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A comparative analysis of the conceptual metaphor "war is a wild beast" in the literary works of Wayne Karlin and Chu Lai

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Abstract: This study investigates the conceptual metaphor "war is a wild beast" as articulated in Wayne Karlin's Wandering Souls and Chu Lai's Red Rain (Mưa Đỏ), with the aim of exploring how metaphor functions as both a cognitive framework and a semiotic mechanism for representing war trauma. Employing a qualitative, interpretive-comparative methodology, the research draws on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, embodied cognition, and semiotic analysis to examine five metaphorical projections—predation, screaming, survival, irreparable wounding, and moral blindness—through which war is cast as an instinctual, amoral, and biologically driven phenomenon. The comparative analysis reveals both convergence and divergence: while Karlin and Chu Lai similarly depict war as a dehumanizing force that reshapes memory, perception, and subjectivity, their metaphorical realizations differ in cultural expression, narrative stance, and figurative intensity. The findings affirm that metaphors are not merely stylistic embellishments, but serve as fundamental cognitive and semiotic structures through which war is conceptualized, narrated, and emotionally processed. This study concludes that metaphor is a powerful interpretive tool for accessing the affective and ethical dimensions of wartime experience. In practical terms, the research provides pedagogical insights for teaching war literature in cross-cultural contexts and highlights the broader applicability of metaphor analysis in fostering empathy, deepening understanding of historical trauma, and enriching interdisciplinary approaches to literary interpretation.

Keywords: *Beast, Chu Lai, Cognition, Metaphor, Semiotics, Trauma, Wayne Karlin.*

1. Introduction

War, as both a historical event and an existential condition, has long tested the boundaries of literary representation. As Scarry [1] argues, the extremity of pain inherent in war disrupts language itself, rendering the direct expression of trauma nearly impossible [1]. Within this crisis of articulation, metaphor emerges not merely as rhetorical ornamentation but as a cognitive and semiotic necessity. Drawing on the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory [2] metaphors shape human understanding by mapping familiar source domains onto abstract, often ineffable experiences. In this light, war is not simply described through metaphor—it is known, felt, and remembered through metaphor.

In postwar literature, metaphor becomes a privileged mode of rendering experiences that resist linear narration or factual recounting. Particularly in literatures shaped by colonial entanglements and ideological rupture, metaphor enables writers to reframe national trauma within symbolically charged and culturally resonant systems. In the Vietnamese context—where war memory intersects with collectivist ideology, ancestral reverence, and the valorization of bodily sacrifice—metaphor does not merely represent trauma; it mediates between personal suffering and collective identity.

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This study examines the metaphor *war is a wild beast* as it unfolds in Karlin [3] and Chu Lai [4] two literary works that explore the aftershocks of the American War in Vietnam from distinct cultural and ideological vantage points. The metaphor casts war as a primal, instinct-driven force that eludes rational containment and corrodes moral discernment. Both authors deploy this imagery to convey how violence, once unleashed, transgresses ethical boundaries and becomes embedded in the body, memory, and identity of those who endure it.

Drawing on theoretical insights from embodied cognition [5] hermeneutic semiotics [6] and Conceptual Metaphor Theory [2] this paper argues that metaphor functions as a cognitive scaffold for narrativizing trauma and moral disintegration. In doing so, it positions metaphor as a critical interface between lived experience and symbolic expression—particularly in literary responses to war. Ultimately, the study contributes to interdisciplinary discourse at the intersection of cognitive linguistics, trauma studies, and literary semiotics, offering new ways of reading postwar literature as a site of affective and ethical meaning-making.

2. Theoretical Background

This study is situated at the intersection of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), embodied cognition, hermeneutic semiotics, and trauma theory, forming a robust interdisciplinary foundation for analyzing war metaphors in literature.

CMT, as developed by Lakoff and Johnson [2] posits that human cognition is fundamentally metaphorical, enabling abstract experiences to be understood through concrete domains. "Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" [2]. The metaphor *war is a wild beast* exemplifies this structure: the source domain of the beast (instinct, violence, predation) is mapped onto the target domain of war (conflict, trauma, moral collapse), revealing how violence is cognitively framed as instinctual and uncontrollable.

Building on this, Johnson emphasizes that meaning arises from bodily experience: "our bodily movements, perceptions, and emotions provide the basic structure of meaning" [5]. In war literature, metaphor is not a mere abstraction but a reflection of lived trauma. Images of bleeding, trembling, or bodily disintegration function as deeply embodied symbols, capturing how war is inscribed upon and remembered through the body.

