hanh’s philosophical expression used as a form of resistance to colonial violence.

The opening imperative of the poem establishes a collective subjectivity (Katsambekis, 2014) that counters the isolation often enforced by the colonizers: “Take my hand/we will walk/we will only walk” (Hanh, 2022, p. 208, lines 1–3). The physical act of holding hands signifies solidarity and mutual aid among the colonized people who are frequently alienated from their community through displacement or labor abuse. The repetition of “we will walk” serves as a rhythmic grounding for asserting presence. The focused adverb “only” is used to deny any action of instrumental utility in a colonized land as movement is usually justified only by production or arrival. To walk “only” for the sake of walking is a kind of refusal of the productivity command, reclaiming time and energy for being rather than doing (De Medeiros, 2025).

Colonialism is essentially driven by achieving goals or military victory, treating the land as a resource to be extracted. Nhat Hanh disrupts the colonial temporality of urgency by rejecting the thought of land as a path to a destination: “We will enjoy our walk/without thinking of arriving anywhere” (Hanh, 2022, p. 208, lines 4–5). For him, the landscape is the destination itself and this shifts the value of it from a means-to-an-end to an essential good setting. It is a direct critique of resolute violence and an act of resistance against the colonization of space by “walking slowly” (Reynolds, 2020, p. 353). During the Vietnam War, the “walk” of soldiers

was a March of violence, and the “walk” of refugees was an escape from terror. Nhat Hanh redefines the meaning of movement by describing it as: “Walk peacefully/Walk happily/our walk is a peace walk/our walk is a happiness walk” (Hanh, 2022, p. 208, lines 6–9). “Peace walk” metaphorically takes out the military connotation of marching and aligns with postcolonial efforts to reclaim language from the colonizer. In addition, linking “peace” and “happiness” directly to the physical act of walking hints at these political concepts. Peace is not just a treaty signed, but it is a physiological state enacted upon the land and the internal state of the inhabitants. A peaceful walker, therefore, creates a peaceful landscape.

However, peace in colonial ideology is often viewed as a post-conflict state to be achieved through violence, i.e. war to end all wars (Wells, 1914): “Then we learn/that there is no peace walk” (Hanh, 2022, p. 208, lines 10–11). Hanh maintains that the means are the ends in the sense that if the walk is not peaceful, the destination cannot be peace: “that peace is the walk/that there is no happiness walk/that happiness is the walk” (Hanh, 2022, p. 208, lines 12–14). This is a critique of revolutionary violence that seeks to reproduce the structures it opposes and a deconstruction of dualism, central to the concept of Interbeing, implying that one cannot achieve environmental sustainability through exploitative methods (Green, 2025). This ecological shift resists the colonial fragmentation of life into distinct spheres of labor, war and leisure.

The balance between individual agency and collective responsibility (Khoury, 2017) is conveyed: “We walk for ourselves/we walk for everyone/always hand in hand” (Hanh, 2022, p. 208, lines 15–17). The self-care of the colonized subject is contextualized within the collective “for everyone.” The ecological web of Interbeing is reinforced by the phrase “hand in hand” emphasizing that no individual exists in isolation and rejecting the Western liberal notion of solitary individual. Walking for everyone may also extend beyond the human to include walking for the ecosystem that sustains the self (Montague, 2018). This is a kind of interconnection between man and nature highlighted in ecological regeneration and healing: “Walk and touch peace every moment/Walk and touch happiness every moment” (Hanh, 2022, p. 208, lines 18–19). To “touch peace” suggests that peace is personified like a perceptible substance available in the direct surroundings and not a distant political abstraction. This implies that the earth itself holds the capacity for giving happiness and healing through mindful presence.

The transformative power of mindful presence, which is consciously living the present moment (Stiles, 2023), is employed in the following two lines to illustrate that practical truth that “Each step brings a fresh breeze/each step makes a flower bloom under our feet” (Hanh, 2022, p. 208, lines 20–21). In the context of the Vietnam War, while the colonizer usually strips the land of life, the image of a flower blooming under the citizens’ feet is a powerful counternarrative; assuring that their footsteps are not instruments of destruction but means of regeneration. This also affirms the mutual relationship between the walker and the land and reflects an act of resistance in which walking heals the wounds of war.

Land, for the colonizer, is an object to be owned, mapped and divided, but for Hanh it is a beloved subject worthy of affection: “Kiss the Earth with your feet/Print on Earth your love and happiness” (Hanh, 2022, p. 208, lines 22–23). The imperative here consecrates the soil and restores indigenous relationships to the land based on devotion rather than ownership. The instruction to “print on Earth your love” is a radical decolonial gesture (Mignolo, 2014). As colonizers are used to leave marks of conquest such as monuments, borders and scars, Hanh suggests imprinting the land with a counter-mark of “love and happiness”. This of course will transform the footprint from a sign of occupation into a sign of spiritual resistance and physical unity.

