



Constructing Women's Voices: Approaching Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* from Feminist Criticism



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[*Abstract*]

This article explores how women's voices are constructed in *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway and *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* (*The Sorrow of War*) by Bảo Ninh. Specifically, this article approaches presentations of women's personalities and positions in the two novels that do not have obvious historical and geographical connections. The women's voices in the two novels, as this article suggests, are characterized by women's desire for self-determination, where they are able to free themselves from domination, and even influence men's psychology and actions. In comparing the characteristics of women's voices in the two works, the article aims to highlight different ways in which women assert their agency. The article affirms the potential contribution of cultural contexts in examining feminist voices and understanding how female figures are made to overcome default passivity and submission to male domination.

Keywords: Ernest Hemingway, Bảo Ninh, Women's Voices, Feminism

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I . Introduction

Feminist criticism as a literary approach emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, expressing a sense of resistance to the long-standing male-centered ideas of patrilineality. This order recognizes male power, and the right to dominate women. Finnish critic Keskinen Mikko describes this inequality in this manner: “The masculine master has not only the power to speak but also to command, and the servant holds the position of quiet submission” (Mikko 2000: 1). Resisting the discrimination, and the “servant”/ “quiet submission” positioning, feminists call for the establishment of women's “voices” as a way of fighting against oppression. The voice, according to Mikko, “is common, as if naturally, taken to connote presence, immediate self-expression, and intentionality of a speaking subject” (Mikko 2000: 2). Mikko continues: “Not only does the voice sound fantastic but it also provides a heuristic ground for realizing such fantasies as equality and freedom of speech” (Mikko 2000: 12). Quoting the results of a survey on voice in feminist criticism by American musicologists Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones, Mikko asserts that the concept of “voice” has been used to mean “cultural agency, enfranchisement, sexual autonomy, and expressive political freedom, all of which has been denied to women” (Mikko 2000: 3). Thus, “voice” can be understood as a metaphor, and establishing “voice” alludes to women's attempts to regain their own experiences. Whether it is “silenced by oppression” or “amplified by feminist criticism,” voice “is a token of origin and essential, unchanging womanhood” (Mikko 2000: 4). It shows women's abilities to speak out as a way of resisting the oppression of a male-dominated culture.

In this article, I will explore how women's voices are constructed in two works, *The Sun Also Rises* by American novelist Ernest Hemingway and *The Sorrow of War* by Vietnamese novelist Bảo Ninh. The women's voices in the two novels, as this article

suggests, are characterized by women's desire for self-determination, where they are able to free themselves from domination, and even influence men's psychology and actions. The two works, the article aims to highlight different ways in which women assert their agency. The article affirms the potential contribution of cultural contexts in examining feminist voices and understanding how female figures are made to overcome default passivity and submission to male domination.

The Sun Also Rises is the first novel of Hemingway, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954. The work has two central characters Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley, both representing the “lost generation,” coping with life after years of severe physical and mental trauma. The novel evokes “the impermanence of love and the certainty of pain and death” (Harold Bloom 2007: 15). When published in 1926, it received mixed reception, and had since then become one of America's widely reviewed novels. (Harold Bloom 2007: 13).

Meanwhile, *The Sorrow of War* is the first and only novel by Bảo Ninh. Published in 1990 under the title *Thân phận của tình yêu* (*The Fate of Love*), the novel is a “history of fate” and uses the point of view of North Vietnam soldier, Kiên, who fights the war against the US. Critic Hoàng Ngọc Hiến considers that novel as combining the themes of war, love, and creativity (1991: 114). As in *The Sun Also Rises*, the novel also depicts a love story, that of Kiên and Phương, amidst the the tragedy of wars. It is “a world with no home, no roof, no comforts [...], without real men, without real women, without feeling” (Bảo Ninh 1998: 28).

One way or another, all the female protagonists in *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Sorrow of War*, directly experience wars, losses, and disillusionment. The article will look at the female characters of the works from the context and consequences of their respective wars, by examining their representations and dynamics with the

male characters.

