



The Sorrow of War – A Different Approach to the Post-War Narrative

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Received: 15.05.2025 | Accepted: 15.06.2025 | Published: 18.06.2025

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.15692461](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15692461)

Abstract

This paper focuses on analyzing *The Sorrow of War* by Bảo Ninh as a symbol of the renewed perspective and narrative approach to war literature in Vietnam after 1975. Rather than glorifying victory or depicting one-dimensional heroism, the novel delves into the tragic fate of individuals during and after the war—most notably through the character of Kiên, a soldier who survives the battlefield but remains haunted by his past. Through a contemplative narrative style, nonlinear structure, the use of stream-of-consciousness technique, and multiple narrative viewpoints, Bảo Ninh exposes not only the physical pain of war but also the persistent, silent psychological trauma it leaves behind. This artistic choice renders *The Sorrow of War* a profoundly humanistic work, awakening readers to the devastating consequences of war—not only in the time of bombs and bullets, but also in the fragile peace that follows. The novel marks Bảo Ninh's exceptional talent in pushing the boundaries of war literature and contributes to shaping a more reflective, dialogical perspective on history.

Keywords: The Sorrow of War, Bảo Ninh, Post-War, Human Condition, Artistic Perspective, Narrative Form.

Original Research Article

Citation: Nguyen, P. H., & Nghiem, T. H. (2025). The sorrow of war – A different approach to the post-war narrative. *ISA Journal of Multidisciplinary (ISAJM)*, 2(3), May–June, 138–142.

1. INTRODUCTION

When responding to Today Newspaper (*Ngày Nay*) of the Self-Reliant Literary Group (*Tự Lực văn đoàn*), Vũ Trọng Phụng once stated: “You want novels to remain just novels. I and writers who share my vision want novels to reflect the truth of life.” With that open-minded and democratic spirit, Vietnamese writers brought forth a more multidimensional, profound, and fresh perspective on the war that the entire nation endured. This is especially evident in post-war themed literary works from the early 1990s. Notable examples include: *A Very Long Day* (*Ngày rất dài*) by Nam Hà, *The Last Epic Song* (*Khúc bi tráng cuối cùng*), *Red Rain* (*Mưa đỏ*) by Chu Lai, *The Crimson Leaf Forests* (*Những cánh rừng lá đỏ*) by Hồ Phương, *The Sinking Waves* (*Sóng chìm*) by Đình Kinh, *Lost in the Forest* (*Lạc rừng*), *Farewell to the Sad Days* (*Tiễn biệt những ngày buồn*) by Trung Trung Đĩnh, *Black Ashes with Red Spots* (*Tàn đen đốm đỏ*) by Phạm Ngọc Tiến, *Firewall, Confrontation* (*Đồi chiến*) by Khuất Quang Thụy, and *Thượng Đức* by Nguyễn Bảo.

Amid this authentic literary world, a unique space bears the name Bảo Ninh—marked by the colors and lines of war that feel both strange and familiar, both distinctive and grounded in ordinary life. Bảo Ninh built the house of *The Sorrow of War* by collecting fragments of emotion, overflowing with the haunting memories of Kiên—the novel's main character.

2. RESEARCH CONTENT

2.1. The Pain of Human Existence in *The Sorrow of War*

Vietnamese novels on war written after 1986 have seen the emergence of many prominent literary figures: Nguyễn Minh Châu, Nguyên Ngọc, Phùng Quán, Lê Lưu, Trần Huy Quang, Xuân Đức, Nguyễn Trọng Oánh, Nguyễn Trí Huân, Bảo Ninh, Chu Lai, Trung Trung Đĩnh, Khuất Quang Thụy, Sương Nguyệt Minh, and others. Many of them were soldier-writers who participated directly in the war. As vigorous and committed voices, they contributed significantly to the renewal of the Vietnamese novel in general and to the evolving post-

war consciousness in particular.

A shared feature among these writers—who depicted the resistance war against the Americans during this period—is that they all experienced firsthand the “blood and flowers” of battle across the nation. Chu Lai, author of a series of war and soldier-themed novels such as *Phố* (The Street), *Ăn mày dĩ vãng* (Begging the Past), *Vòng tròn bội bạc* (The Circle of Betrayal), and *Ba lần và một lần* (Three Times and Once), had endured long months of combat on the outskirts of Saigon. Trung Trung Đĩnh, another writer well-versed in Central Highlands culture, directly fought in guerrilla warfare, drawing upon rich lived experience for his writing. Similarly, Lê Lưu, Khuất Quang Thụy, Nguyễn Trí Huân, and Trần Huy Quang also wore the military uniform, which gave them a profound understanding of the brutal nature of war.