The poem ends with a conditional promise: “Earth will be safe/when we feel in us enough safety” (Hanh, 2022, p. 208, lines 24–25). The safety of the Earth is not only guaranteed by armed forces or political borders, but by the quality and consciousness of human value and presence. Safety is therefore framed as relational balance between man and earth (Toivonen, 2024). The interbeing here asserts that violence toward the Earth, when it happens, mirrors

violence within the human inner self. It acknowledges how the colonial consequences of fear, scarcity and dispossession drive both social and ecological destruction. Thus, the poem concludes with a profound claim that decolonizing the Earth requires decolonizing the self from fear and distress, empowering it with resistance, love and happiness.

Another poem by Thich Hanh is entitled “Recommendation” (Hanh, 2022, p. 26), written during the Vietnam War which is absolutely a war of imperial violence, can be read as spiritual teachings assuring the Interbeing of people during a period of historical catastrophe. The poet gives some recommendations to his people in order to be interconnected and peacefully resist imperialism: “Promise me/promise me this day/promise me now” (Hanh, 2022, p. 26, lines 1–3). He repeatedly and ethically calls upon them to promise him “now” and not later or after victory as awakening can only occur now as a kind of inter-being between them. His choice of the word “now” resists modern colonialism that sacrifices the existent ecosystems or “green sacrifice zone” (Brandajs, 2025, p. 2) for future gain. This oath between them is framed by nature: “while the sun is overhead/exactly at the zenith” (Hanh, 2022, p. 26, lines 4–5). The sun at the top symbolizes clarity without shadows or distortion and places morality within ecology as the cosmic order of the sun and the earth is the background scenery of human ethics. The “zenith” here suggests plain consciousness, resistance and awareness of the decolonized people (Neimneh, 2017) who are distinct from the colonized subjects who often live in the concealed past.

The repetition of “promise me” creates urgency, resistance and determination for enduring the overwhelming violence: “promise me/even as they/strike you down/with a mountain of hatred and violence” (Hanh, 2022, p. 26, lines 6–9). Mountains are natural forms, but they are appropriately used here to describe the imperial brutality (Menger, 2022) and how the colonized body is aggressively struck: “even as they step on you and crush you/like a worm” (Hanh, 2022, p. 26, lines 10–11). The simile here evokes dehumanization, which is always an essential mechanism of colonial rule. Calling someone a “worm” is ironic as worms are ecologically vital to soil regeneration, but the insult here reveals anthropocentric hierarchy. Interbeing destabilizes this hierarchy in the sense that if human beings have inborn connection with soil, then to be “like a worm” is not degradation but ecological continuity.

The language becomes intuitive: “even as they dismember and disembowel you” (Hanh, 2022, p. 26, line 12), assuring that colonial warfare fragments bodies just as colonial mapping fragments land. The splitting off here parallels ecological destruction of deforestation. However, fragmentation is just an illusion with interbeing where relational being cannot be separated even though the body is torn. There is another repetition which points to determination and firmness: “remember brother, remember/man is not our enemy” (Hanh, 2022, p. 26, lines 13–14). This is the radical center of the poem as the “enemy” is not the human being but ignorance, greed and fear. Adopting this perception is a kind of resistance to the binary logic of the colonizer versus the colonized (Memmi, 1957/2021). This also does not excuse violence but relocates its rooted source in consciousness and structure.

The poet likewise calls for thoughtfulness: “The only thing worthy of you is compassion—/invincible, limitless, unconditional” (Hanh, 2022, p. 26, lines 15–16). Compassion becomes resistance (Nisar, 2025), which is “invincible” and unbeatable because it cannot be designated by dominance. It is not a passive submission but a refusal to internalize hatred, which is a psychological victory colonial powers often seek. This boundless compassion extends ecologically beyond humans to include all beings. Hatred for Thich Hanh conceals clarity and transparency as: “Hatred will never let you face/the beast in man” (Hanh, 2022, p. 26, lines 17–18). Where colonial discourse often animalizes the colonized, Hanh here reverses this by requesting to face the violence within humanity itself. The “beast” does not refer to the animalism of man but to the unexamined condition of violence which also denotes the projection of brutality onto nature (Pham, 2025).

Furthermore, the poet believes that transformation is definitely going to happen and it might not be collaborative but solitary and interdependently: “One day, when you face this beast alone” (Hanh, 2022, p. 26, line 19). The beast also may refer to the colonial thought and

the necessity of standing against “global hegemonic thought and before dominant elites of the region as a subaltern space, which can be exploited, levelled and reconfigured according to the necessities of the prevailing regimes of accumulation” (Alimonda, 2019, p. 103). The beast, which is a manifestation of historical rupture and relational disconnection, will be faced without help from others as “alone” initially suggests isolation. However, there is no true solitude with Interbeing as the individual encounter is always rooted in a web of ancestral, ecological and structural relations (Cultural Ecology, 2010).