Ricoeur's hermeneutic semiotics extends metaphor beyond cognition into ontology. He argues that metaphor is not merely decorative but transformative—it reconfigures reality and invites ethical reflection. "The metaphorical statement is not reducible to a mere substitution of terms; it is a redescription of reality" [6]. This redescription generates a "surplus of meaning" [6] allowing literature to articulate what trauma often renders unspeakable.

To address the complexity of metaphor construction, Fauconnier and Turner's Conceptual Blending Theory introduces an additional layer of analysis. Here, metaphor is viewed as a mental integration of multiple conceptual inputs to create novel meaning [7]. The metaphor *war is a wild beast* blends elements of animal instinct, moral collapse, and human suffering into a single compressed image, enabling metaphors to convey affective and ethical intensity across cultural and narrative contexts.

The cultural embeddedness of metaphor is also critical. Kövecses asserts that metaphors are shaped by culturally shared knowledge: "Metaphors are not universal; they are based on particular cultural experiences and values" [6]. In American and Vietnamese contexts, the metaphor of war as a beast may be shared, yet its meanings diverge—psychological haunting in Karlin [3] contrasts with bodily degradation in Chu Lai [8] reflecting distinct cultural schemas of violence, memory, and morality.

Trauma theory further clarifies why metaphor often becomes the primary vehicle for articulating wartime experience. Caruth argues that trauma is marked by latency and symbolic return—it "resists simple location" in language or linear narrative Caruth [9]. LaCapra [10] similarly views metaphor as a symbolic medium through which trauma can be "worked through" rather than re-enacted [10]. Within this view, metaphor emerges as both a cognitive scaffold and a moral instrument—an expressive form that enables trauma to be externalized without simplification or closure.

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Recent interdisciplinary research further substantiates these claims. Nguyen and Tran's cross-linguistic analysis of animal metaphors in English and Vietnamese short stories demonstrates how such imagery encodes emotional volatility and the loss of control—qualities essential to war-related trauma Nguyen and Tran [11]. Williams and Smith [12] psychological study shows that metaphor use in trauma narratives closely correlates with the severity of acute stress symptoms, affirming metaphor's diagnostic and therapeutic relevance [12].

In literary trauma studies, Crownshaw argues that metaphor functions as a mechanism for externalizing psychic rupture, enabling writers to represent the unrepresentable [13]. This insight aligns with Caruth's foundational theory of trauma as non-narrativizable and nonlinear [9]. Khan's analysis of Afghan war literature further shows how metaphors of sound, silence, and spectrality reactivate suppressed cultural memory in *Earth and Ashes* [14]. Meanwhile, Thompson's research on military metaphors in psychotherapy reveals how figurative language facilitates emotional integration among veterans, granting voice to otherwise inexpressible experiences [15].

Together, these frameworks and empirical studies confirm that metaphor in war literature is far more than rhetorical ornamentation. It constitutes an ontological and epistemological structure—a symbolic architecture through which war is encoded, trauma is processed, and the self is reconstituted. In this sense, the metaphor *"war is a wild beast"* serves as a powerful cognitive and cultural apparatus for narrating violence, negotiating memory, and confronting the ethical voids created by war.

3. Research Methodology and Data

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive-comparative approach, drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), Conceptual Blending Theory, and hermeneutic semiotics to examine how the metaphor *"war is a wild beast"* operates in *Wandering Souls* by Karlin [3] and Chu Lai [8]. By integrating cognitive linguistics with literary analysis, the research aims to uncover how metaphor shapes the emotional, ethical, and symbolic dimensions of wartime experience.

The core analytical framework is grounded in Lakoff and Johnson's theory of conceptual metaphor [2] which posits that abstract domains such as war are understood through concrete, embodied experiences. To account for more complex metaphorical interactions, the study incorporates Fauconnier and Turner's Conceptual Blending Theory [7] which explains how multiple mental spaces are integrated to generate emergent meaning—particularly relevant in literary contexts where trauma and moral ambiguity are foregrounded.

In addition, Ricoeur's hermeneutic semiotics informs the interpretive lens [6] focusing on how figurative language and symbolic structures reconfigure perception, memory, and moral understanding. Through close reading and thematic coding, the study identifies five recurring metaphorical projections in which war is rendered as a wild, irrational beast—emphasizing predation, trauma, survival, and the collapse of ethical boundaries.

3.2. Research Data

This study is grounded in a curated selection of literary texts by Wayne Karlin and Chu Lai—two authors who write from distinct yet intersecting postwar perspectives. Their works provide a rich corpus for examining the metaphor *"war is a wild beast"* within cognitive and semiotic frameworks.

