

Phuong as a  
metaphor for the  
direction in kien's life  
in the sorrow of war



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In 1991, Bao Ninh published his novel with the title *Thân Phận Của Tình Yêu*, or *The Destiny of Love* in accordance with North Vietnamese regulations to publish material that only glorified the war, reflecting Ho Chi Minh's fervent patriotism to unify Vietnam. However, while *The Destiny of Love* has the implication of ending in a positive manner, Ninh uses a disjointed narrative to reveal the stark contrast of Kien's personality before and after the war, when his childhood love Phuong leaves him. The Vietnamese word "phương" even translates to "way" or "direction." Through the contrast in Kien's personality, Ninh portrays a realistic view of the Vietnam War from a North Vietnamese perspective. Hence, although Ninh originally published his novel as *The Destiny of Love* to concord with North Vietnam's requirement to glorify the war, he uses Phuong as the metaphor for the direction in Kien's life as the sadness from the war ultimately paramounts the love in Kien's life, revealing that the "destiny of love" is the "sorrow of war."

As Ninh parallels Kien's emotional state with Phuong's presence, he reveals that Kien's pure, naïve love for Phuong gives him purpose to his life during his childhood. For instance, Kien and Phuong were "inseparable, like a body and its shadow. They clung to each other as if there were no tomorrow, as if there were no time to lose and every moment should be spent together" (Ninh 131). Through the simile "like a body and its shadow," Ninh places emphasis on the close relationship between Kien and Phuong. Much like how a body and shadow could not be without one other, Ninh emphasizes that Phuong is the direction in Kien's life. Phuong and Kien are inseparable, as the direction in Kien's life is synonymous with Phuong. Moreover, right before the war, Ninh even uses an ominous tone as he describes, "It was to be the last

night of their prewar lives, their last moments of youth. These had been the final hours of their secure, pure and happy youth, those years and months counted in pleasurable day before the fateful hour to leave... The next day was to be a single step onto a convoy heading for the front” (130). Through diction like “ step,” Ninh presents Kien’s life as a journey in relation to the war. Before the war, Kien’s life is governed by his love for Phuong, which gives meaning to his life as revealed through diction such as “ secure,” “ pure,” and “ happy.” Shortly after, Ninh creates a foreboding mood as he terms the last night of Phuong and Kien’s lives before the war “ their last moments of youth,” referring to Kien’s last moments of pure happiness (130). Hence, Kien’s time with Phuong parallels his youth, when he had purpose to his life due to his love for Phuong.

Subsequently, Ninh uses Phuong’s rape and her consequent absence in Kien’s life as a metaphor to reflect how the innocence in Kien’s life comes to an end due to the war. In fact, Phuong was raped while helping Kien get to the front lines and, “ It was from that moment, when Phuong was violently taken from him, that the bloodshed truly began and his life entered into bloody suffering and failure” (Ninh 180). Ninh parallels Kien’s entrance into the war with Phuong’s rape to emphasize that he lost his innocence and the meaning in his life with the war. In Kien’s life, Phuong is originally a symbol of purity and happiness in contrast to his broken household, where Kien’s mother had left him, and Kien is ashamed of his father for not acceding to socialist ideals. When Kien initially goes to war, he is still capable of feeling love and reminisces upon Phuong as one of the last remainders of the purity of his prewar life. However, Ninh emphasizes the end of this purity and thus

Kien's childhood coming to an end through war imagery with diction like "bloodshed" and "bloody." While it was not a physical wound, Kien even recalls Phuong's rape as "his first war wound" (Ninh 180). Kien's guilt for not doing more to protect Phuong is also similar to his survivor guilt after the war. Thus, Phuong's rape is a metaphor for the war, where Kien's childhood rapidly comes to an end.

With the parallel of the corruption of war with Phuong's rape, Ninh implies that love and sorrow are eventually synonymous to highlight the idea that the destiny of love is sorrow. In fact, "the sorrow of war inside a soldier's heart was in a strange way similar to the sorrow of love. It was a kind of nostalgia, like the immense sadness of a world at dusk" (Ninh 94). When the narrator describes Kien's prewar past, the novel reflects the destiny of love, but it shifts to reflect the sorrow of the war during and after the war. After all, once the legacy of love or the direction in Kien's life is gone, all that remains is the sorrow of the war. Furthermore, through the simile of a world at dusk, Ninh reveals Kien is in the middle of two lives. He cannot go back to the brightness or "day" of his prewar past, yet he cannot move on from his love from Phuong. With the "sun" that is Phuong gone, Kien has lost all the happiness and joy in his life. As a result, without Phuong, Kien has lost all direction, or purpose, in his life.

Consequently, after the war, all Kien is left with is nostalgia for his childhood full of love and melancholy due to the sorrow of the war, as Ninh reveals how the destiny of love has become the sorrow of war. As the narrator describes, "What remained was sorrow, the immense sorrow, the sorrow of having survived. The sorrow of war" (Ninh 192). Ninh reveals that Kien's survival

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guilt overwhelms his life and prevents him from living a normal life after the war. In fact, to emphasize Kien's sadness, Ninh uses repetition with the word "sorrow" and uses diction like "immense" and "remained." The diction "immense" and "remained" have the connotation of there being a burden in Kien's life, which refers to his survival guilt, and highlight how the love in Kien's life has been replaced with sadness in conjunction with the repetition of the word "sorrow." As a result, although Kien has romantic associations with other women such as Lan, it is clear that his purpose in life disappeared with Phuong, as he is unable to love other women. When Lan professes her love to Kien, "Kien remained silent, avoiding her gaze" and "tried to smile but his heart felt constricted" (Ninh 55, 56). Unlike Lan, who is trying to rebuild her life after losing her mother during the war, Kien is unable to rebuild his own life, as he no longer has the capability to love. With Phuong, or the direction in his life gone, Kien is unable to move on as revealed through words such as "silent" and "constricted." Through the disjointed narrative coupled with Kien's inability to love, Ninh creates a melancholy tone to evince that Kien is stuck in the past. For instance, Ninh describes, "from now on it was nostalgia and war collections that drove him on. With Phuong gone this was his only hope of staying in rhythm with his normal life" (73). Hence, Kien's "destiny of love" remains in the past with his "nostalgia," as all his love has been replaced by the "sorrow of war."

Bao Ninh uses Phuong as a metaphor for the direction and purpose in Kien's life to evince how the destiny of love becomes the sorrow of war. While Phuong is initially a symbol of innocence and purity in Kien's life, Ninh uses her rape, which parallels Kien's entrance into the war, to reveal that even

the purest love can be corrupted by the war. Kien becomes hardened by Phuong's rape and is no longer able to love or trust anyone in the same way. Hence, Phuong's rape functions as a metaphor for the war, as Kien is unable to love after the war. Moreover, Ninh uses a disjointed narrative to emphasize that Kien is stuck in the past. The love in Kien's life is gone, as the "destiny of love" is the "sorrow of war."