
Loss of Youth and Love in Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*

Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* connects the tragedy of wartime to the loss of youth and love. It is the story of an idealist named Kien and his first love, Phuong, and how the dramatic events of war caused their pure love to diminish little by little, until the relationship that once was ceased to exist. Ninh writes, "Kien thought back to the source of his own love, when he had been young. That was now hard to imagine, hard to remember a time when his whole personality and character had been intact, a time before the cruelty and the destruction of war had warped his soul." (30). In *The Sorrow of War*, Kien learns that the pure love he experienced as a seventeen year old boy is not attainable postwar because of the haunting events of the Vietnam War.

Before the war, when Kien was still young, he had a very romanticized view of the love he shared with Phuong. It was essentially love at its purest form. It was "so intimate, so perfect that it made [Kien] ache." (118). There was very little sexual interaction between Kien and Phuong, which emphasized the innocent state that both characters were in. Although they had both time and access to privacy, making them capable of physical interaction, Kien kept Phuong's virginity for the sake of purity and perfection. It was a simpler time when a virginal love could easily exist, because bloodshed, rape and war did not taunt and lurk at every corner. Kien idolized this idea of innocence and virginity, especially within Phuong. When the two laid next to one another, it was Phuong who insisted on kissing Kien, urging him to be more physical with her, while Kien was described as "nervous" and afraid to touch her "lovely body." (119). He was never able to fully consummate their youthful relationship, which shows how much value he places in purity. "It was a desperate, pure love, which ached within them." (131). Ninh associates the word "ache" when he talks about Kien and Phuong's pure love in several passages. He does this in order to emphasize how much value Kien associates with the days of his youth with Phuong. It made him ache to remember these times, because he would never be able to experience purity to this degree ever again. He idealized his age of innocence.

The love that Kien and Phuong shared before the war also functions as a metaphor for prewar Vietnam. Like the two lovers' relationship, everything was simpler and purer. The natural imagery used by Ninh in *The Sorrow of War* helps to emphasize the idea of innocence before the war. Kien remembers walking through Hanoi in his youth fondly: "Memories of a midday in dry season in beautiful sunshine, flowers in radiant blossom in the tiny forest clearing." (88). A similar, spring description was used to describe Kien and Phuong's relationship: "What a beautiful, warm and sweet April day it was." (118). Spring imagery is very effective, because it reinforces the idea of a simpler time where innocence easily existed. Prewar Vietnam was like Kien's relationship with Phuong in the sense that they both were representative of his youth. It was a more beautiful time that had not yet been tainted by the cruelty of war. However, like his

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relationship with Phuong, the city gradually moved past innocence into darkness as the war carried on. It was inevitable and sorrowful for Kien, because he placed so much value in the memories of his youth.

During the war, Kien struggled to hold on to his idealized vision of Phuong. It is his love for Phuong that essentially keeps him moving. “‘I wonder if they’ll bomb Hanoi,’ Huan asked. But Kien did not respond, realizing then that he had only come to see Phuong and that no one else mattered.” (161). Kien’s memories of Phuong before the war are dominantly positive, and it is these memories that he has no trouble remembering. Remembering Phuong in her youth became his oasis in the midst of turmoil. It is his love, or idea of love, that keeps Kien fighting and moving forward. On page 44, Kien’s nostalgia for the past is described, “At night while I sleep I hear my steps from a distant peacetime echoing on the pavement. I just have to shut my eyes to conjure up those past times and completely wipe out the present.” (44). Love acted as a fuel to help Kien function in the midst of war.

As Kien is pushed deeper into the war, more winter imagery was used by Ninh to describe the desolate and deadly times that Kien was living in. The city that he loved was burning down to the ground. The war came with heavy baggage – death, bloodshed, rape and prostitution. The winter imagery signals a change in tone. Unlike his prewar memories of Phuong, it is as if Kien would willingly dispose of his memories of Phuong during the war. Rather than making him ache, these memories are like a sharp pain.

Kien encounters many women during the war, mistaking them for Phuong, as if he was silently wishing that they were his young love. These women, who were so negatively affected by the war, become representatives of Phuong. Despite how beautiful and delicate these women were, they too were affected by the war. Kien slowly begins to fully comprehend that the haunting effects of the war were universal to all of Vietnam. Like many other women in Vietnam, Phuong becomes the victim of a rape. After that, Kien takes issue with holding Phuong close to him. His world seems to fall apart and he resorts to interacting with Phuong robotically, relying on instinct instead of passion and love. The woman that he was once so attached to, who was described as a shadow to his body, was now a victim of the war. She was part of the disarray and destruction. Kien began to turn some of his hate for the war to Phuong, because of some cruel comments made by several soldiers that labeled her a whore.

The physical rape of Kien’s beloved also functions as a metaphor to describe that the country of Vietnam was also being raped. It was being raped of all the goodness and purity that Kien once saw in it. Although the war eventually ended, Vietnam had become tainted, “bitter and sad.” (193). The country, like its people, had been negatively affected by the war. One of the sorrows of war is that Kien fought so hard to protect this idealized view of Vietnam and Phuong but what remained postwar was anything but innocent and pure. Like his relationship with

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Phuong, Postwar Vietnam was not the same Vietnam that Kien adored so much in his youth.

Although Kien finally discovered that the comments made by the soldiers were not true, it was impossible for him to go back to Phuong. If Kien tried to find the Phuong that he once loved, it would be a lost cause, because the war had an extreme effect on all of Vietnam, including the two lovers. He loved a Phuong that no longer existed. One of the sorrows of war is that the boy and girl that entered the war is never going to come out the same. The relationship that he cherished and romanticized at the beginning of the war really had no chance of lasting, because the war left “psychological scars.” (193). Postwar, Kien has a choice of either holding onto a war-tainted relationship with Phuong or holding onto the optimistic, idealized idea of their love in his head and physically letting his first love go. Both Kien and Phuong were too torn up by war to ever go back to the relationship that once was, so the decision is simple for Kien. He chose to hold on to the idea of their first love. “Despite the horrors of war, despite the cruelties, the humiliations, despite all the ridiculous prejudices and dogma which pervaded everyone’s life, his Phuong would remain young forever. She would be untainted by war... untouched, unchanged.” (227). The Sorrow of War powerfully depicts the effects of war on this tragic couple and, on a larger scale, the effects on an entire country.

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