Thus, war in their works is not merely a backdrop of historical events and dramatic episodes—it is a canvas of human destinies and personal tragedies during and after the conflict. These soldier-writers endeavored to uncover hidden truths through a more grounded and objective lens. One major reason for this shift in perspective is the growing temporal distance from the war, which afforded writers a necessary detachment to revisit the truth more candidly and authentically.

Like a surging river flowing into the vast ocean, war flooded the creative consciousness of countless artists and writers. War permeated artistic life and became a familiar, captivating theme. However, war often brings with it sorrow, hardship, sacrifice, and irreparable loss. Literature that remains confined to a single, rigid perspective cannot open paths for readers to deeply understand the multifaceted, ever-turning reality of life. Each literary work, if it transcends the boundaries of printed text to truly reflect reality, will be etched in readers' memories as an unforgettable mark.

Scholar Nguyễn Văn Long observed: “The farther away the war recedes, the clearer and more distilled the memories become. As war enters the pages of literature, it must expand to embrace its many dimensions. Because now, readers have the right to understand the two brutal wars that have passed just as they truly were” [4, p.18].

Destroying life and culture, war swept people into a whirlwind of fire and bullets, forcing them to live in an abnormal state of existence. Writers faced these truths head-on and did not shy away from exposing “the reverse side of the medal”—the pain, loss, and long-lasting consequences that war inflicted upon individuals and post-war society. The silence after the war allowed writers to probe more deeply into the sacrifices and losses in order to explore human psychology. Their courage in unearthing the hidden corners of reality and in speaking painful truths—such as disillusionment, despair, casualties, and death—demonstrated a determined effort to correct earlier one-sided depictions of wartime reality in literature.

It is no coincidence that *The Sorrow of War* became a literary “phenomenon” in the 1980s and 1990s. The novel expresses not just the sorrow of war itself, but the pain of human existence. Bảo Ninh's achievement lies not only in the

authenticity and new perspective he brings to the war, but also in his fresh approach to feeling, interpreting, and reflecting on the theme. His work resonates not only with philosophical depth but also with artistic intensity. Even the title serves as a powerful artistic signal—representing anguish, loss, and the soldier's haunting trauma from the brutality of war. Greater than physical pain is the psychological suffering, what we now call “war syndrome.” In a sense, Kiên—the protagonist—is a mentally ill man afflicted with post-war trauma. Emerging from the battlefield, still stunned by the horror, Kiên is immediately confronted by the dark sides of post-war society. He embodies the tragedy of a soldier during and after the war. Even a few lines sketching his appearance hint at the deep wounds of his soul: “He was tall and slim, his face unhandsome, sullen, with a savage look in his eyes. His skin was dry and dark, pockmarked, shriveled like leather, speckled with gunpowder burns, and his lips tightly pressed. A bullet scar ran close to the bone on his cheek.” [5, p.294]; “His gaze was discouraging. A fixed stare that saw nothing at all—empty and numb.” [5, p.75]. By choosing Kiên as the central character, Bảo Ninh opens up multiple perspectives for readers to confront this harsh reality. In post-war novels, war is no longer portrayed as “logical” but rather as “paradoxical” (Hoàng Ngọc Hiến), for nowhere else do victorious soldiers return bearing “the sorrow of survival.” They feel they have been “cast out from the roadside” (*Begging the Past*), or “left stranded in this world” (*The Sorrow of War*). They are isolated, caught in an “endless chain of dull, dreary, sickeningly peaceful days.” With nothing to hold onto but “a fragment of the past fluttering in a fragile chest,” they are disillusioned, anguished, and enraged at the indifference of others to a war their generation hurled themselves into. More than ever, Kiên (in *The Sorrow of War*) realizes that he and his comrades are all victims of war—whether dead or alive, each one was shattered by it in their own way. His new life is no different from the one already lost: a youth consumed by the sorrow of war.

