



## The Shifts of Power in Gender Discourse: Approaching Bao Ninh's *Short Stories* and Svetlana Alexievich's *Unwomanly Face of War* from Feminist Narratology



Cao Kim Lan\*

### [ *Abstract* ]

This paper examines narratives of women's marginal position in Bao Ninh's *Short Stories* and Svetlana Alexievich's *Unwomanly Face of War* from a feminist narratological approach. In analyzing voices of marginalized women, direct and indirect descriptions of women's beauty and pain, and private-public narratives of women's love stories, this paper aims to identify presentations of women's real authority in the text written by a male author, Bao Ninh, and in the one by a female author. The paper argues that juxtaposing these texts reveals an overturn of the traditional conception of sexual and gender differences. Specifically, distinguishing between male/female discourse does not show powerful /nonpowerful language, but recognizes the real authority of each type of discourse based on sexual differences. The writing also illustrates that masculine language becomes powerless and deficient in the women's world; meanwhile, in writing about herself, woman establishes a type of a powerful feminine discourse, which blends both emotional, enthusiastic, and gossipy characteristics of female language and direct, rational, and strong ones of male language. Thus,

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\* Ph.D., researcher, Institute of Literature, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, [caokimlanvvh@gmail.com](mailto:caokimlanvvh@gmail.com)

the feminists' radical segregation on male/female discourses to overturn masculine authority and create a language for women at par with men has been clearly shifted when comparing the two writers' texts based on the juxtapositional model of the comparative literature.

**Keywords:** Shifts of power, gender discourse, marginalized women, powerful/nonpowerful discourse, Svetlana Alexievich, Bao Ninh

## I . Introduction

Many a time, women are relegated to the periphery of popular discourse, particularly during times of war. They are frequently depicted in ancient literature as suffering women waiting for their husbands. The outlook of women has gradually changed, and now, they have new functions and positions in contemporary literature and history. However, it appears to be exceedingly difficult to modify people's perceptions about marginalized women in war. Regardless of historical evidence to the contrary, the war without women's faces is a powerful bias. For example, in *From a Conversation with a Historian*, Svetlana Alexievich records that women first appeared in the army of Greek of Athens and Sparta in the fourth century B.C. During World War II, the world witnessed women serving in all branches of the military in many countries of the world: 225,000 in the British army, 450,000 to 500,000 in the American, 500,000 in the German, and about a million women fought in the Soviet army. They mastered all military specializations including the most "masculine" ones. (2017); or from another document, in the book *Women and War in the Twentieth Century*, Nicole Dombrowski shows the exact numbers: "By the end of 1943, over 800,000 women volunteers served in the armed forces and the partisans, constituting about 8 percent of military personnel. Most of these women fought at the front, about 200,000 of them in the air defense forces; thousands more fought the Germans as rank-and-file soldiers, as machine gunners, as snipers, as sappers, and as driver-mechanics in tank units. A few female officers led battalions

of men into battle." (2015: 103). Paradoxically, women have only won military awards for their bravery and distinguished service, often posthumously. After war, they must even hide the victory medals and never wear them in the ceremonies (Alexievich 2017). This unfair reality requires to be changed. Additionally, making those precise figures public is also a particular way to uncover another truth of war. Women images are emerged from a variety of perspectives, they can be portrayed as brave warriors or ordinary women, however, in the great victories, we cannot deny the significant contributions of those marginalized women.

From a feminist narratological approach, this paper examines narratives of women's marginal position in Bao Ninh's *Short Stories* and Alexievich's *Unwomanly Face of War*. By analyzing voices of marginalized women, direct and indirect descriptions of women's beauty and pain, and private-public narratives of women's love stories this paper seeks to identify presentations of women's real authority in the text written by a male author, Bao Ninh, and in the one by a female author. The paper argues that juxtaposing these texts reveals an overturn of the traditional conception of sexual and gender differences. Specifically, distinguishing between male/female discourse does not demonstrate low and high status, or powerful and nonpowerful language but rather recognizes the real authority of each form of discourse based on sexual differences. Additionally, the writing illustrates how masculine language becomes powerless and deficient in the women's world, while a woman establishes a type of powerful feminine discourse throughout her writing about her self, which blends both emotional, enthusiastic, and gossipy characteristics of female language with direct, rational and strong ones of male language. Thus, when comparing the two writers' texts using the comparative literature's juxtapositional paradigm, the feminists' extreme segregation of male/female discourses to undermine the masculine authority and build women's powerful language on an equal footing with men's has been clearly moved.

