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# The Literature of Trauma: Reading the Sorrow of Love in Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

### THE LITERATURE OF TRAUMA: READING THE SORROW OF LOVE IN BAO NINH'S *THE SORROW OF WAR*

RYAN SKINNELL

Readings of Vietnam literature often revolve around the discussion and resolution of a central event. In some books, such as *Born on the Fourth of July*, by Ron Kovic, the event is one in which the protagonist struggles to remember a key episode that reshaped his conception of self, glory, and duty. In some books, such as *Home Before Morning*, by Linda Van Devanter, the central event is an acknowledgment of a specific failure and the search for salvation. Invariably, at the heart of any work of Vietnam War literature, there must be a discussion of trauma and how that trauma affects the survivor. According to Kali Tal, in her essay, "Speaking the Language of Pain: Vietnam War Literature in the Context of a Literature of Trauma," narratives that address the trauma of war have long been categorized as explaining their own specialized type of trauma, regardless of the author's actual knowledge of the war. In other words, different traumas equal different types of literature, and any Vietnam War literature of trauma is analogous with any other. Tal declares, however, "For combat veterans, [...] Retelling the war in a memoir or describing it in a novel involves not merely the development of alternative national myths, [...] but also the necessary rebuilding of shattered personal myths," whereas nonveteran authors produce war literature for different reasons than veterans, such as "to tell a story, make a point, create an aesthetic experience" (226). Tal advocates recognizing the difference between telling a story that allows a survivor/author to rediscover cultural space in which to reestablish him or herself in order to live and telling a story because an author wants to reach an audience. That is, according to Tal, literature written by trauma survivors is "qualitatively different" than literature written about survivors (217). An author who was never a

combat soldier can never approximate the personal investment in the story that a combat veteran must, and consequently, the literature produced by each group must be evaluated in different ways. Tal goes further to explain that the literature of war, specifically the Vietnam War, must be categorized using different criteria: literature written by veterans and literature written by nonveterans.

Literature written by combat veterans is often a writer-based struggle to tell the truth, or at the very least, a truth, about a situation in which trauma was survived. Tal considers trauma literature of Vietnam veterans to be more like the literature of other trauma survivors, such as Holocaust, rape, incest, and A-bomb survivors, than it is like the literature of combat nonveterans. She claims, "One of the strongest themes in the literature of trauma is the urge to bear witness, to carry the tale of horror back to the halls of normalcy and to testify to the truth of the experience" (229). To support her claim, Tal quotes Holocaust survivor and author, Elie Weisel, saying "I never intended to be a philosopher or a theologian. The only role I sought was witness. [...] I was duty-bound to give meaning to my survival" (qtd. in Tal 229–230). In effect, Tal, along with Weisel, believes that the literature produced by war veterans is not about telling the story of war; it is not about reproducing the horrific, painful, harrowing moments of a survivor's life in order to effect a change within the audience. Rather, veterans who experience trauma write their stories in order to give meaning to their survival and to present evidence that there was truth in their experience. The literature of trauma seeks to communicate the meaning of an experience which can never truly be communicated nor experienced through language.

In addition, in survivors' processes of communicating their experiences, one of the most important byproducts of producing trauma literature is the victim/author's attempt to become part of a community of survivors. Often, the trauma that one experiences is so diminished by words, and therefore unable to be truly conveyed to a reader, that trauma survivors often become reticent about discussing the site of their trauma. Tal says, "If the members of a persecuted group define themselves as a community bonded by their common misfortune and see their individual sufferings as part of a common plight, then and only then will the urge to bear witness be present" (235). She goes on to argue that sufferers who believe themselves to be alone and not members of a larger community of sufferers will likely suffer quietly, not seeking out opportunities to bear witness, and eventually deciding that their trauma is in some way what they deserve (235). Authors who step forward to tell their stories, to make an attempt at expressing the details of their trauma, want to increase the

knowledge within and about their trauma community in order that they may be a benefit to that community.