In *The Sorrow of War*, Bảo Ninh immerses readers in a multidimensional worldview by portraying the tragedy of a soldier during both wartime and postwar periods. As Kiên recalls the memories of the days gone by, he simultaneously travels back in time to relive the raw emotions of the past: “All of them were blasted out of their bunkers by napalm, went mad, fell face-first into the sea of fire. Above their heads, helicopters skimmed the treetops, thrusting their machine guns into the napes of their necks and opening fire. Blood spurted out, soaking hair, gushing in torrents, filthy and smeared.” [5, p.7]. This passage reads like a close-up film shot. War is essentially a life-or-death struggle, a constant battle for survival — every day, every hour, every minute, every second — as death lurks around every corner. “But even now, and perhaps forever, Kiên cannot explain why, on that cold night, standing by the window watching the thin veil of rain slowly drift across the shivering, blue-gray air, swaying in the northeastern wind, as he longed for Phương, he suddenly saw the rainy season in Cảnh Bắc, saw Ngọc Bơ Ray, saw the Gỏi Hồn Pass. Why? Why did the faces of each comrade in his platoon appear? And what miracle then drove time even further back, to recreate before his eyes the horrific battle that wiped out his 27th battalion?” [5, p.16].

These questions reflect his anxiety, his inner torment, his self-interrogation, his never-ending anguish — or perhaps *his TRAGEDY*, his *PAIN*. The tragedy continues to engulf the mind of the returning soldier, who can never truly break free from the haunting past.

The weight of these horrifying memories prevents soldiers like Kiên from living in the present. Though he longs to escape, he remains stuck, unable to fully resurrect his soul or reintegrate into peacetime life. “The atmosphere in the room was strange, as if it had been sucked into the gravitational pull of the past: trembling, jolting, thudding with the shockwaves of hundreds of shells raining down on the Gỏi Hồn Pass. The walls of the room shook violently under the roar of dive-bombers.” [5, p.194]. Memory suddenly becomes a knife that cuts deep into the soul, saturated with the echoes of death and loss. Kiên — the soldier who survived and returned — cannot mend his life to live for the present or the future. He is trapped in the past — a past soaked in sorrow, a past in which he witnessed the deaths of his comrades, a bloody past where even tears can no longer fall. Can he not forget, or does he never allow himself to forget? Perhaps to forget would be a betrayal — but then again, is not remembering — remembering precisely and completely — a form of spiritual torment? The act of “Kiên jerking back from the window” seems to affirm his reversion to the past. He is retreating — retreating into pain, into memories that should have long remained buried. “His soul adrift, his consciousness blurred, confused and dazed, Kiên paced back and forth as flashes of memory struck him. Staggering down into a chair, he mechanically picked up a pen, and instead of writing a letter, he began writing something entirely different.” [5, p.210].

The human condition—especially that of people in wartime—has always been fertile ground for writers to explore, portray, and express their perspectives. Entering the literary world of Bảo Ninh, we do not simply witness the brutality and cruelty of war or the immense suffering, pain, and loss endured by those who fight. Rather, we are led to see life behind the heroic aura, behind the victory—a vision of individual and national fates whose right to live happily and peacefully has been stripped away by an unjust war. Looking at Kiên, we see that war does not merely steal one’s youth or prime years—it robs an entire lifetime. Kiên lives engulfed in enduring sorrow and loss, stretching from past to present. His realm of memory contains a vast sky of collective and personal recollections. What belongs to the individual may be buried or hidden, but what belongs to the collective often echoes powerfully. And so, “the very first story in his life cruelly revived the deadly battle at the Gỏi Hồn Pass.” That moment marked Kiên’s true return: “His whole life up to that point was suddenly illuminated by a stream of consciousness flowing backward through time.” The truth is that he “believed he had been resurrected, but it was a resurrection into the far reaches of the past.” It was a new life, the life that had passed—the youth of himself and his many comrades. He did not approach this life with the eagerness of youth or the joy of his twenties, but with heaviness, sorrow, and solitude. His memories returned in waves—shapes, voices, and lives around him resurfacing one by one. What Bảo Ninh offers that is unique is not a traditional realist novel, but rather a *stream-of-consciousness* novel. The term “stream of

consciousness” was coined by American psychologist William James in the late 19th century, who described consciousness as a continuous flow in which thoughts, sensations, and associations intertwine without conventional order or logic. Writers like James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and William Faulkner are prominent figures of this literary style.