This choice of two texts is not arbitrary. Both narrate themes of war and humanitarian attitude. Both writers wish to write about war from a unique perspective, which results in a different truth about war. This feature is quite familiar in the Comparative

Literature method in general, and it is also a prerequisite for surveying in this writing. Meanwhile, even if the two are of different genres, both are strikingly similar in representing the lives of women in war. While each short story of Bao Ninh follows a protagonist and some events that affect the character's fate, the chapters in Alexievich's novel follow a flexible structure, with each chapter focusing on topics rather than character. Alexievich's novel is essentially an oral document of the war experiences of women who fought in Russia's great Patriotic War. There is no central heroine or main character; all are protagonists. Its narrative framework is established by fragments of individual lives associated with their jobs and fates. That is a specific structure in which every chapter is comparable to one of Bao Ninh's short stories.

Finally, based on similarities and dissimilarities of women's fates during the war, this study will focus on the survey of several issues pertaining to gender discourse. Bao Ninh's and Alexievich's texts will be compared not based on their shared history, geography, or culture, but based on their seemingly similar portrayals of women's destinies and their marginal status in the war, with a particular emphasis on the gender discourse generated by the two writers' sexual differences. This gender contradiction forms two kinds of distinct discourses. Alexievich places women at the center of war - in the frontline and tells about them from an internal point of view with a deep understanding of how to show women's war/history in their own language. In contrast, Bao Ninh is a male writer strongly associated with peripheral "prejudices" about women. He would never "dare" to place women in the path of bombs and bullets in the manner of warriors. Their position and roles are just at the fringes of fierce struggles, and he portrays women via the lens of male discourse. However, both their works share a humane thoughts and anti-war sentiments.

Bao Ninh's *Short stories*, is believed to be "his own war" (1994) that allowed him and his comrades to share "a common sorrow," an "immense sorrow of war" (1994: 217). As a renowned Vietnamese writer whose novel *The Sorrow of War* has been translated into 18 different languages around the world, Bao Ninh's work was honored by *The Independent!* as a novel that "vaults over all the American

fiction that came out of the Vietnam war to take its place alongside the greatest war novel of the century" (Bao Ninh 1994). However, this study does not concentrate on his novel, but his short stories, collection that exists as fragments of a central narrative, marginal stories when compared to *The Sorrow of War*. Bao Ninh's short stories do not sing of a winner's triumph, nor form of collective memory, but rather layer private sufferings. With a desire to find understanding in different fragments of the nature of war, Bao Ninh's short stories depict displaced, marginalized women, full of pain and uncertainty. History and the victories during the Vietnam War were not very crucial to the stories but only the stack of "small things" and quotidian events. Bao Ninh reproduces other truths about the war many Vietnamese are unfamiliar with.

On the other hand, Alexievich, "writes not about war, but human beings in war... writes not the history of a war, but the history of feelings." (2017: xxi) She aspires to be "a historian of the soul." (Alexievich 2017: xxi) She was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature 2015 for her body of works described by the Nobel committee as "polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time." (Theocharis 2019: 185) This includes the novel *Unwomanly Face of War* (first published in Russian in 1985), a set of novelistic accounts or monologues recounting the unbearable sufferings of women who served in the war. Their memories can be distant or vivid, private, or public, terrible, or joyful, but the war has left an indelible mark on them. Their stories aren't "dry and bare history of facts and events, but a history of feelings and emotions; history that has been overlooked or has slipped past unnoticed." (Jaireth 2017: 3) In Alexievich's narrative, hearing and listening combine to create a style that is more direct and effective. Hence, this study focuses on the interpretation of the shifts of power in gender discourse by examining women's marginal position in the war in the works of these two authors.

