

LITERATURE,  
SURVIVAL AND  
REAPPROPRIATING  
SUPPRESSION  
IN **BAO NINH'S** NOVEL  
***THE SORROW OF WAR***

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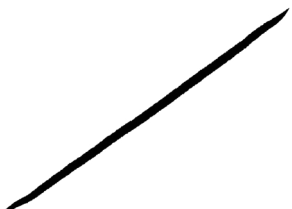
international bestseller

by Bao Ninh (Author)

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**Abstract:** Literature offers an unbridled power to its creators: through literature, authors are able to provide power to the powerless, a voice to the voiceless and an autonomy to the oppressed. Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam* works to grant each of these to its characters and author much in the same way that postcolonial literature works to preserve the history and legacy of cultures pre-colonization, or other anti-Orientalist writings work to promote more accurate accounts from the Eastern hemisphere as a means to challenge the West's carefully constructed conceptualizations of "the Orient." What makes *The Sorrow of War* so remarkable as a piece of anti-Orientalist literature, however, is that the novel provides power, a voice and an autonomy to his central characters and author in a manner that is three-fold. Not only does *The Sorrow of War*, in its construction and reception, ensure the survival of its author by allowing Ninh a sense of collective resolution and an outlet for providing testimony to his experiences, Ninh's debut novel also works to immortalize his memory and provide North Vietnam an auspicious and undeniable narrative autonomy and agency.

**Keywords:** identity, literature, survival, testimony, Orientalism, autonomy.

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In the introduction to his aptly titled 1978 book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said establishes the term "Orientalism," defining it as the West's production of the East as a monoculture, indiscriminately grouping the nations and regions of the Earth's eastern hemisphere under the unified moniker of "the Orient." Said writes that the West's production of "the Orient" has provided the former a stranglehold on the world's conceptualizations of "the Orient" "politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively" (p. 2). Inherently problematic, Orientalism as a practice precipitates the Eastern world's status as eternal other. Orientalism is not irreversible, however—Said offers that "society and literary culture," when "understood and studied together," may advance us toward a "better understanding of the way cultural domination operates," an "unlearning" of the "inherent dominative mode," and, subsequently, perhaps an elimination of "the 'Orient' and the 'Occident' altogether" (p. 28).

Dominant culture's dismissal and repression of "the Orient" as a monoculture engenders the slow death of complexities in Eastern culture and identity on the world stage. Colonialism—as a practice—succeeded, in many cases, in extinguishing the heritage and cultures of the colonized. Similarly, Orientalism enacts an erasure of differentiation among the cultures homogenized under the umbrella of "the Orient." Though, as Said mentions, we may learn to "unlearn" these practices of cultural domination and loosen divisive ideologies' grips on our conceptualizations of our world as existing in two parts: the western and the eastern worlds, *our* world and *their* world. But how? Several authors, including Bhabha (1994), Quayson (2011), and Hiddleston (2016) have written that literature — authors' construction of and readers' interpretive work with literature, specifically—may resurrect and ensure the survival of the individually and collectively oppressed. In an article examining this phenomenon of literature as survival in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, *Contemporary Literature's* Peter Earle wrote that:

Only a writer endowed with a comparably wide range of secret powers is likely to exercise effectively the art of survival... By the art or literature of survival I mean the

ultimate power of testimony through the creative use of memory. That is, creative power enables testimony to transcend obstacles, ignorance and repression. (2001, p. 553)

In this review, I will argue for Bao Ninh's successful utilization of literature as a tool for dismantling Orientalism and thus, as a means to guarantee his own survival and the preservation of North Vietnamese narrative agency. I will provide reference to several authors who've already thoroughly explicated Ninh's debut novel as a masterclass in employing craft and literature as survival and coping mechanisms in my attempts to uniquely classify *The Sorrow of War* as a piece of literature that achieves Ninh's goal in a manner that is three-dimensional, in which Ninh—in the construction of his novel—not only ensures his own survival, but also immortalizes his and others' memory and advocates for North Vietnam's undeniable narrative agency in the process.