Bảo Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War* opens with the image of a bulky Zil truck transporting the remains of fallen soldiers along a “miserably muddy and ruined road.” From the very image of the Gỏi Hồn Pass, Kiên’s stream of memory is awakened. The echo of the past pulls him back to “the unbearably harsh dry season throughout all of Zone B3, with the independent 27th battalion” [5, p.6]. One by one, the images of fallen comrades return with heartbreaking vividness, slow-motion horror scenes pulling him back to “blood spurting, gushing, soaking, filthy... brains bursting out of ears...” The savage, devastating attack that the enemy inflicted on the 27th battalion wiped everyone out—only Kiên remained. These young men, just seventeen, eighteen, or in their early twenties—heroes of their era—stand as monuments of tragic heroism in history. The sounds of rushing streams and howling winds become a call that drives the soldier back into a past that cannot rest. “As for Kiên, he was merely the writer, persistently and quietly blending his own fate with the shared fate of the characters. In general, he was extremely passive, almost becoming unknowable even to himself in the process of writing” [5, p.115]. The unconscious, instinct, and the subconscious had overtaken and dominated Kiên’s entire awareness. That is perhaps why “he let the narrative flow as it wished, surrendering completely to the mysterious logic of memory and imagination.” Kiên’s act of writing is both an effort to remember himself and a struggle to hold on to the values of the era he lived through. His writing becomes not only a spiritual resurrection of the character but also a responsibility to preserve what has passed, the lost years—to write in gratitude, not betrayal. The people who died in the war left their lives behind on some distant land, in an unmarked grave—or worse, with no grave at all, only pain and bitterness. Kiên’s pages are a resurrection of the lives of an entire generation, a restoration of their dignity, an affirmation of the meaning in the lives of countless soldiers who lived, fought, and died for the peace of their homeland. He did not simply resurrect himself—he resurrected an entire era, an entire generation of lives once thought anonymous. Kiên realizes: “It was one page of life, but from two different worlds, two different eras.” Literature, beyond revealing and reenacting reality, also serves as a unique museum for future generations. As visitors, we must not only come to observe and admire, but also to listen, to explore, to understand, and to be deeply moved.

In *The Sorrow of War*, the fates of so many people flowing through the river of time bring profound humanistic insights. Kiên’s memories are personal ones situated within the stream of historical events—a persistent, haunting trauma of a veteran, breathing within the epic atmosphere of the era, echoing with the heroic, glorious voice of a nation.

Without history, without the past, there can be no present and no future. Bảo Ninh’s success lies in his portrayal of Kiên’s personal memories set against the backdrop of historical events.

The author seems to embrace the lingering trauma of a war veteran in order to engage in a dialogue—not only with the triumphant, proud voices celebrating glory—but also with himself. Today's fast-paced, modern life may pull us into forgetfulness. The new may overwhelm and isolate us from the old. With time, who can be certain that people won't, for one reason or another, forget the painful fragments of memory, the sorrows and tragedies of war? Readers are not only drawn into Bảo Ninh's backward journey through time but are also moved and captivated by his masterful storytelling. If one does not understand war in its full depth, if one does not dare to confront and acknowledge war as destruction, how can humankind hope to prevent violence, suffering, and loss?

Kiên's actions in the novel are powerful testimony to the enduring force of trauma. He writes—and writes, and writes... He writes what he has seen, he writes what he cannot forget, and he writes what must never be forgotten. For forgetting can itself become evidence of ingratitude. War brings with it unspeakable pain. People enter it already resigned to the fact that they may never return. But even when they emerge from the battlefield, they often find that they cannot truly return—to life as it once was, to the normalcy that has been forever stained by tragedy. Is Kiên writing for himself, or for someone else? Does it even matter, when no words can fully express his emotions, his longing, his haunting memories? Perhaps literature proves its true power when it offers people a space for spiritual rebirth—even in the depths of pain. Could it be that what Kiên writes is also a desperate attempt to preserve the noble values of a heroic era? The journey of remembrance takes Kiên vividly and wrenchingly back to his sorrowful past. For a soldier who once fought on the battlefield, returning to peacetime life should be a sacred joy. But beyond that trembling joy lies an unending crisis. This novel does not focus on plot or dramatic situations; setting is not the emphasis. Instead, Bảo Ninh pours the human self into every line of text. From beginning to end, Kiên leads readers through countless wartime memories—only to leave them there. As for him, he seems to surrender completely, allowing the stream of consciousness to guide him. The novel is woven from countless links of memory and emotional flow, yet there is no logical sequence, no clear structure. Everything unfolds in a nonlinear recollection: "Sometimes, all I have to do is close my eyes, and my memories immediately turn themselves around, retracing their path back to the past, pushing the present world aside like grass on the roadside." [5, p.251]. Readers who are used to exploring works with a clear beginning and end may feel lost when stepping into the world of *The Sorrow of War*, for "any page could be the first page, and any page could be the last."