In contrast, the literature of nonveteran writers can generally be viewed as reader-based prose in which the story serves as a metaphor for a lesson to be learned. Tal states, “War literature by nonveterans can be critiqued in the same manner as other genre literatures” (225–226). A novel written about a war by someone who was never present in the war must be analyzed using the same principles as one would use to analyze any piece of fiction as a means of understanding the lesson. Using such elements as character, plot, and narrative style, nonveteran war literature can be read with the goal of determining the metaphor to which the author is alluding. Readers are meant to ingest the literature and make determinations for themselves about what is significant and what is central to the meaning. The literature struggles to affect the reader and does not necessarily struggle to bear witness to an atrocity or provide a human truth about an actual traumatic event.

Using Tal’s contentions about the literature produced by survivors of the Vietnam War and other traumas opens up an important perspective for discussing Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War* (*Sorrow*). *Sorrow* can easily be read as a war novel and discussed as a graphic reproduction of war-related trauma. Some of the most moving events in the novel are in the form of flashbacks to war-time events. For example, Ninh’s main character, Kien, recalls at one point the capture and torture of several South Vietnamese soldiers responsible for the deaths of three innocent women. Over the course of several chapters, Kien agonizes over his own responsibility for deciding the fates of the offending soldiers even as he oversees them digging their own graves. Throughout the novel, Kien repeatedly flashes back to the sorrow of the war, narrating incalculable horrors through almost platitudinous phrases, such as, “When will my heart be free of the tight grip of war?” and “My memories of war are always close by, easily provoked at random moments” (44). Kien is clearly haunted by the time he spent in combat, recalling painful memories in the course of his writing. He finds himself lost in the turn of fan blades that become, for him, the blades of an American helicopter. He mourns the death of his last friend at Tan Son Nhat airport, mere hours before the end of the war. He passionately describes “deadly B-52 raids and U. S. helicopter attacks, [his] grim labors as a member of the Remains Gathering Team and [...] and his frequent nightmares about the ‘Screaming Souls Jungle’” (Nguyen). Using Kien’s own building blocks for the story, it becomes quite clear that the war has changed him and has irrevocably altered his character.

In the context of Tal's distinction between the literature of veterans and nonveterans, *Sorrow* at first seems exemplary. Bao Ninh was a North Vietnamese soldier who, like his protagonist, was one of ten survivors out of 500 members of his brigade. Like Kien, Ninh fought for several years, and perhaps witnessed many or all of the atrocities described in *Sorrow*. In fact, there has been much speculation that Kien is indeed "a thinly disguised portrait of the author as a young man" (Goldenberg) and that *Sorrow* is autobiographical to varying degrees. Regardless of the fidelity of the novel to Ninh's actual experiences, *Sorrow* is indeed a piece of literature written by a combat veteran with the apparent goal of communicating truths. Kien's suffering, and by extension Ninh's, is palpable and it is clear that the novel was not written simply to tell a story, make a point, create an aesthetic experience, but seems crafted rather to bear witness to the truth of his war. By Tal's paradigm, readers may be equipped to receive the "truth" of Kien's service and trauma because of Ninh's own experience and because, by Tal's definition, *Sorrow* can be read as more than a war story—it can be studied as a transformational narrative by critics who "define their position as outside readers" and "bring to bear the tools of sociology, psychology, and psychiatry—an understanding of *trauma*—to the task of reading the literature of survivors" (247 emphasis in original). *Sorrow* as a war story demands the kind of attention Tal would have critics pay it.

And yet, *Sorrow* is also confounding. In order to know that *Sorrow* is worthy of the kind of reading Tal would have critics undertake, readers must be aware of Ninh's history. Critics must first undertake contextualizing research before reading the novel, or at least before critiquing it. In the event that a reader picks up the book without knowledge of Ninh's history, she might read *Sorrow* with the goal of performing a traditional criticism of the characters, plot, or narrative style. For Tal, the possibility of this sort of misinterpretation might be insignificant because of the writer-centered nature she sees in trauma literature. What does a trauma survivor care if readers misinterpret? The language is not primarily for readers' benefit anyway.