To observe the shifts in gender discourse based on/through

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<sup>1</sup> *The Independent* is a British online newspaper. It was established in 1986 as a national morning printed paper. The *Independent* Foreign Fiction Prize (1990–2015) was a British literary award. It was inaugurated by British newspaper *The Independent* to honor contemporary fiction in translation in the United Kingdom.

the juxtapositional comparison of the two authors' works, this paper employs a feminist narratological approach. While feminist narratologists assert that there is a need for gender to be inserted in the intersection of feminism and narratology, even "postclassical" narratology has yet to formulate a method to describe this. There are various approaches available, depending on narratologists' perspectives and interests. However, combining the gender and narratives, according to Susan Lanser, is to share the "belief that sex, gender, and sexuality are significant not only to textual interpretation and reader reception but to textual poetics itself and thus to the shapes, structures, representational practices, and communicative contexts of narrative texts." (2014. This paper combines the political eye of the feminist and the penchant for recurring patterns of narratologist to examine discursive distinctions between male and female. This will assist us in identifying changes in gender discourse that feminists previously claimed in their statements. Feminists' radical viewpoints that male language is strong and powerful while female language is powerless and meaningless are no longer appropriate. Comparison will clarify that our usual gender categories no longer apply.

## II. Voices of Marginalized Women in War

Recognizing the bias faced by marginalized women, feminists have sought to develop a unique means by which women can have their own voice. They argue that the striving of male authors to "identify men's experience with women's" is paradoxical because the voices of women are still made by men (Cavallaro 2003: 94-101). And, in opposition to the traditional view that "male as the dominant group (that) created language, thought, and reality" (Spender 1980), Hélène Cixous proposes the concept *L'écriture féminine* which calls for a gradual change in viewpoints on the relationship between gender and language, while simultaneously attempting to overturn men's prerogative of *L'écriture masculine* based on the phallogocentric language system. In Cixous,; (1) "Woman must write her self: she must write about women and bring women to writing... Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by

her own movement" (Cixous 1976: 875); and (2) the linguistic structure itself will change when women write/speak of women, of their body, as subjects. *L'écriture féminine* is regarded as a manifesto of Cixous's feminist thought. Women write about women, which means, they must transcend the phallogocentric symbolic order, and her writing is inextricably linked to her inevitable conflict with conventional men. Although Cixous is careful to emphasize that she is "not trying to create a feminine writing but to let into writing what has always been forbidden up until now, knowing the effects of femininity" (Cixous 2008: 52), the metaphor of breast milk as "white ink" and views on women's language and voice have shattered the assertion of male-dominated language.<sup>2</sup> Thus, if war is considered a fact, for Alexievich, fact is skewed by the absence of women's voices.

I am aware that each kind of discourse has its own characteristics, as well as distinct structures and functions. Ideology shapes discourse, which, in turn, shapes reality, which is associated with power and oppression. Bao Ninh and Alexievich's war discourse is primarily composed by their thoughts and voices. For Bao Ninh, war not only ruined the dreams of youth but was also left indelible marks on the memories of the returnees. The aftershock of the catastrophic war appears to have shaped Bao Ninh's being a writer of sorrow. Even while writing about war from the position of the victor, Bao Ninh's writings are not all glorious. It is a thoughtful journey that seeks for the universal values of human beings. Regardless of whether it is a novel or a collection of short stories, human beings are still presented deeply and painfully. As for Alexievich, when carrying out thousands of interviews with many female veterans who return from the war, she aspires to write war from the perspective of women, to show their version, their history of the great Patriotic War of Russia. "It is not the history of a war or a state and not the lives of heroes, but the history of small human beings, thrown out of ordinary life into the epic depths of an enormous event. Into great History." (Alexievich 2017: 18). She

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<sup>2</sup> See more, Hélène Cixous "When I do not write, it is as if I had died" (pp. 51-57), in *White Ink: Interviews on Sex, Text and Politics*, and "Writing and the Body" in Dani Cavallaro. *French Feminist Theory: An Introduction* (2003).

desires to seek "something else," to gather all "knowledge of the spirit," and write a "history of feelings...a history of the soul" (Alexievich 2017: xxi). She pursues the traces of inner life and creates the records of the soul to understand the war that we do not grasp, of life and death as well as its meanings in the never-ending darkness of the battle. Those goals define a novel's voice as completely dynamic, active, powerful, and convincing. While the language and experiences of female ex-soldiers may have been distorted (more or less) by the times in which they are living in, or faded, or infused with romance in some way in women's memories, it is apparent that their tremendous desire resulted in active and authentic voices. Women's perception of war is shaped by their language: "how vile it was, this war ... When you look at it with our eyes. Simple women's eyes ... As frightful as can be" (Alexievich 2017: 117).