II . Representation of Female Beauty

The Sun Also Rises and *The Sorrow of War* have different perceptions women. In *The Sun Also Rises*, the character Brett is described as embodying beauty that blends masculine and feminine features. Brett's body possesses “curves like the hull of a racing yacht” (Hemingway 2006: 22). Also, she knows how to accentuate her curves by wearing “a slipover jersey sweater and a tweed skirt” (Hemingway 2006: 22). Unlike traditional women, Brett has short hair “brushed back like a boy's” (Hemingway 2006: 22). Brett asserts her manliness in both her beliefs and lifestyle. She often appears in public places, discos, pubs, even bullrings—all male spaces. Brett's heavy drinking and smoking challenge conventions, instilling tension wherever she appears. A neighbor who witnesses Brett's drunken act comments: “Last night I found her not so gentle. Last night I formed another idea of her. But listen to what I tell you. She is très, très gentille. She is of very good family” (Hemingway 2006: 50). Brett is “not so gentille” because drunkenness is seen as an unconventional quality for women. This is also in contrast to her family background. For Rena Sanderson, Brett is “the epitome of the modern woman” (Sanderson 1996: 177).

Unlike Brett, Phương in *The Sorrow of War* is portrayed with dominant feminine characteristics. Her beauty is not expressed from a male-driven perspective. The narrative voices out Phương's appearance as sexy and attractive. Phương's beauty is “obvious, brilliant, reckless and outstanding” (Bảo Ninh 2007: 147). She has “white skin,” “fair complexion” and “immortal and sparkling brown eyes” (Bảo Ninh 2007: 207). “Her hair waves heavy with water” (Bảo Ninh 2007: 114), “her soft fragrant embraces” (Bảo Ninh 2007: 128), and “a curtain of beautiful long hair almost covers his face” (Bảo

Ninh 2007: 154). All these make up the beauty of Hanoi women – feminine, sexy, and charming.

The discourse on hair suggests an interesting discussion. Hair as crowning glory may be related to the domination of political will, which Pheng Cheah describes as “the presumption of one culture’s frame of reference as universal and known; the other’s as different, unknown, and thus inferior” (according to Friedman 2013: 35).. Accordingly, Brett's short hair indicates “usurpation” of women over men, reflecting the fact that the feminist struggle emerged in the beginning of the twentieth century. Hemingway's depiction of Brett may be related to the context of the feminist struggle, which in the US climaxed in the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment of 1920, recognizing women’s right to vote. This puts women equal to men in political activities. Socially, Brett's physical and personality traits are expressions of the “new type of woman” who dares to make her own moral principles and living standards. “Brett's fashion and lifestyle put her in (a position that is an) “antithesis (to) her corseted, ruffled, and straitlaced Victorian foremother” (Donaldson 1996: 178). No longer “corseted” or “straitlaced,” Brett wears a slipover jersey sweater. Without long hair, Brett behaves more independently, as if like the men around her: drinking, smoking, and engaging in sex. James Nagel asserts that: “Brett is by no means the first representation of a sexually liberated, free-thinking woman in American literature but rather an embodiment of what became known as the “New Woman” in nineteenth-century fiction” (Nagel 1996: 92). To be “sexually liberated” or “free-thinking” may be regarded as an attempt to break free from conventional gender positioning.

Meanwhile, Phuong's long hair encapsulates Vietnamese conception of a woman’s appropriate self-presentation, aside from industry, good communication skills, and virtue. Psychoanalytically, Phuong's beauty may also be seen as responding to claims made by

Sigmund Freud who considers “the essential difference” between the moral development of the little girl and the little boy (Freud, 2001: 178). The female body here is completely independent of the symbols that signify male authority.

Moreover, the novel also appears to highlight Phuong's outstanding female naturalism in her motherly qualities. The love between Phuong and Kiên as schoolchildren may be described as the love between a mother and a son. A memory of a distant past characterizes this. Along the shores of Hồ Tây one night, Phuong takes care of Kiên like a mother as “he placed his head inside her arm, as a little boy... She comforted him with soft words about his father... (and) he moved gently and began sucking her, softly at first, then with a strong passion, holding her breasts between both hands and tasting her, young and sweet” (Bảo Ninh 1998: 132). Phuong is compared to a young mother who has “soft words about his father” and Kiên is described as “(placing) his head inside her arm... sucking her” like a newborn. Phuong's story about Kiên's father in this memory assembles a new language, where the mother's law, the female's law is obeyed. In “holding her breasts” and sucking them like a newborn, Kiên seems to transmit the power of motherhood. At the front, Kiên is followed by this memory even “among the dead and surrounded by suffering, he often dreamed of and felt her warm flesh again and tasted her virgin milk, in his dreams, it was that which had given him the magical vitality to become the strongest, the luckiest, the greatest survivor of the war” (Bảo Ninh 1998: 133). The “virgin milk” strengthens Kiên, even while facing adversities. It evokes a return to the mother. Regarding this feminist mode Mikko points out: “The maternal voice which the baby listens to is a woman's voice but it has the overtone of the voice-in-general; it is the voice of a mentor, authority, master which only later is specified as that of a mistress” (2000: 7). In this situation, the maternal voice plays mentor, authority, and master.