3.3. Wayne Karlin (United States)

- Karlin [3]: A novel that fictionalizes a real-life postwar encounter between a U.S. Marine and the family of a fallen Vietnamese soldier. The narrative foregrounds themes of guilt, haunting, and moral injury, portraying them as enduring consequences of war [3].
- Karlin [16]: A collection of short stories depicting emotional dislocation, ethical collapse, and the surreal normalization of violence during and after wartime [16].

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- Karlin [17]: A novel exploring postwar alienation, survivor's guilt, and the complex tension between personal memory and national narratives [17].

3.4. Chu Lai (Vietnam)

Chu Lai [8]: A novel focused on battlefield experiences and physical trauma, emphasizing the raw immediacy of war and its lingering psychological effects [8].

Chu Lai [4]: A portrayal of the residual impacts of war during peacetime, where physical deterioration and emotional numbness become metaphors for unresolved trauma [5].

Chu Lai [18]: A seminal work in Vietnamese postwar literature that explores fractured identities, repressed memory, and moral disintegration. The protagonist embodies a deeply scarred postwar self, haunted by both past violence and present estrangement [18].

These texts were selected for their sustained metaphorical construction of war as a dehumanizing, instinct-driven force. Through close reading, the study investigates how conceptual metaphors articulate trauma, reshape subjectivity, and encode cultural memory across two war-affected literary traditions.

4. Findings

4.1. War as a Wild Beast: The Convergence of Predation, Instinct, and Dehumanization

The metaphor *"war is a wild beast"* constructs a cognitive schema in which war is no longer understood merely as a political or military act, but rather as a biological entity—predatory, instinctive, and amoral in essence. This conceptualization does not arise from a simple, unidirectional projection from the domain of wild animals onto the phenomenon of war. Rather, it is shaped through the resonance of multiple experiential domains—where survival instincts, bodily sensations, and the erosion of moral norms emerge and interact simultaneously.

Within this framework, war is not experienced as a coherent sequence of rational events, but as a living organism—a concealed predator, ever-watchful and poised to strike without warning. Although both Karlin [3] and Chu Lai [8]draw on the source domain of the "wild beast" to conceptualize war, their deployments of the metaphor diverge significantly, reflecting differences in cultural context, narrative stance, and affective orientation.

In Karlin [3] frames the metaphor primarily from the perspective of American soldiers, who initially possess a sense of control but gradually descend into fear, helplessness, and dehumanization [3]. In one passage, he writes:

"The American soldier would soon start to see the whole rural population as the enemy… 'We'd end up shooting everything—men, women, kids, and the buffaloes'" [3].

Here, Karlin [3] underscores the collapse of moral boundaries—where distinctions between humans and animals dissolve, and violence becomes an instinctual reaction. The phrase "shooting everything" reveals the soldier's moral disintegration and illustrates how war devours human empathy, reducing the individual to a pre-civilized state governed by survival instincts.

In contrast, Chu Lai [8] extends the beast metaphor beyond human behavior, attributing beast-like qualities to the environment, sounds, and atmosphere of war [8]. Rather than focusing on moral collapse, Chu Lai [8] emphasizes the sensory domination of war—how it overwhelms perception, blurs boundaries between human voice and animalistic roar, and dissolves the capacity for verbal expression:

"…the sounds of wild beasts roaring savagely… voices yelling, cursing, and crying faded, then went silent" [8].

Unlike Karlin [3] who approaches war through the lens of postwar reflection, Chu Lai [8] immerses the reader in the immediacy of battle. Screaming and silence are presented as dual extremities of a tortured corporeality. While Karlin foregrounds ethical deterioration, Chu Lai [8] emphasizes the disintegration of sensation and language, transforming the human into a being that communicates through breath and weeping—forms of expression that precede articulate speech.

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This divergence is further evident in how the two authors depict space. Chu Lai [8] conceptualizes war as a kind of vapor that permeates the landscape:

"War was still somewhere out there, lurking, blurred and shimmering like a wave of heat across the wide, silent fields" [8].

Here, war is portrayed as a spectral beast—present yet intangible, producing a pervasive anxiety.

Karlin, in contrast, renders the enemy's presence as abrupt and violent:

"They searched the jungle for signs of the NVA. Too often they acted as bait; the enemy was located when it hit them" [3].

Whereas *Red Rain* depicts war as a slow, pervasive force, *Wandering Souls* presents it as the embodiment of sudden, predatory violence. Yet both narratives converge in their displacement of human agency.

Soldiers are no longer rational subjects; they are reduced to biological entities—panting, crawling, howling, desperate to survive:

"Homer hurried back to his comrades, all of them panting, frantically crawling upward" [3].

The verb "crawling," used prominently by both authors, serves as a central image of lost personhood: the soldier no longer walks upright, no longer speaks meaningfully, no longer represents symbolic humanity. What remains is merely a body reacting in despair.