In addition, to compose a women's war that "has its colors, its own smells, its own lighting, and its own range of feelings" (Alexievich 2017: xvi), Alexievich faithfully keeps distinct female voices, following their authentic voices. In her journeys that she seeks people willing to talk to her and share with her their stories, she listens to women's stories with utmost care and empathy. Even though her recollection of those women's faces has faded, she never forgets their voice, she "hears them like a chorus" on hundreds of recorded cassettes with thousands of meters of tape recording. Alexievich must be intensely aware of how we use language and how it affects our lives while writing in direct languages, as Lakoff puts it: "Language uses us as much as we use language. As much as our choice of forms of expression is guided by the thoughts we want to express, to the same extent the way we feel about the things in the real world governs the way we express ourselves about these things" (1975: 3). Thus, while creating her narratives based on testimonies, she looks at the world through the eyes and feelings of a humanist, as opposed to ignoring emotions and focusing exclusively on facts and great events. From fragments of women's lives and livings and from "thousands of voices," Alexievich composes women's history in order to comprehend human beings' inner selves. Lakoff emphasizes that women experience inequality in terms



of language in two ways: the way they are educated and the way language is used to evaluate them. Alexievich's enchantment with her subjects created a unique women's language, both creative and honest. It strongly illustrates the ability to overcome men's prejudice, as articulated by Lakoff: "Our use of language embodies attitudes as well as referential meanings. Woman's language has as its foundation the attitude that women are marginal to the serious concerns of life which are preempted by men" (1975: 1).

Hence, by juxtaposing Bao Ninh and Alexievich's works, we will be able to distinguish the masculine voice (*L'écriture masculine*) in Bao Ninh's short stories and the feminine voice (*L'écriture féminine*) in Alexievich's *Unwomanly Face of War*. However, does language function in this manner in these two works?

The short story *Gió dại* (*The Wild Wind*) by Bao Ninh serves as the narrative for *L'écriture masculine*. The story narrates the situation of peripheral characters. Dieu Nuong, a beautiful woman, and Tuan, a wounded soldier who volunteered to remain on the battlefield as an army cook. Narrated from a male perspective, the story does not deal with bloody battles but on the impact of war on ordinary people. If the narrator in *The Sorrows of War* is self-conscious and empathizes with characters, the narrator in *The Wild Wind* is completely bewildered, and does not understand at all. Female characters are only explored externally through indirect discourse through rumors or repetition of others' utterances, making the story unreal. The narrative is peppered with phrases such as "it is heard that," "the legend of Dieu Nuong," "people said that," "people stated that," "possibly," "people guess that," and "I heard from many people. Until that ambiguity is partially uncovered, people painfully realize that the ravages of war do not only take place in the front line but are present everywhere. All impressions of Dieu Nuong who embodies the loose, informal, free, and wandering lifestyle and "separated from the community" (Bao Ninh 2013: 60)<sup>3</sup> are confirmed by men's observation, and we only know that this woman turns out to be a product of war, and her body and mind are beyond men's "understanding." However, not only Dieu

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<sup>3</sup> All quotations from Bao Ninh's *Short Stories* in this article are my translations.

Nuong but also all female characters in *The Wild Wind* including soldiers' wives who have lost their husbands, ragged widows, and "a group of hungry, naked and emaciated children" drag out their miserable existence in the quagmire of war, where makes them beauty more vulnerable. Dieu Nuong harbors mental trauma caused by witnessing scenes of bloody death and smelling "the breath of corpses." (Bao Ninh 2013: 67) Her insanity, sleepwalking, and freedom, together with her vibrant and mysterious beauty contribute to her out-of-placeness in the violent war. Her magnificent voice described as "quiet like a wild wind" (Bao Ninh 2013: 62), just adds to the melancholy of the war colors. Thus, in this story, Bao Ninh does not conceal his "lack of understanding" of women. He must rely on rumors to compensate for his deficiency. Nonetheless, his honest and realistic descriptions open a new path and provide a significant signal for the reconciliation of powerful and non-powerful voices in modern texts.