For French critic and psychoanalyst Hélène Cixous: "Woman embodies the divine Mother and her primordial voice, just like an infant sucks milk from its mother's breast" (Mikko 2000: 9).

Unlike Hemingway who depicts Brett as strong and masculine, Bảo Ninh portrays Phương with a gentle, feminine charm. However, Phương is not positioned inside her traditional space and function of keeping house and raising a family. The story renders her in the middle of history where she experiences the vicissitudes of life. When the US is about to attack North Vietnam, she receives vague but powerful premonitions. She sings a song on Đồ Sơn beach in August 1964, signalling the coming situation: "From now on, what harsh wind will blow on the world..." (Bảo Ninh 2007: 206). The fierce wind, she adds, blows obscurity and loss, indicating terrifying devastation: "Fearing that we won't be able to live and love... It is not in time that it is all gone!" (Bảo Ninh 2007: 207). On the other hand, Brett's actions can be seen as typical of the 1920s woman in America. In *The New York Times*, Margaret O'Leary once commented: "the modern young girl is a delight. She dresses simply and sensibly, and she looks life right straight in the eye; she knows just what she wants and goes after it, whether it's a man, a career, a job, or a new hat!" (1922: 49). Brett reproduces the type of modern woman that O'Leary describes. Meanwhile, US aggression becomes the context and motivation for women to participate in family and society tasks. Though Phương does not go to the frontline, and to a certain extent chooses indifference, her experience shows how wars become great equalizers. Men and women alike made sacrifices in order to be free..

The personalities of Brett and Phương in the two novels are both beyond the traditions, although each girl differently lives a "modern" life. Brett lives actively, strong as a man. Phương lives deeply, understanding the nature of the times. Both express an establishment of voice and the affirmation of a woman's awareness

of beauty and feminine values. However, in a male-dominated culture, a woman's voice often finds itself opposed. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Pedro Romero engages in a relationship with Brett. He wants to possess Brett and turn her “ more womanly” (Hemingway 2006: 242). He also insists that Brett grows back her hair long, a condition for marriage. Giving up her freedom means being a wife and mother to Romero’s children, a very strong demand. Romero's proposal to Brett reflects what most women go through, as far as the feminist struggle is concerned: “The feminist challenge is vital to locating invisible and silenced women and restoring them and their voices to rhetorical history” (Glenn 1997: 2). Brett's decision to leave Romero affirms the establishment of a woman's voice which breaks the “invisible” and “ silenced” position.

The Sorrow of War, on the other hand, shows an interesting contrast between Kiên and Phương responses to the latter’s being raped at Thanh Hóa station. Phương’s calmness surprises Kiên. He is perplexed, not seeing a hysterical or desperate Phương. As in the usual, she acts indifferently. The excerpt below fully captures Kiên’s attempts to understand what Phương is going through:

He thinks, perhaps it is the surrender to the so-called new fate, Phương has now regained her consciousness, and balance, calmly wiping away the sufferings, ruthlessly burying what she used to praise as pureness and goodness. But that means an end!—Kiên thinks and understands he will abandon Phương and ignore her fate (Bảo Ninh 2007: 268).

The third person point of view shows Kiên’s repeated speculations. From his limited perspective, Phương does not appear to suffer, and this typifies the easy assumptions of a masculine figure. Her demeanor is very complex. Most Vietnamese women are subjected to this kind of simplistic perspective, where they are only measure by way of virtues and anti-virtues. Obviously, Phương transcends simplification when she behaves differently from what

Kiên expects. With balance and calm, she chooses to suffer in silence, like many who have “historically internalized the social pressures to be chaste, obedient, and silent” (Glenn 1997: 179). These women may be chaste or obedient, but never silent. Their silence are always pregnant with meaning. “These women still have much to tell us—all we have to do is listen to their voices and their silences” (Glenn 1997: 179). Not being able to decipher Phuong’s silence and leaving her after her tragic experience are his ultimate failures.

III. Re-establishing Women’s Position

In the feminist struggle, the establishing of women's voices must always be set in contrast with men's voices. Myra Jehlen (1981) asserts that feminists need a fulcrum from men’s position to reiterate the power of their voices. Mikko observes that in history, “the symmetry between the female and male voices is far from being perfect. Woman is doomed to lose the voice which she never really had, whereas man becomes the voice which he imitated all the time” (2000: 8). In the binary scheme, the male has always been in the privileged position, and the female in the marginalized, always prone to losing her voice. Man raises his voice and metaphorically imposes his privilege and being the first sex. He is downgraded to the second sex, the position ascribed to the woman, if he loses it. He becomes silent, and passive. The struggle for women's rights reverses dualistic views, eliminating “negative stereotypes (e.g. silence, passivity, deception, and confusion) as is often associated with women” (Duncan 2004: 2-3). In this section, I will analyze how two novels repeatedly push men into passivity and repositioned women as active and even dominant agents.