However, a traditional reading of *Sorrow* points to another problematic aspect of the book. While war trauma is a major and recurring theme of the novel, *Sorrow* can actually be read as a book about the trauma of rape; specifically it is the rape of Kien's boyhood girlfriend, Phuong, around which the narrative, fragmented as it is, is built. As the story proceeds, there is much made of the exploits of war and the sorrow that it visits upon the combatants and the people with whom the combatants associate themselves. The book leaves readers with no doubt about the accuracy of

the truism “War is hell.” But the dramatic and traumatic event that appears at the logical point near the end of the book, the unified action around which all the other actions revolve, is the scene in which Phuong accompanies Kien on the train ride to find his unit, and she is brutally raped. In the context of a late night bombing raid by American forces, Kien is thrown from the train car he is travelling in with Phuong. He slowly makes his way back much later to find her bleeding and vacant with a ripped blouse and torn slacks. “Kien felt himself unable to cope or to understand fully what had happened” (Ninh 204). Kien is stunned and infuriated, even to the point of killing the soldier who stopped the rape from continuing. He lashes out at Phuong for trying to stop his murderous reaction, calling her a whore and shoving her away. He even leaves her, alone and lost, because he is unable to comprehend the reality of her rape. Using Aristotelian guidelines for drama, we can see this as the dramatic end of *Sorrow*. This series of events is placed at the end of the book, at the point where Western novels usually locate their central drama. All the events used to set up Phuong’s rape are simply elaborations that make the trauma of the rape all the more dramatic. The descriptions of war that take place chronologically after Phuong’s rape, but textually prior, inform the reader as to what kind of repercussions the rape trauma had in Kien’s life. Descriptions of Kien’s encounters with women are suddenly recontextualized in light of the relationship he had with Phuong. And finally, we can see the beginnings of resolution where the writer within the story begins to finish his narrative after he completes recounting the memory from the train ride. In essence, a possible, and to my mind persuasive, reading of *Sorrow* is that the central trauma of the book is Phuong’s rape, a trauma which compounds and is compounded by the subsequent trauma of war.

If, indeed, Phuong’s rape is the central trauma of the narrative, it must be considered that Kien’s suffering in the war, while significant as a source of trauma, extends but does not displace the trauma he suffered on the train before the war had even begun for him. Reviewers of *Sorrow* have seen “Love seem[ing] to be totally [eclipsed] by the narratives about the war—the killing, the dying, and the brutalizing—and about heroism and cowardice” (Lam), but, in fact, Kien’s relationship with Phuong is a recurrent touch point within the narrative. For example, prior to the scene where Kien describes the capture of the South Vietnamese soldiers, Kien allows his soldiers to break military rules and meet up with the women that the South Vietnamese end up killing because he is nostalgic for his own boyhood days in love with Phuong. Nearly every scene of war-related trauma can be located near a memory of Phuong in the days before her

rape and Kien's resulting trauma, and it seems that for every episode that haunts Kien from his war experience, another memory haunts him as much, or more, from his relationship with Phuong. That the narrative then builds to the rape and not to a clear instance of "war trauma" suggests that the pain Kien harbors extends from the rape, even if it is not encompassed by it. Therefore, if Phuong's rape is the single unifying event around which Kien's traumatic story revolves, *Sorrow* is potentially problematic for Tal's argument.

First, Phuong's rape as the focal point of *Sorrow* is troubling in the context of Tal's distinction between the literature of survivors and non-survivors. While there is at least circumstantial evidence that Bao Ninh was a soldier in the same vein as his protagonist, there is no evidence to suggest that Ninh experienced the same central trauma as his main character Kien. In fact, in an interview, Ninh acknowledges only that "[Kien and I] are alike in that I was a soldier who experienced the war and so is Kien" (Larimer). Ninh is quite reticent about drawing any further parallels between himself and his main character who experiences such incredible traumatic stress. Furthermore, even if the events surrounding and including Phuong's rape are in fact based on historical events to which Ninh was a party, there is still the problematic issue that neither Kien nor Ninh was the victim of the rape. That is, though Kien obviously suffers as a result of Phuong's rape and Ninh does an exceptional job of conveying the experience, the men were not raped, which begs the question of whether the narrative leading up to and including Phuong's rape is literature written by a trauma survivor or literature written about a trauma survivor.

