

Good example of essay on bao ninh's the sorrow of war

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Boa Ninh's, *The Sorrow of War* is the tale of Kien, the protagonist and his journey during the war and after. Ninh uses the stream of consciousness technique in the novel where Kien travels forth between the past (the war, and before) and the present (life after the war) in an effort to make sense of his life, reconcile with a changed country and adjust to his new life. When Kien returns from the war he tries to replace his feelings of despair and sparseness with a desire to live a normal life in the post war society that is free of haunting memories. But this is not to happen. War destroys the Vietnamese society, the land and their way of living. Through the life of Kien and his personal loss in love, Ninh paints a picture of the society at large. Kien goes to the war as an idealist, to bring peace and reconciliation to his country but comes back to a society where there is no love or respect for veterans who fought in the war. He comes to a society where people do not want anything to do with the war or people who fought in the war.

Kien is afraid that the Vietnamese people will not have any sympathy for people who had fought and given their lives because of the negative feelings they harbor, and this comes true. Kien's friend Oahn loses his life trying to save a woman he feels sympathetic for. The woman, instead of feeling thankful for what Oahn does for her, murders him. Witnessing this incident Kien says, " Oahn had been sympathetic to women soldiers in the battle field and look what had happened to him" (106). The Oahn episode is symptomatic of the Vietnamese society that Kien returns to after the war- a thankless brutal society that leaves Kien disillusioned. Kien when he gets back from the war seeks to remind and tell the people that it is important to retain their values of yore even during difficult times. When Kien leaves for

war, his family gets divided, he loses the love of his life, loses family members and friends in the war. He also ends up feeling lonely in the middle of a contemporary society and culture which is completely alienated from the veterans and any symbol of the war. It is as though the Vietnamese society wanted to put everything about the war behind it and start life anew. The Vietnamese society according to Ninh suffered the degeneration and destruction of their culture and way of living because of the war, as a result of which many became refugees and travelled to other countries as exiles in order to survive.

Although war, death, loss and destruction form the central themes and core of the novel, beneath all the misery, there is also a beautiful bitter sweet love story between Kien and Phuong. The war is the reason Kien and Phuong get separated both the times. The first time Kien leaves Phuong for the war and the second time, the rape of Phuong in the train causes them to separate. Although Kien loses a lot, it is rather Phuong and the women of Vietnam who come across as the biggest losers and sufferers in the war. In every war, the collateral damage is more when it comes to women. There is a psychological and physical war waged against the women during war from which it is really difficult for them to come out. It happens in 'The Sorrow of War' too. Ninh uses the character of Phuong to describe the women in post war Vietnamese society. Her suffering mirrors the suffering of all the women in the society and also lets the reader look at the decaying values of the Vietnamese society. The society is transformed and it is not for good. Phuong gets raped by men travelling in the train in front of Kien's eyes. Kien and Phuong not only get separated after this incident but Phuong also loses her

life to prostitution and promiscuity as a result of the rape.

War is difficult for men but in many cases it becomes unbearable for women.

Ninh says that it was not Phuong alone but countless Vietnamese women who suffered during and after the war. In the novel, Ninh shows that women were mistreated and repressed even after the war comes to an end. There is

a scene in the novel when a soldier mistreats the corpse of a woman and

Kien reacts to it. Kien on seeing it says, “ But I just couldn’t watch that

asshole treating a body like that, and a woman, too” (104). This reaction of

Kien is in tune with the traditional Vietnamese attitude towards women- one

that of respect. It is also positive. However Kien notices that after the war,

the attitude of the Vietnamese society towards women changes. He sees

that the traditional views are lost and the women and their psyche being

severely damaged. The sex and the violence portrayed in the novel suggest

that the war has paved a new path for the young Vietnamese that does not

bode well. It has led to a callous attitude toward women and the loss of their

position in the society. They were mistreated during the war, after the war

and for many years after the war. The transformation of the society after the

war according to Ninh is not at all positive as although he tries to remain

optimistic Kien loses the plot seeing how much the society has changed.

Ninh’s novel, although at a glance looks to be a semi-autobiographical novel

(Ninh was a soldier during the war and the story is partly a recounting of

what he saw and experienced), is largely about a society that was

completely changed after the war. Ninh feels that no one really gained from

it and that there was only destruction and suffering. The destruction was not

only of the land, but of the culture and the traditional values too. The book is

not just about the sorrow of Kien but also the sorrow of the collective. Kien's sacrifice of his family, love and friends were all in vain. The future that he so idealistically fought for in his youth never comes to fruition.

Works Cited

Ninh, Boa. *The Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam*. New York: Pantheon Books. 1995.