Meanwhile, Alexievich's narrative establishes distinct values for women's history through the narrator's profound understanding of women during the war. It is not another war where she purposefully makes "victory terrible" and "shows the filth of the war" (Alexievich 2017: xxxv), but one that is composed by women's language. Then, through a feminine respectability discourse, the real authority is formed. This view reminds us of Chéris Kramarae's assertion that women's language is non-powerful, "gossipy, talkative, uncertain" language (1980: 58) that has been refuted in Susan Lanser's study of feminist narratology (1986: 341-63). However, in Alexievich's novel *Unwomanly Face of War*, we realize that women's language is built differently. She does not attempt to construct a kind of discourse that is equal to men's, but rather "shows" women's experiences in their own language: simple, direct, and emotional. Female characters in Alexievich's novel do not try to "clean" the feminine quality in both their speech and thoughts as pointed out by Lakoff and Lanser. Surviving in dire circumstances of war, these women make no efforts to obliterate the distinction between men and women. On the contrary, females wish to claim that they are different entities with their concerns and worries that men could dismiss as "silly." With those distinctions, however, women have

entire control of their strength and voice.

Concretely, women live and fight in facing the reality that men consider women as children, fainting flowers, or young girls who are loved, not as soldiers/fighters on the front lines. Men, for example, do not hide their disappointment in accepting the female soldiers and have completely negative thoughts about women: "They were so different—bashful, timorous, mincing, or resolute, fired up. Not all of them knew how to submit to military discipline; women's nature resists army rules" (Alexievich 2017: 115-116). The girls who volunteered to go to the front, however, accept this inequality as an unavoidable thing and show their abilities and differences in a natural way. Recognizing that the war is not a dancing night, they learn and work without cease. Even though "men... reluctantly let women into their world, onto their territory" (2015: 20), women continue to show their naturalism in a proactive manner. The active voice, for example, is used to begin all of their words: "I wasn't the only one ... All our girls expressed the wish to go to the front" (Alexievich 2017: 5). "We began to study", "We studied the regulations" "we had already mastered all that. Only so as to get to the front the sooner" (Alexievich 2017: 7). It has been seen that because of that initiative, women have come to recognize another truth about war based on their personal experiences. "Women's war is more terrible than men's. Men hide behind history, behind facts; war fascinates them as action and a conflict of ideas, of interests, whereas women are caught up with feelings." (Alexievich 2017: xxiii) Women's language takes on a more active voice as they become more aware of their own difference. All of their stories are told from the first-person point of view with honest feelings of pent-up emotional pains: "We've been silent so long. Forty years ..." (Alexievich 2017: xxiv) Despite being rejected, forced to "tell" about great victories and show a war without tears and "women's trifles," without being scared and worried, in Alexievich's novel, women's war appears to be full of those trivialities such as "how you wanted to be beautiful, how you wept when they cut off your braid", or "I didn't want to die. Shooting was scary, I never thought I'd shoot. Oh, lord! I was afraid of the dark, of the dense forest. Of wild animals, of course ... Oh ... I couldn't imagine how someone could

meet a wolf or a wild boar. I was even afraid of dogs in my childhood" (2017: 47-8). Women's direct words about their feelings cannot completely be accepted by censors. They criticize those trivial stories and refuse to embrace this truth. Because primitive naturalism humiliates and dethrones women by characterizing them as females, making them into ordinary women. Without physiology or biology, men's heroism is sterile. Thus, when women are encouraged to tell the truth, a machine gunner's wife - a radio operator confesses, "He studied *The History of the Great Patriotic War* with me all last night. He was afraid for me. And now he's worried I won't remember right. Not the way I should." (Alexievich 2017: xxiv) What are "right memories"? Female ex-soldiers must break free from male dominance if they wish to retain a "different truth" of war that they have experienced with many irrevocable differences between women's and men's bodies and minds.

It is remarkable that, despite intentionally writing about women's history, the voices Alexievich recorded did not attempt to create a powerful language that is equally masculine voice. On the contrary, they experienced and perceived war entirely through the characteristics of powerlessness, emotion, and enthusiasm. If we go back to Lanser's textual analysis of the young wife's letter, we can see that "beneath the "feminine" voice of self-effacement and emotionality, then, lies the "masculine" voice of authority that the writer cannot inscribe openly." (1986: 349), as she points out in her study, However, this claim seems to be changed here. Obviously, women are not necessary to hide their voice "like a cheating game" in Alexievich's novel. Their undeniable roles in war give them opportunities to expose themselves honestly, and their own femininity, thus, was truthfully exposed in blending many prerogatives of masculine discourse. They become truth-telling narrators, demonstrating that "women's language" is not powerless. On the other hand, "the subversiveness" that Lanser identified in her study is also not necessary to be hidden under masks, so Alexievich's women discourse has shifted to the new status: seeking sexual differences and gender power, and exposing men's prejudices. Then, a new linguistic structure is established here, which constitutes a "truth" that is dissimilar from that of men In

Alexievich's war, for men, the truth "is what we dream about. It's how we want to be!" (Alexievich 2017: xxxv) while for women, the truth is their true feelings and experiences in war.