Firstly, the novels ascribe the male characters the role of observers. *The Sun Also Rises* is told in the first person point-of-view

of the main character, Jake Barnes. He connects the diverse relationships in the expatriate community living in Paris in the years after World War I. Meanwhile, *The Sorrow of War* is told in the third person point-of-view, but follows the character Kiên who throughout the story is in the process of “refighting of the war” and remembering people in light of the Vietnam War. Though different in points-of view, both novels elucidate the suffering and unhappiness caused by the traumas of love and war.

Barnes is a veteran of World War I. The war leaves him with wounds in the genitals, causing him to permanently lose the ability to have sex. He falls in love with Brett, once a nurse during the war. He does not satisfy Brett, and accepts her attachment to other men. He lives a stoic life on the sidelines, and becomes fond of Spanish bullfighting festivals. Brett meets Romero in one of the bullfights. Barnes gets entangled in a dilemma as he feels “(sending) a girl off with one man... (introducing) her to another to go off with him” (Hemingway 2006: 240). When Brett leaves Romero, it is Barnes who “(goes) and (bringing) her back. And (signing) the wire with love” (Hemingway 2006: 240). In the process, Barnes shows his enduring patience, most especially in bitter circumstances. Both the world war and bullfighting arena defeat him. He is rendered powerless.

On the other hand, Kiên’s privilege is also tempered. He appears to be confused and passive in relation to women. He loses his wit and initiative when he a woman neighbor allows him to hide in the bomb shelter, when he witnesses Phuong’s rape, and when he walks into the mute woman's room. Gradually, after intense psychological pain, Kiên also closes his heart. After the war, he locks himself in a lonely room to live with the past, observing himself and seeing his life like a river where all are “disappearing and drifting far away” (Bảo Ninh 2007: 130). Kiên and Phuong’s post-war life only prove to be bitter, as the woman predicted: “Maybe until we die, we will still be virgins... but we love each other so much.” (Bảo

Ninh 2007: 210). Unable to open his heart to other women, Kiên “fights against his life alone, unrealistically, bitterly, full of difficulties and mistakes” (Bảo Ninh 2007: 54). In that tragic battle, he finds “his new life which is his past youth lost in the sorrowful war” (Bảo Ninh 2007: 93). From conventional male perspective, this passivity is deplorably feminine. While the women around him move on, and beyond the control of men, he stays in stasis. Redstockings supposes that when we “identify the agents of (women's) oppression as men... All power structures throughout history (become) male-dominated and male-oriented. All men receive economic, sexual, and psychological benefits from male supremacy. All men have oppressed women” (1969: 100). In Kiên, however, the male figure is disempowered, while woman's voices abound.

Looking more closely at the men's sex lives, an assumed indicator of male power, it may be observed that having experiences trauma, both male characters engage in masochism and sadomasochism. In Hemingway's novel may be found this:

Brett's face was white and the long line of her neck showed in the bright light of the flares. The street was dark again and I kissed her. Our lips were tight together and then she turned away and pressed against the corner of the seat, as far away as she could get. Her head was down.

“Don't touch me,” she said. “Please don't touch me.”

“What's the matter?”

“I can't stand it.” (2006: 23)

Meanwhile, in Bảo Ninh: “He controls her violently, destroys her with his mysterious, thorough, and perilous loneliness” (2007: 127).

Hemingway's narration illustrates the unusual state of the relationship between Barnes and Brett. There is obvious misery in

the rapid change from powerful longing in the back seat of a taxi to motionless anguish as if they were strangers. Michael Reynolds notes that, "Jake (Barnes) has all the sexual drives of a normal man but has none of the physical equipment to satisfy those drives. From this information, we must assume that his testicles are intact, and his phallus is missing" (1998: 25). Considering Barnes's inability, sex means suffering and punishment, for both, and in the end somewhat an instance of masochism. For Richard C. Robertiello, masochism "is the turning of destructive drives against the self," and "when we talk about a sexual masochist, we are referring to someone who cannot enjoy the sexual act unless it is accompanied by pain, humiliation, or submission" (1970: 56). In Barnes, we see the convergence of pain, humiliation, and submission, but not the pleasures of the sexual act. Quoting Freud, Robertiello thinks that "a masochistic attitude was an essential inborn part of the female sexual role and the female sexual response" (according to 1970: 56). In the case of Hemingway, this is inverted: masochism from the male causes great unhappiness for the female.