In conclusion, while Karlin and Chu Lai both invoke the metaphor of the "wild beast" to frame war, they do so from distinct narrative and affective positions. Karlin emphasizes dehumanization and moral crisis, portraying war as a force that strips soldiers of reason and transforms them into instinct-driven beings Karlin [3]. Chu Lai [8] by contrast, foregrounds the total sensory invasion of war, wherein space, sound, and bodily experience become saturated with instinct, and all normative modes of expression collapse [8]. Yet both converge on a singular idea: once war is imagined as a wild beast, it ceases to be an object of moral judgment and becomes a latent, predatory force—ever-present, uncontrollable, and inescapable.

4.2. Screams and Savage Acts of the Beast: War as Extreme Dehumanization

The metaphor *"war is a wild beast"* is further developed in *Red Rain* by Chu Lai and *Wandering Souls* by Wayne Karlin as an experiential cognitive structure, in which war is not merely personified as a living entity but embodied as a non-human force governed entirely by instinctual violence and a will to destruction. From a cognitive semiotic perspective, this image transcends rhetorical comparison—it constitutes a complex conceptual framework wherein bodily sensations, primal language, and reactive movement converge to construct the image of a war-beast that stalks, assaults, and annihilates.

In *Red Rain*, Chu Lai constructs war as a biological fury, where sound and motion are not merely descriptive elements but sensory triggers evoking the terror of being hunted:

> "The artillery still roared incessantly. Bullets hissed through the air, rasping like the laughter of a demon. In the chaos of retreat, bodies and groups of people were hurled up and slammed down" [8].

The "incessant roaring" of artillery, the hiss "like the laughter of a demon," and the passive motion of "bodies… hurled up and slammed down" collectively evoke panic and helplessness in the face of an uncontrollable force. Here, war is no longer a strategic action or discrete battle—it becomes a sentient creature endowed with will and a perverse pleasure in destruction. The simile "rasping like the laughter of a demon" elevates war beyond physical violence, introducing a metaphysical and moral dimension: war laughs, war mocks—and its laugh is a mechanical sound personified with malevolence.

In contrast, Karlin's *Wandering Souls* develops the "beast" metaphor primarily through screams and corporeal suffering, where language disintegrates under the weight of bodily agony:

> "The bullet had blown a ten-inch hole out his navel region… He was bleating like a horribly injured animal. Each scream a total effort…" [8]
> "After a few seconds more of his inhuman screaming…" [8]
> "…we had to listen to them moaning all night until they died, one by one" [8].

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If, in Chu Lai's narrative, war is an attacking beast—an entity external to the human—then in Karlin's, war becomes an internalized beast residing within the soldier's body, erupting through screams, cries, and mechanical spasms. Verbs such as "bleating," "screaming," and "moaning" form a biological lexicon of pain, in which the body loses expressive capacity and becomes a primal, reactive machine.

The divergence between the two authors lies in how they construct the experiential dimension of war. Chu Lai emphasizes environmental sensations—sound, kinetic force, and atmospheric pressure—as part of a violent ecosystem encircling the soldier. War is portrayed as a predator lurking in space, ready to strike from any direction. Karlin, however, delves into the visceral interior, where war is registered through wounds and utterances forced from the gut and throat—what may be understood as the final voice before the collapse of language.

Nonetheless, both approaches converge on the idea that war leads to extreme dehumanization. In both narratives, individuals are stripped of rationality and morality, reduced to objects thrown, screamed through, and consumed by the survival instinct. As Lakoff and Johnson [2] argue, conceptual metaphors not only shape how we speak about the world but also structure how we experience it Lakoff and Johnson [2]. In this case, imagining war as a beast reflects not only its brutality but affirms that war is a sensory, non-verbal, and inhuman phenomenon—where screams replace discourse, and fear emanates not from the enemy, but from war's very impersonality.

Thus, the metaphor *"war is a beast"* functions as both a multilayered conceptual structure and a tactile-imaginative form, where sound, motion, and cries signify the disintegration of the human self. War is no longer a confrontation between armies, but a clash between humanity and an invisible force—where survival demands inhabiting the form of a screaming organism.

4.3. The Beast's Struggle for Survival → War as a Biological Condition

The conceptual metaphor *"the beast attacks to survive"* is further extended into the notion of war as a biological reflex—where violence is no longer a matter of moral choice, but rather an instinctual act, operating beyond the reach of rational control. In this blurred space of imagery, war is no longer the result of political strategy or personal hatred; it manifests instead as a logic of survival—where killing is driven by adrenaline, neural reflexes, and fear embedded in the very fibers of the body.