### ***Literature as Resolution***

Ninh's novel revolves around Kien—the central figure whose experiences on the battlefield, as a member of North Vietnam's MIA recovery team and as a survivor of the Vietnam War are explicitly chronicled in *The Sorrow of War*. Ninh, through Kien, leaves nothing to the imagination regarding the healing power of literature (and, specifically, of crafting literature). In a 2018 interview with Union College's Bunkong Tuon, when asked about the role of war literature, Ninh remarked that, "Literature is the opposite of war, which is death and hellfire. Literature is life and peace... To write brutally and honestly about the war is to think about peace and the future" (2017, p. 3). While initially Kien writes that his life, in the immediate aftermath of the war, seems "detached and apart from him, floating in a void" (Ninh, 1996, p. 16), Kien is eventually able to discover what it is that can finally take him "from turmoil to peace" (p. 76) and free him from those "past years" that "imprison" him (p. 44). As the "sorrows of war and his nostalgia [drive] him deep down into the depths of his imagination" (p. 173), Kien is able to recognize "some wonderful truth deep inside him" (p. 76); now, in the aftermath of the war, his "duty" becomes to "expose the realities of war and to tear aside conventional images" of post-war Vietnam (p. 50); to fulfill this "sacred, heavenly duty of which [his] novel would become the earthly manifestation" (p. 57).

Ninh writes that, for Kien, the path of war, and its aftermath, "seemed endless, desperate and leading nowhere" (p. 15). In his postwar experiences, however, Kien discovers that this "endless" path, for some, *does* conclude somewhere. In the novel's second half, Kien travels to the Balcony Café, a nightclub in central Hanoi "unofficially known as the Veterans' Club" (p. 151), where he encounters several former soldiers utterly broken by their experiences. Ninh introduces us to Vuong, a former armored-car driver, for example, who, following the war and his inability to find steady employment in its aftermath, every night goes "into a steep dive," drinking relentlessly "until he drop[s]" (p. 153). Kien, reflecting on Vuong's self-destruction, explains that it was "sad, almost unbelievable, that such a tough and courageous fighter could fall so quickly in the postwar days" (p. 152). As the men

he served alongside slip away, falling victim to unbridled PTSD and its poisonous alternatives, Kien immerses himself in his writing—a way for him to outwardly express his trauma in a way that isn't self-destructive. This is where Kien's "endless" path concludes—not drunk on the floor of the Balcony Café, but with the "earthly manifestation" of his suffering: a novel that exposes the realities of war and provides an outlet for the trauma that, when internalized, is all too often fatal.

### ***Literature as Testimony***

Kien ensures his own survival by making use of what Earle labels "the ultimate power of testimony"—through literature and authorship—and by assuring himself that his novel transcends an existence as merely some sort of earthly, sterile transcription of the events of the Vietnam War. Indeed, Kien's writing, as counter to his post-traumatic stress, succeeds in sustaining him on earth in the aftermath of the war, yet there is another element to Kien's "sacred" and "heavenly" post-war duty: as a survivor of the war, Kien also believes he has "the burden of his generation, a debt to repay before dying" weighing on his shoulders. Just as he writes to ensure his own survival, he writes to memorialize the victims of the Vietnam War; those that have surrendered their voices in death, whether they'd succumb to the fire of American machine guns or to the torment of their tortured minds. As Earle writes, literature, and Kien's ability to bear witness and provide testimony for and faces to the "nameless ordinary soldiers... [of] Vietnam" (p. 192) through literature is how he copes with his own trauma, and ensures the survival of not only himself, but of his already fallen compatriots.

To write, and to "expose the realities of war," as I've noted, is a distinctive choice on Kien's (Ninh's) part. As the *Commentary's* Charles Horner wrote in 1995, Ninh, an "actual fighter, one whose 500-man infantry brigade... melted away to ten survivors by war's end...by virtue of [his] credentials, could have enjoyed an honored existence in post-1975 Vietnam; but... opted otherwise" (p. 50). Horner could just have well been writing about Kien, too—*The Sorrow of War's* author and central figure, in choosing to write their novels, make a choice not only as a means to cope with their otherwise internalized suffering and ensure their survival, but to guarantee the longevity of their account and the memory of those they served alongside. Ninh's novel is not without commentary on the significance of leaving behind such a lasting account or memory of Kien or his compatriots' existence. A little over halfway through *The Sorrow of War*, Kien's father, an eccentric, aging artist, upon feeling the "touch of death" in late 1965, goes "on an orgy of self-destruction, shredding his canvases, then burning them," leaving behind "nothingness." Ninh writes that in the aftermath of this "crazed, barbarous ceremony," every "trace of [Kien's] father had been wiped away... His father had quit the world, gone in a sleepwalker's dream, taking with him forever [his] deathly yellow paintings" (p. 128). The parallels between his father's "barbarous" ceremony and the scorching barbarity of the Vietnam War are clear; thus, so too is Ninh's message: rather than allow himself or those otherwise "nameless" soldiers to fade into a similar "nothingness,"