2.2. Narrative Perspective and Storytelling Techniques in *The Sorrow of War*

Portraying the portrait of a person who has experienced immense suffering and possesses a complex, tormented inner world is by no means an easy task. In exploring the novel, readers come to recognize the author's literary talent. *The Sorrow of War* is a novel that blends both first-person and third-person narration. Of these, the third-person narrator

appears more frequently, acting as the voice that directly depicts the brutal, devastating war Kiên once took part in. The first-person narrator—"I"—is Kiên himself, living with memories of the past, and it is the return of those memories that compels him to write a "debut novel," "a war that has never been told." A second instance of the first-person narrator appears—this time, a character named Phán—who recounts his torment and unrelenting guilt over the death of a South Vietnamese soldier on a rainy jungle night. Though this account spans only two pages, it touches the reader's heart and awakens a deeply human sorrow. Toward the end of the novel, yet another "I" appears—this time, a person who claims to be the one organizing Kiên's manuscript. This narrator also speaks briefly, but meaningfully. This experimentation and creative use of multiple narrative voices help *The Sorrow of War* maintain its status as a leading war novel from the pre-*Đổi Mới* era through to the present. The creation of new storytelling forms in war literature after 1986 reflects the effort of writers to renew narrative thinking. Among these innovations, the most groundbreaking strategy is the use of the first-person narrator, which allows characters to speak for themselves about the war. When the story is (at least partly) told by someone who directly witnessed and lived through it, the emotional and experiential gap between narrator and story, narrator and reader, is significantly shortened. This also strengthens the dialogic and interpretive quality of the work, allowing contemporary voices to critically engage with the past on equal terms.

One of the defining signs of transformation in Vietnamese novels after 1975—and particularly after *Đổi Mới*—is the increased diversity of narrative perspectives. Authors began to break away from the authoritative position of the omniscient narrator, granting their characters an equal voice. This reflects the rise of dialogic thinking within literature. In post-1980s war fiction, narrative perspectives became increasingly diverse. War is depicted through the viewpoints of both insiders and outsiders, of both sides—ours and the enemy's—of both real and surreal characters (such as ghosts, gods, or even money).

In *The Sorrow of War*, Bảo Ninh employs at least three narrative perspectives. The first belongs to the third-person narrator, who tells the story of Kiên's life while anchoring the narration through Kiên's point of view. The second is Kiên himself, who directly narrates in the first person within the novel he is writing. The entire story is Kiên's recollection of the past and of war—but not as a coherent, linear narrative. Rather, it emerges as fragments, disordered and discontinuous pieces of memory, haunted by trauma. These include bittersweet memories of youth, his first love, Phương, his family, his neighborhood, and Hanoi. They also include painful memories of war, fallen comrades, the enemy, death, life, nobility and degradation, good and evil... Kiên does not aim to tell a complete story of his life. He merely recounts the shattered fragments of memory as they flash through his mind in contemplation. The third perspective is that of a different first-person narrator—the person who assembles Kiên's manuscript: "Later on, when somehow I came to have the entire manuscript

stored in the attic room of the mute woman... At first, I tried to arrange it into a sequence I could read, as I usually do. But it was hopeless—there seemed to be no sequence at all. Every page seemed to be the first page; every page seemed to be the last.” [5, pp. 290–291]. This diversification of narrative perspectives is a noteworthy innovation in post-1986 Vietnamese war literature in terms of narrative technique. The flexible use of multiple viewpoints has generated a rich artistic effect for war novels. Writers shift the narrative perspective among various characters, each bearing their own consciousness, personality, and lived experiences. As a result, the face of war appears more vividly and comprehensively through the self-awareness of each character.

3. CONCLUSION

The emergence of war-themed novels marked a new artistic direction—one that reflects the reality of war through personal experiences and individual perspectives. These works reconstruct the painful dimensions and brutal face of war, as well as the postwar social and human condition. Soldiers return from battle with the consciousness of those out of sync with time. They come back bearing wounds that never fully heal, unable to live as ordinary people, struggling to reintegrate into everyday life. What they leave behind on the battlefield is not only blood, bones, and their youthful years, but also enduring torment and the most persistent, agonizing traumas of their remaining lives. Bảo Ninh does not merely bring a fresh breeze

or open a new door; he offers a deeper, more multifaceted perspective on the postwar human condition. Through language, he sketches an entire inner world—unique, complex, and emotionally rich. He allows readers to behold a vivid portrait of the human psyche, filled with longing, layered emotions, and multidimensional reflections.

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