In *Red Rain*, Chu Lai captures the dissolution of moral judgment in a concise and piercing moment:

> "I knew some comrades who pulled the trigger in hesitation, as if they could not distinguish who or what they were firing at" [8].

The phrase *"pulled the trigger in hesitation"* signals a rupture between perception and action: the act precedes conscious thought. Survival does not wait for reason—the body shoots because that is the only way to stay alive in a space where every shadow might be the enemy. As Lakoff and Johnson suggest, metaphors do not merely describe experience—they structure it Lakoff and Johnson [2]. In this case, *"shoot to live, hesitate and die"* becomes not a rhetorical expression but an existential reality.

This logic is intensified through a stark and definitive command:

> "Bury all confusion between friend and foe three meters underground" [8].

The verb *"bury"* here transcends its literal meaning. It becomes a semiotic signal of repression—where doubt, emotion, and morality are interred to preserve psychic endurance. From a semiotic standpoint, this image enforces an ontological binary of life and death: no moral gray zone remains, only *us or them, live or die*. Ricoeur refers to this as the metaphorical reconfiguration of perception—where the world is forcibly simplified in order to be endured [6].

In *Red Rain*, perceptual space is further transformed into an abstract, enclosed, and anonymous terrain:

> "The enemy… was just a gray, stinking, acrid wall. If you broke through it, you lived; if it crushed you, you died" [8].

The metaphor of *"the wall"* strips the enemy of human form and recasts war as a closed biological environment, where confrontation is no longer human-to-human but body-to-mass—an invisible,

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suffocating force. The use of sensory signifiers—smell, color, and texture—creates a symbolic zone of both physical and psychological claustrophobia, where violence does not serve conquest but survival: an effort to carve out space to breathe.

In *Wandering Souls*, Wayne Karlin reinforces this logic of survival by explicitly severing moral agency from the act of killing:

> "Some would later feel… they killed simply to survive" [3].
>
> "He and his comrades killed… in order to stay alive" [3].

The phrase *"simply to survive"* is not merely a post-hoc justification—it denotes an altered existential condition in which the soldier ceases to act as a moral agent and instead becomes a reactive biological system. Killing, in this context, is no different from flinching, pupil dilation, or a racing heartbeat under threat. Johnson describes this as the embodiment of cognition: under the conditions of war, perception is no longer filtered through reflection, but through muscular contractions and instinctive fear [5].

Thus, the metaphor *"war is a struggle for survival"* transcends rhetorical usage and becomes a foundational cognitive schema that shapes how the soldier interprets both self and world. When killing is reprogrammed as instinctual reaction, war escapes all political and ethical frameworks—it becomes a pure biological state, like that of a beast that kills not from hatred, but because it has no other option.

4.4. War as a Beast That Leaves Irreparable Wounds

The conceptual metaphor *"war is a wild beast that leaves irreparable wounds"* constructs a cognitive framework in which war is imagined as a brutal creature capable of inflicting damage that transcends the physical realm. Much like the bite of a predator—causing not only immediate injury but also lasting trauma—war does not end when the gunfire ceases; it continues to dwell in memory, in the human body, and within the ethical architecture of the self.

In *Wandering Souls*, Wayne Karlin develops this metaphor through images of irretrievable bodies and unresolved grief:

> "It is hard to imagine 300,000 missing in action, the emotional toll of knowing not only that the sons and daughters, husbands and wives who went to the war would never return, but also that one would never know how they died, nor get back their remains" [3].

Here, the phrase *"missing in action"* functions not merely as a military term but as a semiotic marker of irreconcilable absence—a loss without identification, a moral wound that remains unbandaged. As Judith Butler argues, ungrieved deaths become absences embedded in the social unconscious, perpetuating collective suffering [19].

This metaphor is further reinforced by Karlin's visceral imagery:

> "The war still lingers, like blood trickling in our hearts" [3].

The image of blood trickling silently within the heart evokes a persistent, internalized pain—subtle yet erosive. War here is no longer an event but a vascular condition: it circulates quietly and destructively through the self. Cathy Caruth suggests that trauma operates outside linear temporality, producing ruptures that suspend the subject between presence and absence [9].

Karlin deepens the metaphor through a symbolic dissolution of identity:

> "Now you're a ghost, invisible, a wandering soul among the living" [7].

To become a ghost within one's own life reflects the ultimate alienation—humanity is stripped, vitality nullified. The character ceases to exist as a social subject and becomes instead a residue of unresolved time and fractured memory.

Similarly, in *Nắng đồng bằng* (*The Sunny Delta*), Chu Lai extends the source domain of the *"unhealable wound"* through representations of bodily disfigurement:

> "Looking at his withered, darkened arm, then at his sunken chest… No one would recognize Linh anymore" [4].