Many feminists continue to maintain that the statement that the masculine voice is associated with the discourse of power and that the "women's language" is, in contrast, the discourse of the powerless must be disproved.<sup>4</sup> The proposition that women's language is "polite, emotional, enthusiastic, gossipy, talkative, uncertain, dull, and chatty," for example, is merely a "cover" for a speech that is "capable, direct, rational, rational, illustrating a sense of humor, unfeeling, strong (in tone and choice word) and blunt" (Kramarae 1980: 58) of masculine discourse. And Lanser's essay eloquently demonstrated this argument (Lanser1986: 341-63). When examining the works of two writers based on the juxtapositional model of comparative literature, however, it has been realized that a new gender discourse is gradually forming. The discourse concerning women is, of course, men's speech for Bao Ninh. However, that masculine voice, rather than being a voice of authority, contains his distinct perspective of women's marginal position in war. His narrative strategy of "lack of understanding" about women established by using indirect discourse and external point of view has been acknowledged as a deficiency by the "language field" of women in the system of masculine symbols. Meanwhile, in Alexievich's novel, women's war is reconstructed using feminine language that does not imply equating with male domination. Women simply show their difference. And those differences become their strength and authority. Interestingly, this gender-identified nature becomes strikingly compatible with the "faint" authority of masculine domination in Bao Ninh's works. The vague knowledge about women, exactly the area/gap that Bao Ninh "couldn't understand", is filled in Alexievich's novel.

Thus, Alexievich does not establish women's language as breaking with tradition and inducing a radical shift of the linguistic style, as many feminists argued in their study.<sup>5</sup> The writer is also not

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<sup>4</sup> See more: Lakoff, S. Lanser, Kramarae.

<sup>5</sup> See more Cixous. 2008. *White Ink: Interviews on Sex, Text and Politics* (Edited by

trying to compose powerful language by imitating the qualities and characteristics of men's language; rather, "woman must write woman" (Cixous 1976: 877), because "by writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display" (Cixous 1976: 880). As a result, the structure of language will be changed. Women will build a new symbolic system that is richer and more flexible when they become subjects of the speech rather than passive recipients, and when they reject the phallic-centered conceptual system. Being herself in the war with her own emotions and thoughts, happiness and pain, it has been realized that women's language can gradually fill the gap between men's and women's powerful status. Women were employed in varied jobs and different positions during the war due to their physical and mental differences. Their mind and body are different from men, but not inferior. Women are not to be dominated.

### **III. Direct and Indirect Discourse: Women's Beauty and Pain in War**

To "overthrow" men's prejudices about marginalized women, Alexievich uses direct discourse in her writing, however, this bias is vague and hidden in the narrator's indirect discourse in Bao Ninh's *Short Stories*. The two types of discourse unveil the writer's different perspectives as well as the shift of power in their language, which are highlighted in Lanser's book *Narrative Act* (1982) and her essay *Towards Feminist Narratology* (1986). Here, the recognition of this specificity, according to Lanser, "has led not only to the rereading of individual texts but to the rewriting of literary history" (1986: 343); even she also suggests that "it leads to a rewriting of narratology that takes into account the contribution of women as both producers and interpreters of texts" (Lanser 1986: 343)

In Bao Ninh's works, war is neither win-lose struggles nor washing away hatred, rather, it mostly contains in deep humane

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Susan Sellers), Acumen Publishing Limited; Dani Cavallaro. *French Feminist Theory: An Introduction*, London & New York: Continuum, 2003. p. 123

contemplation on human beings. Even though women's faces are being increasingly out of place, Bao Ninh keeps following those marginal signs to make a difference. In his narratives, the grimmer and bare the men's word is, the more magical the women's world becomes. If male characters are usually observed from an internal point of view with profound understanding, on the contrary, women are a fully mysterious world depicted by indirect discourse.