Kien ensures that he and the fallen will leave *something* behind: a testimony—one that may “transcend obstacles, ignorance and repression.” (Earle, p. 553)

***Literature as Autonomy***

Ninh’s novel and Kien’s brutally honest testimony *do* transcend obstacles, ignorance and repression by giving a voice not only to the dead, but to the suppressed. Suppression of North Vietnamese voices in popular narratives of the Vietnam War are a product of Orientalism. In her book, *Gender and Warfare in the Twentieth Century*, Angela Smith writes that “since the earliest days of Western civilisation, soldiering has represented the ultimate in manliness. Prowess on the field of battle... has been an integral part of the way masculinity has been constructed for generations” (2004, p. 174). Not only has the West’s widespread cultural dominance given this half of the world the ability to construct popular culture’s concept of masculinity, but it has also given the West an unofficial precedence when it comes to narratives of the Vietnam War. Discussing Vietnam specifically, Smith writes that, “combative action in Vietnam often appears in terms of graphically violent representation, focusing on the victim of the violence or on the act itself, distilling the way in which the soldier is perceived.” (p. 177) The West, having “defined” masculinity, coupled with a focus on Vietnam’s victims in popular narratives from the war, America’s loss—and subsequent “victimhood”—puts the nation in prime position to perpetuate images of the North Vietnamese as savage, vicious and ultimately unsuffering and triumphant victors of the Vietnam War.

While it’s true that the Vietnam War “lingers in American minds like the memory of an illness” (Smith, p. 186) and U.S. President Lyndon Johnson’s “determination to pursue war against [Vietnam] alienated many” (Rollins, 1984, p. 420), many popular Vietnam War narratives—especially those written or produced in the ten or so years immediately following the conflict—perpetuated “the myth of American innocence and benevolence” in Vietnam while irrefutably dehumanizing the North Vietnamese (p. 422). For example, in a 1984 article written for *American Quarterly*, Peter Rollins wrote that John Wayne’s *The Green Berets* and Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (p. 426), released in the almost immediate aftermath of the war, perpetuated the idea that the most tragic narrative of Vietnam was that of an American leaving behind a “healthy civilian environment to become immersed in a war that leaves him physically or psychically wounded” (p. 42). Despite widespread civilian and celebrity protest of the war in America, popular media’s insistence on promoting the image of the defeated, victimized American soldier—his innocence forcibly relieved of him in the jungles of Vietnam, his mind traumatized by images of death, gore and of war—encourages the American mind to inevitably and adversely envision the North Vietnamese as vengeful, triumphant victors, furiously pounding their fists on their chests as they celebrate having emerged from Vietnam’s jungles “better off” than their American invaders.

In a 2008 article written for *PMLA*, Yen Le Espiritu wrote that:

Today, more than thirty years after the fall of Saigon... Public recollections of the Vietnam War—the war with the difficult memory—often involve the organized

and strategic forgetting of the Vietnamese people (Sturken 122). As scholars, public historians, and the media have repeatedly documented, Vietnamese bodies, during and after the war, have not been accorded the same humanity and dignity given to American bodies... The controversial Vietnam War Memorial, commissioned to commemorate and memorialize the American soldiers who fought in Vietnam, provides a pointed example of this “forgetting.” Framed within the nationalist context of the Washington Mall, the memorial must “forget” the Vietnamese and “remember” the American veterans as the primary victims of the war. (pp. 1701-1702)

As Le Espiritu notes, such dehumanizing images of the North Vietnamese are a product of exclusion. While the West inundates popular media and perception with images of the battered American soldier, readers are left to “fill in the gaps” by conjuring juxtaposed images of the boastful North Vietnamese army to contrast with those of bested and battered armed forces of the U.S. As discussed above, however, novels like Ninh’s—those that provide crucial testimony to the experiences of the North Vietnamese—exhibit otherwise. Scenes from *The Sorrow of War*, like that which takes place inside Hanoi’s Balcony Café, for example, illustrate that for Kien, Ninh, and other authors of Vietnam War narratives told from the perspective of the North Vietnamese, “victory is fundamentally a hollow nationalist discourse that speaks little of the experiences of ordinary Vietnamese who had to endure extreme suffering and loss, the effects of which often continue even decades later” (Ng, 2014, p. 83). Ninh makes no secret of the trauma and suffering Kien endures in the aftermath of the war—he hardly embodies the image of a triumphant victor; he is hardly a survivor. Tellingly too, while Kien laments that, after the war, there is no sense of “enlightenment,” or “hope... for a beautiful future...” even in the war’s immediate conclusion Kien isn’t granted any sense of reprieve or relief, let alone joy. As *Commentary*’s Charles Horner wrote in 1995:

The narrator and the few survivors of his brigade were among those present in Saigon on April 30, 1975, the last day of the war. But, as he recalls the event years afterward, even at the time they did not experience that soaring and brilliant happiness they would later see depicted in films about the fall of the city. (p. 51)

### ***Ninh’s Masterstroke: Literature as Reappropriation***

Accounts like Ninh’s work to counter the sort of generalizations and hyperbolics that Orientalism encourages. Instead of perpetuating an image of a nation of blood-thirsty killers and jubilant victors, *The Sorrow of War* sheds light on the experiences of men like Kien, Vuong and others, who, in the immediate and years-long aftermath of the war, found themselves just as empty, unemployed, bested and broken by conflict as their opponents. For the North Vietnamese, there was just as much a loss of innocence, tranquility and harmony as there was for Americans who participated in Vietnam’s bloodiest conflict. Unsurprisingly, a multitude of studies were published in the aftermath of the Vietnam War emphasizing the debilitating and crippling effects of the war on the American psyche, economy, military and politics, including how the war “increase[ed] popular suspicion of [American] government, leaders and institutions” (Herring, 1991,

p. 117). However, studies emerging primarily in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries would finally detail too the physical and psychological tolls endured by the U.S.' counterpart in America's supposed war against "hardline communism." In a 1995 article written for *Economic and Political Weekly*, M.S. Shivakumar wrote that:

Vietnam lost hundreds of thousands of people... [and] has about 600,000 war invalids among northern veterans and two million civilians who suffer from the 'war trauma'. Even today any visitor to North Vietnam observes lot of evidence of destruction and torment the place endured, either physically or among the people. Vietnam has spent two decades caring for the war invalids and will probably spend more time in the future too. (p. 1836)

Ninh's novel, in explicit detail, emphasizes this reality that the North Vietnamese bled blood just as red as their American counterparts' and experienced the same sharp and dramatic sensations of guilt, loss and sorrow as their invaders. Unequivocally, Ninh's novel demonstrates that the men and women of North Vietnam who sacrificed their livelihood and gave their lives in the name of their nation suffered great losses and were definitively human, too.

In this book review, I've advocated for literature's ability to alleviate the internalized trauma of its characters and authors alike by providing them an outlet for expressing their trauma and providing testimony to their experiences, thus subsidizing the work of authors like Bhaba and Earle, who've advocated for a similar "power" of literature. My classification of Ninh's novel as a piece of literature that not only ensures Ninh's (Kien's) survival but memorializes those "nameless" other victims of the Vietnam War, humanizes the North Vietnamese and opposes suppression of the North Vietnamese wartime narratives contributes to discussions headed by Ng, Rollins and Smith, among others. Such a classification is distinctive because it explicates Ninh's three-fold manner of countering Orientalism and suggests that Ninh's greatest achievement in *The Sorrow of War* is his successful reappropriation of Orientalism's suppression of "the Orient" and of North Vietnamese narratives of the Vietnam War. In the novel, Ninh, through Kien, advocates for the use of literature as a means to suppress trauma, the lingering sorrows of war and the West's overwhelming suppression of "the Orient" and narratives of—in Ninh's case—the Vietnam War. Thus, Ninh takes ownership of suppression as both a personal and popular tool, using it to quell his own torment as well as to provide an undeniable narrative agency and autonomy to a nation historically rendered voiceless by the West's cultural suppression of the East.

### Conclusion

Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam* exemplifies the incredible power of literature. Ninh's debut novel provides a power, a voice and an autonomy to those nameless and voiceless victims of the Vietnam War traditionally silenced by the West's cultural domination, suppression and generalization of "the Orient." Daring to defy such a sweeping conceptualization of the North Vietnamese and the whole of the planet's eastern hemisphere, *The Sorrow of War* cues readers into the realities that there were no

“winners” of the Vietnam War: American and Vietnamese soldiers alike were and will forever be burdened by the bloodshed and horrors of their experience. Ninh’s novel is not without hope, however: *The Sorrow of War* explicitly defines the ability of literature to allow victims of war and violence—victims like Ninh himself—a sense of collective resolution, an outlet for providing testimony to their experiences, a means of immortalizing their memories and a method of elevating their voices above the suppression of dominant culture in order to provide themselves an undeniable narrative agency.

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