From decolonial and ecological standpoint, the poet establishes the necessity of conscious and persistent presence before systemic harm of colonial violence: “with your courage intact, your eyes kind” (Hanh, 2022, p. 26, line 20). Courage here is reconfigured away from martial or retaliatory reaction and directed toward the Buddhist perfection of energy. The adjective “intact” signals unbroken resilience against the fracturing effects of colonial ordeal. The phrase “eyes kind” invokes compassion against the colonial gaze which objectifies land and dehumanizes people. These compassionate eyes refuse instrumental perception and recognize instead the intrinsic value and relational agency of all beings (Lan *et al.*, 2022). In ecological resistance, this is a shift from domination to kinship, moving human relations with the world from control and exploitation toward connection, respect and interdependence (Topa and Narvaez, 2022). This can be considered as self-control during crisis.

Also, this sense of self-discipline is not passivity but a well-ordered refusal to absorb the destabilizing effects of systemic violence by allowing them to settle into the depths of one’s emotional and cognitive being: “untroubled/(even as no one sees them)” (Hanh, 2022, p. 26, lines 21–22). The native’s worth does not increase by external acknowledgment but through the unseen quality of mindful action like most natural ecological processes of root growth and soil formation, which regularly happen unseen. Resistance here is interior revolution or what is called decolonization of perception (Wa Thiong’o, 1986). This quiet courage of confronting colonization resists the show-off logic of colonial modernity, which values spectacle, public victory and heroic narratives.

Decolonial confrontation is often intrinsic and interpersonal. Interbeing shows that suffering and peace coexist as the untroubled mind acknowledges rupture without being consumed by it (Zakaria, 2024). This mirrors indigenous and Buddhist views of cyclical ecological disturbance and regeneration, where ecosystems endure fire, floods and exploitation, then recover resilience through adaptive balance: “out of your smile/will bloom a flower” (Hanh, 2022, p. 26, lines 23–24). The “flower” that blooms is a metaphor for generative emergence. It also embodies practice of Interbeing as it physically manifests nonseparation, reconciliation and nonviolent presence. Resistance is thus reconceived as cultivation through which there is a continuous practice of making space for life to regenerate itself.

Additionally, Hanh argues that violence is not final as peace most effectively leads to revival and prosperity. The blossoming flower, which is a Buddhist image, symbolizes ecological regeneration and new worlds emerging from ruin: “And those who love you/will behold you/across ten thousand worlds of birth and dying” (Hanh, 2022, p. 26, lines 25–27). While colonialism usually constricts identity, resistance expands it cosmically as life and death are cyclical, not absolute endings and this comprehension resists colonial narratives of erasure. The phrase “Ten thousand worlds” points to infinite cosmology and interbeing across time and space.

Besides, the speaker’s humility resists triumphalism: “Alone again/I will go on with bent head” (Hanh, 2022, p. 26, lines 28–29) and his “bent head” may signal grief, reverence or continuation despite loss. It also accepts suffering without surrendering to hatred: “knowing that love has become eternal” (Hanh, 2022, p. 26, line 30). Therefore, love here becomes a historical force and the sense of Interbeing transforms love from a sentiment into an everlasting truth that connects all forms of life. The poem closes with a return to the cosmic eventual imagery: “On the long, rough road/the sun and moon/will continue to shine” (Hanh, 2022, p. 26, lines 31–33), declaring that human violence does not halt

ecological cycles. As “the sun and moon” outlast empires and ecological resistance depends on enduring love for land and life, the poem becomes an act of quiet, luminous and profound resistance.

Conclusion

Written during a period of intense geopolitical conflict, Hanh’s poetry functions as engaged Buddhism where spiritual practice is inseparable from social action and attentive response to suffering. It addresses the psychological and physical fragmentation caused by war and exposes through an ecocritical-postcolonial perspectives how colonialism organizes space and power to control and damage land and bodies. This article has presented two linked dimensions: nature as a witness to war and colonization, and interbeing as ecology’s resistance to colonial violence. Initially, the natural world of land, rivers, plants, trees and birds is not a decorative imagery but a dynamic historical agent carrying memory, serving as witness to violence and sustaining survival. Nature is, therefore, repositioned as a political and ecological agent rather than passive scenery, revealing that colonial violence disrupts not only human societies but the fundamental ecological order itself.

Secondly, ecology becomes a form of resistance through the interbeing between humans and non-humans. Compassion, awareness and ethical responsibility are offered as alternatives to domination and safety and peace are redefined as ecological integrity in which Earth and humanity are mutually dependent. Interbeing, in this framework, is not a nostalgic return to a pre-colonial past but a present-focused practice of mindful coexistence and care for living beings. It has become both psychological and ecological process enacted through awareness of interconnectedness in a fractured world. Therefore, an ecocritical and postcolonial reading of Hanh’s poetry has revealed that nature, history and spirituality are deeply bound together, and resistance is a compassionate awareness and interbeing with nature.

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