Dieu Nuong describes *The Wild Wind* in this manner: "In the mixing of the dawn, illusion and reality, sounds and images are integrated. There is a slim body, a graceful gait. A stream of her hair fell on.... Maybe a ghost. A seductive ghostly in full of soft and alive, but can suddenly dissolve into the mystery" (Bao Ninh 2013: 55). Nga in the short story *Trại "Bảy chú lùn"* (*A Camp of "the Seven Dwarves"*) also appears as an illusion from the soldier's look: "I was stunned, I couldn't believe my eyes anymore" (Bao Ninh 2013: 127), "Her voice is so beautiful, it can soar to the height and suddenly fall" (Bao Ninh 2013: 128). Ngà in the story *Hữu khuynh* (*The Rightist Deviationism*) are another strange and painful image of women. That girl appeared in the dreams of Tư (Ngà's lover), "in the long nights and the deepest corners of his heart" (Bao Ninh 2013: 224). He often saw Ngà's beautiful figure: "Her oval face appeared out in the darkness, both faint and clear. The thick hair fell to her shoulders. Tư reached out his hand and touched that hair. He stroked it gently. Her bare arms and soft shoulders although had disappeared, still trembled in his hands..." (Bao Ninh 2013: 225). Just like that, the soldier's many flesh and blood experiences have vanished in the face of the girl's true love.

Not only are women portrayed from an external point of view, but their images are mostly coated with an illusional color, sometimes of art. Giang, in the story *Hà Nội lúc không giờ* (*Hanoi At No Time*) is seen from the painter Nam's perspective, as being "vivid and illusory":

"Giang in the picture is just seventeen years old. Under the shimmering reflection of a lamp, her young and pink oval face is so pretty. The plump lips were slightly pursed, the high neck was white. Her head was bowed, her arms crossed on her knees. I

couldn't see her eyes since she didn't raise her face, but I could see her delicate eyebrows, thick and slightly wet eyelashes" (Bao Ninh 2013: 564).

All women in Bao Ninh's narratives are observed from the external point of view, they are beautiful, but strange and hard to understand. Also, they aren't depicted with specific psychological descriptions, nor direct dialogues between the characters. In his narratives, mainly the narrator's speeches (including narration and indirect dialogue) and telling from the third person point of view with indirect discourse. The narrator is a far distance from female characters. This technique leads to the reality that his authority is very small. His knowledge is limited, and the narrator doesn't understand women, only observes and describes some feelings from the outside. The limitations of understanding of this narrator, on the other hand, make him more believable. Making no secret of that deficiency, Bao Ninh's narrator creates a blurred world full of emotions that is so different from men's fierce world in war.

In addition, in Bao Ninh's short stories, no matter what these women are, a mother worships her son on an airplane because he was a military pilot who died in an air battle (*Thousand Years of White Clouds*), a high school girl (*Giang, A Forbidden Book, A Competition*), a young girl who encountered in the battle (*Carving the side of the boat*), a "prostitute" of the war (Dieu Nuong in *The Wild Wind*), a female courier (Nga in *The Camp of "the Seven Dwarves"*), a girl from the enemy side (Ngà in *Rightist Deviationism*), or a gentle and holy French girl with illusory violin sounds (Sophie in *The Violin of the Invaders*), and Giang - the hope's source in war (*Hanoi At No Time*) - all of them have the magical or illusory beauty. They are presented as a living source - a great song during the furious sound of weapons and bombs.

This seems completely different from Alexievich's image of women in the front line. Women don't write about themselves in the same way that Bao Ninh does. Women's beauty is observed and depicted with many differences depending on their own experiences. And women's authority and status are shaped by this distinction.

The girls appear as subjects in any situation in *Unwomanly*



*Face of War*, irrespective of ravages and brutalities, or even paradoxes of war. They do not, however, have fragile beauty like angels. In the strange situations of war, most of them portray both their outer appearance and inner nature by their own direct speech. On the front line, beautiful young girls must very quickly cut their long hair and dress military uniforms. War does not inherently accept women's presence with many complicated costumes. To survive, they must become men. The girls' familiar image is "in old boots and a man's padded jacket" (Alexievich 2017: 77). Not only that, but their bodies are also destroyed in the cruelest and barbaric way. Shura Kiseleva, for example, "was the prettiest of us. Like an actress. She got burned up" (Alexievich 2017: 86); or in another case, "one of our nurses was captured... A day later we took back that village... We found her: eyes put out, breasts cut off. They had impaled her on a stake ... It was freezing cold, and she was white as could be, and her hair was all gray... She was nineteen years old (Alexievich 2017: 123).