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This transformation signifies not only medical deterioration but also the symbolic collapse of identity. Elaine Scarry notes that physical pain resists linguistic representation, making the body itself the primary medium through which suffering is expressed [1].

The extremity of dehumanization is captured when the character loses the ability to feel meaning:

> "His heart had hardened; even family and homeland no longer mattered" [4].

Here, death becomes a viable escape, as life has been hollowed of its essential human substance. The foundational pillars of identity—family, homeland—lose their sanctity, leaving behind an emptied, estranged self.

Across the literary terrains of Vietnam and the United States, Chu Lai and Karlin converge in a shared metaphorical structure: war is a wild beast that not only attacks but leaves enduring bite marks across memory, language, and ethics. These wounds do not bleed on the surface but drip silently within the psyche—emblems of a survival that is incomplete, where the human subject persists only as a being stripped of its own self.

4.5. A Beast Cannot Discern Right from Wrong → War Is Inhuman

The conceptual metaphor *"a beast cannot discern right from wrong → war is inhuman"* constructs a cognitive mapping in which war is equated with an instinct-driven, amoral entity. This metaphor reframes war not as a political or strategic endeavor, but as a primal, dehumanizing force that renders human ethical reasoning obsolete. Within this schema, war becomes an autonomous phenomenon governed by survival impulses, stripping individuals of moral subjectivity and reducing them to reactive organisms.

In *Wandering Souls*, Wayne Karlin foregrounds the gradual erosion of moral consciousness through the routinization of violence. One illustrative moment captures this process starkly:

> "After two hours of killing, the lieutenant smacked a Buddhist monk in the jaw with his rifle butt when the man didn't answer his questions" [3].

The phrase *"after two hours of killing"* functions not merely as a temporal reference, but as a semiotic marker signaling the internalization and normalization of brutality. The assault on a Buddhist monk—an archetype of compassion and spiritual transcendence—symbolizes the collapse of ethical restraint. According to Lakoff and Johnson, when war is conceptualized as a domain governed by instinct, violent acts no longer require moral justification; they become automated responses to perceived existential threats [2].

Karlin escalates this framework through a clinical cataloging of violence devoid of affect:

> "Some participated willingly, emotionlessly or happily or psychotically shooting, scalping, raping, and mutilating" [3].

The spectrum of affective responses—from detachment to elation to psychosis—underscores that war not only distorts behavior but also destabilizes subjectivity itself. Killing becomes emotionally permissible and ethically intelligible, blurring the ontological boundary between human and beast. Judith Butler conceptualizes this phenomenon as the production of "ungrievable lives"—subjects stripped of moral worth, whose destruction becomes both conceivable and repeatable [19].

This vision finds a visceral parallel in Chu Lai's *Red Rain (Mưa đỏ)*, where corporeal suffering is rendered through harrowing, image-laden narration:

> "Cries, groans, writhing, twitching, blood pooling… A naked child ran madly, screaming for her mother… The newborn beside her continued to nurse at the blood-soaked breast of the dead woman" [8].

This sequence operates as a semiotic field of dehumanization. The image of an infant nursing at the blood-soaked breast of a corpse transcends representation—it functions as a conceptual metaphor for the collapse of cognitive distinctions between life and death. Consciousness retreats; only instinct remains. As Lakoff and Johnson argue, in extreme conditions, moral perception is supplanted by bodily reflex, producing a subjectivity governed entirely by somatic urgency [2].

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Ricoeur emphasizes that metaphor is not merely decorative, but generative of new realities [6]. The juxtaposition of nourishment (*"nursing"*) with decay (*"corpse," "blood"*) dismantles conventional symbolic frameworks, rupturing the sacred structures of maternity and life. Within this cognitive frame, war transcends its political function to emerge as a monstrous, inhuman force that defies ethical comprehension.

Ultimately, the metaphor *"war is a beast that cannot discern right from wrong"* lays bare the radical moral degeneration engendered by warfare. When violence is no longer accompanied by shame, hesitation, or ethical deliberation, the human subject ceases to be a moral agent. Instead, they become a reactive mechanism—an extension of war's own instinctual logic. War does not merely allow inhumanity; it produces it. It constructs a moral vacuum wherein ethical order is devoured by the instinctual savagery of a beast called war.