Meanwhile, Kiên's unmanly tryst with the mute woman quoted briefly shows his signs of sadomasochism. Marie France describes sadomasochism "as a consensual sexual practice (that) can rouse feelings very high on both sides, resulting in accusations that lesbian feminist sadomasochists are not contesting the structures of desire but merely aping the pattern of sexual relations under the patriarchy and counter-accusations of repression and censorship" (1984: 35). From this perspective, Kiên's sexual relation with the mute woman illustrates repression and censorship as he controls the woman violently, as if he is destroyer. There is no pleasure in this, as it is structured on patriarchal sex. Kiên may not be like Barnes but he is as mentally injured. He is also unable to love as sex with the mute woman is done out of revenge for his tragic fate.

There may be more to the loss of passion in these cases, as

Lê Lâm argues about suffering and sexual activity in Hemingway (2015: 85). There is also the death of love in World War I, “one of the most persistent themes of the twenties” (Spilka 1969: 73). This may also be extended to Kiên's inability to love. It is a form of illness, after the war distorts the spiritual life of people. Barnes and Kiên have been made miserable by the wars they went through, that they have consequently nothing to give. In effect, they have also lost their privileged position.

Meanwhile, the females go on to assert their agency and louden their voices. The liberated Brett subverts male domination and is surrounded by passive, weak, and dependent men. She gets engaged to a man she does not love (Mike Campbell), falls in love with a man she can't marry (Barnes), accidentally seduces a man who mistakes her caring attitude for love (Robert Cohn), and falls in love with a younger man (Romero). Mimi Reisel Gladstein describes Brett “destructive indestructible,” and not to be faulted for being “devastatingly attractive to men” (1986: 59). On the other hand, Phương has always been conscious of her life choices since she was young and since Kiên left her. After she is raped and loses her virginity, she overcomes her terrible pain, calmly defy fate as she “raises her head and drinks long sips of water” and “breaks dry food and puts it in her mouth to chew casually” (Bảo Ninh 2007: 262). She sets straight the value system and expectations imposed on her lives an indifferent life. She doesn't allow pain to torment her, brushes aside the shame.

Brett embodies an era of growing female emancipation. James Nagel emphasizes that “by the 1920s there were some eighty feminist societies in Paris enrolling more than sixty thousand women in support of their cause; to some extent, their influence on sexual mores and social codes is given embodiment in the character of Brett Ashley” (1996: 92). Scott Donaldson supports this perspective by offering convention:

Brett resembles a traditional man in her sexual expectations, and Jake resembles a traditional woman in his sexual unavailability and his uncomplaining tolerance of others' inconsiderations. The reversal, both overt and implied, in their gender roles signals that something has gone awry between the sexes (1996: 179).

In the aforementioned reality, women are taught to think, perceive, and interpret like men (Fetterley, 1981: 20). It is only men that have the right to express themselves and speak for themselves, as "all men are immutably violent simply because they are men" (McCarry 2007: 405-406). This state is subverted by *The Sun Also Rises*, where the female does not only become the object but the agent of desire.

In contrast, while Phương is clearly severed from the highly politicized recognition of the place and contributions of women in the socialist movement (Hồ Khánh Vân 2020: 71-72), she clearly transgresses the traditional values of industry, appropriate self-presentation, good communication skills, and virtue. Her character asserts an individualistic voice that is active and adaptive to situations. She mainly shows strength and power through her absence. She haunts Kiên's memories and causes him constant suffering. After the war, Phương chooses to leave Kiên. In her silence, she "changes into the surprise of self-assertion" (Todd 1980: 17). Symbolically, Phương's absence reinforces the power of resistance.

IV. Conclusion

In comparing *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Sorrow of War*, the article was able to show conversations about women's voices despite differences in cultural and geographic origins. Hemingway created a female character that possesses male characteristics reflecting the trend of the struggle for women's liberation in the context of

American history, culture, and society in the early decades of the twentieth century. Self-identifying as masculine and participating in men's supposed activities appear to establish gender equality. Bảo Ninh portrayed a woman that transgresses traditional values in the context of Vietnam War. Both written by male writers, the novels deploy reverse gender power where women resist male domination, and violate the dynamics. The novels even depicted the demise of their men.

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