

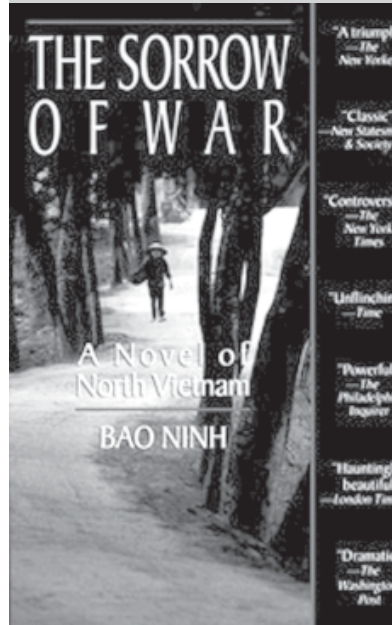
BOOK REVIEW

THE SORROW OF WAR

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Bao Ninh, *The Sorrow of War*, a novel of North Vietnam, translated from Vietnamese by Phan Thanh Hao and edited by Frank Palmos. Riverhead Books, New York, 1996.

Bao Ninh, the author, was born in Hanoi in 1952. During the Vietnam War with the United States, he served with the Glorious 27th Youth Brigade. Of the five hundred who went to war with the brigade in 1969, he is one of ten who survived. Ninh's novel *The Sorrow of War* is about the war between North Vietnam with South Vietnam and the United States which took place throughout Vietnam between the 1960s and mid 1970s. The novel depicts the social atmosphere in Vietnam before, during and after the war. The author uses Kien, a young male soldier from the north, as the main



character in the story. The plots of the story happen around Kien's life before he joined the army, during his service in the army during wartime, and after the victory. Kien's recall of his past memory about his youth, love, family, neighbors, friends in the army, and foes makes up the whole picture of the story.

The Sorrow of War does not criticize or bias against any political ideology whether the communist Vietnam or the United States. Instead, it criticizes the war itself. The novel portrays the tremendously destructive effect of war on human beings, nature, and each individual person. The war brought a complete change to a person's life. The war destroys a person's hope, dream, and future. It causes separation, sorrow and great despair. Besides, the novel challenges the concept of victory perceived by the Vietnamese state. Although the war ended and the victory was gained in April 1975, the story suggests that each individual family and person did not win; they could not gain back what they once had prior to war. They lost their family, relatives, friends, lovers, children and everything that make their lives meaningful. Also, the war has a serious psychological effect on each individual. Its level of influence determines whether or not a person is able to bury the past, deal with the present and confront with the future. In the story, the side-effect of the war is too much for Kien to bear. The past memory keeps on haunting him like a ghost.

'The war with the American determines all events in his life: the happiness, the unhappiness, the joys, the sorrows, the loves, the hatreds.'
(p.75)

Kien lost not only his family, friends but also his love. Everything in his life cannot turn to its normal, happy state as it was before the war. Although Phoung, his sincere lover, still survives and both of them still love each other, they knew they could not normalize their love relationship.

‘It was sad; although they had been excellent lovers, they were destined to be forever lonely. They had lost not only the capacity to live happily with others but also the capacity to be in love. The ghost of the war haunted them and permeated their deteriorating lives.’
(p. 230)

The novel tells about the lives of Vietnamese soldiers during wartime. They faced hunger, suffering, hardship, death and despair. It reflects their point of views and opinions towards the war. The soldiers did not like it. They wanted to see an end to the war no matter which side would win or lose so that they could go back home. The ordinary soldiers felt more and more depressed as the war dragged on and on seeing no sign of its end. Their lives were unsafe; they knew death may come to them anytime. Some of them were still alive, but they felt they had died already as they saw their friends had died one after another in the battle every day.

Oh, this is war without end,

War without end.

Tomorrow or today,

Today or tomorrow.

Tell me my fate,

When will I die.... (song sung by soldiers, p. 15)

What they saw was killing, injury, blood, and corps. Furthermore, the story reflects how war turned the concepts from idealism and humanity to violence and cruelty, from doing the impossible to the possible. It depicts the soldiers who were honest, ideal and good-hearted, who later on became engaged in brutal act and killing. The author also intends to convey the message of social inequality in the communist Vietnamese society that sons of poor, peasant families went to war while children of rich families in Hanoi enjoyed their easy and comfortable lives in the city. The poor went through all the hardship and risked their lives not for the sake of themselves but for others’.

‘...My brother was already in the forces. I could have been exempted as the only son left but the village chief would not agree. We have so many of those dammed idiots in the North enjoying the profits of war, but it’s the sons of peasants who have to leave home, leaving a helpless old mother exposed to hardship...,’ said Can, one of the soldiers (p. 21)

In conclusion, I would say that *The Sorrow of War* is an interesting and moving novel as the author used his experience as a soldier during the war to write the story. I would recommend this novel to those readers who want to know about the effect of war on the Vietnamese society. The notions of the devastating effect of war from the story can contribute to the understanding of not only war in Vietnam but also war in general. It sends an important message to all of us to reconsider such topics as–All of us do not like war, but why are we engaged in war? It also intends to explain that the result of war is so destructive. No matter one presumably wins or loses in the war, the result is that one loses--just more or less.