5. A Comparative Analysis of the Conceptual Metaphor "War is a Wild Beast" in the Literary Works of Wayne Karlin and Chu Lai

5.1. Similarities: Shared Conceptual Mapping of the Beast Metaphor

Both *Wandering Souls* by Karlin [3] and *Sunlight on the Plain* by Chu Lai [4] employ the metaphor *"war is a wild beast"* as a foundational conceptual schema. In these texts, war is not depicted as a political conflict or historical event but as a sentient, autonomous force—devoid of empathy, morality, and rational restraint. This beast, driven by primal instinct, lashes out to survive, inflicts lasting damage, and gradually erodes the emotional and ethical foundations of the human subject.

Through this metaphor, war is cast as an inhuman rupture—one that transcends the boundaries of will, reason, or ethical deliberation. The analysis draws on Conceptual Metaphor Theory [2] embodied cognition [5] and hermeneutic semiotics [6] while also resonating with trauma theory's emphasis on the limits of representation and the unspeakability of violence [9, 10].

Table 1.
Core Similarities in the Conceptual Metaphor "War is a Wild Beast".

Aspect	Shared Metaphorical Traits
Underlying Frame	War is conceptualized as a non-human, instinct-driven predator devoid of moral reasoning.
Violence Mechanism	Violence functions as reflex, not reason—triggered by primal survival instincts.
Consequences of War	War inflicts irreversible wounds on both body and psyche.
Emotional Collapse	Emotional numbness, detachment, and dehumanization dominate the psychological experience.
Function of Metaphor	Shapes cognition under extreme conditions; operates as an epistemological structure, not mere ornament.

This table highlights the structural convergence between the two authors' metaphorical mappings. Both Karlin [3] and Chu Lai [8] frame war as an irrational and dehumanizing entity, wherein instinct overrides morality, and the consequences are inscribed into the body, memory, and emotional fabric of the human subject.

5.2. Differences: Divergent Embodiments of the Beast Metaphor

Despite a shared metaphorical foundation, the embodiment of the *"wild beast"* metaphor in the two texts reflects divergent cultural sensibilities, narrative perspectives, and experiential intensities. Karlin writes from a postwar vantage point—haunted by memory, guilt, and transnational empathy [3]—while Chu Lai [8] writes from within the immediacy of war, immersed in the corporeal horror of combat [4]. These differing orientations yield distinct metaphorical realizations: Karlin's beast is spectral and psychological, surfacing through trauma-induced disorientation, whereas Chu Lai's is visceral and embodied, marked by physical degradation and relentless violence.

The metaphor's conceptual structure draws from embodied cognition [4] and Conceptual Metaphor Theory [2] while its representational force resonates with trauma theory's engagement with

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unspeakable violence [9, 10]. Though their forms differ, the metaphor retains its inhuman essence and its capacity to dismantle moral and ethical agency.

Table 2.
Key Differences in Metaphorical Realization Between Karlin [3] and Chu Lai [4].

Aspect	Wayne Karlin (*Wandering Souls*)	Chu Lai (*Sunlight on the Plain*)
Temporal Perspective	Postwar retrospection; haunted by memory and unresolved grief	Immediate wartime experience; embedded in bodily suffering and chaos
Symbolic Focus	Absence, ghosts, internal bleeding, psychological scars	Blood, bodily decay, physical trauma, emotional desensitization
Tone and Style	Reflective, philosophical, elegiac; informed by ethical reflection	Brutal, visceral, raw; unflinching portrayal of war's material devastation
Metaphoric Extension	War as haunting, infection, ghostly continuity of death	War as mutilation, decay, and destruction of life and spirit
Moral Collapse	Transition from ethical subject to spectral remnant	Transformation from emotional being to survival-driven shell

This comparative schema underscores how each author internalizes and manifests the beast metaphor. For Karlin [3] war materializes as a lingering phantom that inhabits memory and conscience; for Chu Lai [4] it takes the form of flesh—wounded, bloodied, and stripped of humanity. These complementary perspectives expand the metaphor's interpretive range, reinforcing its capacity to articulate war's totalizing violence.

6. Conclusion

The metaphor *"war is a wild beast"* operates across multiple cognitive and semiotic registers. It encapsulates war's uncontrollable and amoral nature; externalizes trauma through the body; and embeds cultural meaning within literary form. Through this metaphorical lens, both Karlin [3] and Chu Lai [8] enable readers to grasp not only the visceral immediacy of wartime experience but also the deeper epistemological rupture that war introduces. Here, metaphor functions not merely as a literary device, but as an interpretive mechanism—a form of cognitive survival—that allows literature to testify to the ineffable dimensions of violence, loss, and memory.