Second, the rape as focal point complicates Tal's notion of community. She writes of trauma survivors, "The community of Holocaust victims, the community of combat survivors, and the community of rape and incest survivors are very different in composition, and thus the work of bearing witness is quite different within each of them" (235). In Tal's formula, it seems, there is little room for the multiplicity of traumas present in *Sorrow*, unless multiplicity itself constitutes its own different composition and therefore different process for bearing witness. If *Sorrow* is, as most reviewers have seen it, witness only to the horrors of war, Tal's division is easily applicable—Ninh was a soldier and his book is a testament to the truth of his combat trauma. Ninh belongs in the community of war veterans. However, other possibilities exist. If *Sorrow* bears witness to the brutality of rape, but Ninh is a member of the combat veteran community and excluded from the community of rape survivors because he did not survive a rape, readers must question the fidelity of truth in the central

event of the novel. Perhaps the truth of the war is decipherable, but perhaps the truth of the rape is only comprehensible in the context of war. Or, perhaps the multiplicity of traumas does differentiate the experience conveyed in *Sorrow* from other traumas. Of course, if this is so, the community of survivors to which Ninh belongs (combat survivor and rape victim) is virtually non-existent, or more accurately, over-determined in such a way as to be worthless. Still another possibility is that, if the trauma of Phuong's rape does not make the trauma of war different for Kien (and Ninh) than for his fellow soldiers, then it is nearly impossible to reconcile the central trauma of the novel with the need to bear witness as a member of the combat veteran community without simply turning the rape into a war trauma and eliding the differences in war and rape trauma that Tal sees. In any case, the possibility exists that the rape as unifying event in *Sorrow* could serve as much to isolate Ninh from communities of survivors, even as he may be writing to find a place within a community, as to ingratiate him. So ultimately, the question becomes: Does suffering any trauma qualify an author to bear witness to the truth of another kind of trauma? In terms of trauma communities, is it simply a case of "any port in the storm"?

While there is no easy way to reconcile the many functions of *Sorrow* with some of Tal's arguments, I have perhaps beleaguered the issue more than is necessary considering that one of Tal's central points is that the trauma of war is very similar, if not the same, as the trauma of other survivors. She writes, "A careful study of the literature produced by trauma survivors points to a certain uniformity of experience and unanimity of intention which transcends the particular incidents described" (229). If it is true that the specific trauma becomes almost a moot point and that intention of the author becomes central, then it can be concluded that *Sorrow* is trauma literature written by a survivor. Ninh survived the trauma of war as a North Vietnamese soldier; and he seeks to bear witness to an atrocity, regardless of what that atrocity transforms into in the novel. The knowledge that Ninh writes a novel from the perspective of a trauma survivor, however, doesn't entirely answer an important question for readers: "How does the rape as the central site of trauma affect how one reads this book?" If all trauma literature struggles to convey a traumatic event, and if the uniformity of experience limits the value of identifying the specific trauma, how does the knowledge that Kien's central trauma is his witnessing Phuong's rape illuminate the text for readers? One part of the answer is that, since *Sorrow* has been identified, by readers and its author, as a novel about war, future readers may read it as simply a novel about the North Vietnamese experience in war and the resulting trauma(s).

Another part of the answer is that, because a Western audience will always search for the differences and similarities between the North Vietnamese experience and the Western experience during the Vietnam conflict, the difference in the site of trauma may be a source of discussion about how the trauma from war differs from the trauma in war. As Tim O'Brien points out, when telling a true war story, "The truths are contradictory [...] and a true war story will tell the truth about this" (80-81).

The simple smoothing over of individual experiences that Tal performs raises important issues which there is not room here to discuss, such as the truth in individual rather than communal traumas, but to the extent that readers and critics can overlook the particularities of the individuals' experiences of trauma, they might be led to read *Sorrow* as more than a soldier's experience of the carnage of battlefields. By incorporating male and female, civilian and military, individual and collective, battlefield and hometown, and pre-war, in-war, and post-war traumas, Ninh has written trauma literature for an entire society that has suffered irreparable damage with which they must live. Maybe the difference in trauma between *Sorrow* and other novels in which the trauma can be located is best summed up by O'Brien's belief that the truths are contradictory. The truths that Bao Ninh is interested in conveying inevitably become lost in the language, and the only conclusion left to draw is that *The Sorrow of War* is a war story about love that must also tell a love story about war in order to bear witness to the truth of the experience.

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