7. Discussion

The metaphor *war is a wild beast*—as developed across Chu Lai [8] *Red Rain* and Karlin [3] *Wandering Souls*—illuminates how conceptual metaphors serve not merely as literary embellishments but as fundamental cognitive structures for framing traumatic experience. Drawing from Conceptual Metaphor Theory [2] this metaphor maps animalistic qualities—irrationality, savagery, instinct—onto the domain of war, transforming it into an existential condition rather than a political event. War is no longer understood through geopolitical logic but through the primal, affective registers of fear, injury, and survival.

In both texts, metaphor functions as an epistemic and semiotic mechanism. As Johnson [5] argues, meaning emerges from our embodied interactions with the world [4]. The metaphors analyzed—such as *the beast devours its prey → war consumes the living* or *the beast cannot distinguish right from wrong → war is inhuman*—are rooted in bodily schema and emotional experience. In this view, metaphor is not decorative but constitutive: it enables subjects to process realities that exceed rational comprehension. This is particularly evident in Karlin's portrayal of soldiers as *"ghosts among the living"* [3] or in Chu Lai [18] depictions of fragmented bodies and desensitized minds [8]—images that exemplify how trauma resists conventional narrative but becomes legible through metaphor.

From a semiotic perspective, metaphor also operates as a system of signs that encode cultural memory and ethical disintegration. Following Ricoeur [6] who posits that metaphor refigures perception, the beast becomes a master signifier of the collapse of moral order and the erosion of human subjectivity [6]. For instance, the image of a newborn nursing from a corpse [8] does not merely

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convey horror; it symbolizes a world where the natural order—care, life, protection—is inverted. Metaphors here act as semiotic condensations of war's violence, compressing complex emotional and moral disorientation into stark, affective symbols.

The comparative analysis in Section 5 reveals that while both authors converge in using the beast metaphor to foreground war's dehumanizing and instinctual nature, they diverge in narrative emphasis. Karlin explores the lingering psychic residue of war, situating trauma within a postwar temporal frame marked by ambiguity and spectrality [3]. In contrast, Chu Lai [8] focuses on the immediate sensory and moral collapse on the battlefield, highlighting the body's role as both target and witness [6]. These differences reflect distinct cultural models of suffering and memory, as Kövecses notes, metaphors are shaped by and embedded in specific cultural experiences and values [20].

In sum, the metaphor *war is a wild beast* functions on multiple semiotic and cognitive levels. It captures the uncontainable, amoral force of war; it articulates trauma through bodily imagery; and it embeds cultural meaning into literary form. By projecting war through this metaphorical lens, both Karlin and Chu Lai provide readers with not only a visceral sense of wartime experience but also a conceptual grammar through which violence, grief, and memory are rendered intelligible. Metaphor here becomes a mode of survival—an interpretive structure that allows literature to bear witness to what exceeds language.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has investigated the metaphor *"war is a wild beast"* as both a conceptual and semiotic mechanism in Karlin [3] and Chu Lai [8], revealing how metaphor functions as a cognitive scaffold and narrative strategy for representing the embodied, emotional, and moral dimensions of war trauma. Drawing on theories of conceptual metaphor, embodied cognition, and hermeneutic semiotics, the analysis affirms that metaphor is not merely ornamental but foundational in shaping how war is perceived, remembered, and encoded in cultural consciousness. Specifically, the beast metaphor articulates affective intensities—fear, rage, numbness—that often elude rational language and resist conventional narrative form.

Through five metaphorical projections—predation**,** survival instinct**,** destruction**,** scarring**, and** moral blindness—war emerges as a dehumanizing, instinct-driven force that strips individuals of ethical agency. Both Karlin [3] and Chu Lai [8] deploy this metaphor to convey trauma that resists literal expression: Karlin through psychological haunting and ethical disorientation; Chu Lai [8] through visceral immediacy and somatic degradation. Despite their divergent literary sensibilities and distinct cultural-historical contexts, both authors converge in portraying war as an inhuman rupture that reconfigures memory, subjectivity, and moral frameworks.

This research contributes to interdisciplinary dialogues in literary studies, cognitive linguistics, and semiotics by underscoring metaphor's central role in structuring meaning within postwar narratives. It demonstrates how figurative language renders trauma both narratable and symbolically legible when direct articulation becomes impossible. Furthermore, the analysis highlights metaphor's function as a cultural mediator—bridging private affect and collective memory through symbolic compression and imaginative resonance.

Future research could pursue broader comparative studies across war literatures shaped by colonial violence, civil conflict, or forced displacement. Integrating cross-cultural metaphor theory with trauma studies would further illuminate how distinct literary traditions use metaphor to negotiate grief, guilt, and ethical rupture. Additionally, pedagogical applications of metaphor analysis can enhance transnational approaches to teaching war literature—emphasizing how metaphor not only represents what war is, but how it is felt**,** suffered**, and** remembered**.**

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Transparency:

The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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