Alexievich's female beauty is only revealed in such a way. Women understand that war is not for human beings, there is only "beat," "stab with a bayonet," and "strangling each other." (Alexievich 2017: 135) "They break each other's bones. There's howling, shouting. Moaning." (Alexievich 2017: 135). And, in such nightmares, women's differences can cause troublesome problems, so they purposefully exclude them. Women's fashion items are not allowed. It's not a good idea to be a woman. In war, there are no women. Girls even realize that they are being "masculinized," because of not bathing, not dressing well, and not being flirted with. It's all just a matter of death preparation. However, a woman's natural identity seems to be stronger in essence. They still want to be attractive. Their desire is only to look beautiful. "I was very afraid that if I was killed, I'd lie there looking unattractive. I saw many girls killed... In mud, in water ... Well... How shall I... I didn't want to die like that." (Alexievich 2017: 152). They expressed their fears. Thus, from women's perspective, female beauty becomes their obsession and desire, not life or death but beauty. Even they are very much concerned about their appearance after death: "In the end, only one fear remains - of being ugly after death. A woman's

fear... Not to be torn to pieces by a shell... I saw it happen... I picked up those pieces" (Alexievich 2017: 193). And it is what men seem to think is so stupid that makes the difference.

Not only is women's beauty described differently depending on male/female perspectives, but their pain is also distinguished in indirect and direct discourse from men and women's looks. In both Bao Ninh's and Alexievich's narrative forms, gender identity is established as an inevitable thing.

In Bao Ninh's narratives, indirect discourse is one of the main techniques, and remarkably, it is employed extensively. For example, in *The Wild Wind*, the narrator admits: "The illusory elements are enhanced by each person's imagination." (Bao Ninh 2013: 55) Dieu Nuong's life, as the story's heroine, is filled with ambiguous details, "rumors" and "fabrications." This external observation is so radical that when Dieu Nuong even is rescued from a pile of corpses, traumatized, and described as a "prostitute" willing to hang out with anyone, the physical intimacy of the character "I" who already had sex with her, also becomes a very common "self," "I" of all men. Take into account Bao Ninh's rapid transition in discourse: from a seemingly very personal "I," such as "I was enjoying never-before-seen minutes there, beyond my hometown", "I took a step forward and touched something wonderful...", "I was sunk in a sweet hell" (Bao Ninh 2013: 76). But, despite all the passion, magic power, and even guilt, the narrator still understands nothing about Dieu Nuong. His entire range of emotions is an illusion. Furthermore, the use of non-exactly demonstrative pronouns such as *nobody*, *people* (e.g., "not many people linger with her," "nobody dares to make her hopeless," "people keep promising" (Bao Ninh 2013: 77), has revealed that the character "I" turns also out very common and vague, just as man's ego. Thus, this one-of-a-kind intimacy has been "faded", becoming faint. It keeps the story narrated from an outside outlook. It's precisely the physical relationship that cannot be the body-mind one after moments of infatuation. The women's image in Bao Ninh's works is beautiful and fantasy, thanks to this narrative technique.

This technique of telling is also pursued in Bao Ninh's other

narratives. Concretely, in *A Camp of "the Seven Dwarves,"* whatever the narrator knows about Nga is observed from the external point of view, regardless of how tumultuous the circumstances are (even in a long time, the soldier-narrator lives in the same forest with her). Nobody knows what she is thinking. In her suffering and living, the soldier is completely powerless. He just quietly witnesses her changes, seeing "her grief diminished", or "her sadness and longing were getting more and more intense. She got older" (2013: 135). Therefore, when she abandons everything, including her son to the front in the hope of finding her lover, she and the soldier both sink into throbbing pain. Obviously, although they are not in the front lines of the war, the brutality of war has a heavy impact on their fortunes.

Thus, unlike in *Unwomanly Face of War*, there are no images of female soldiers who sacrifice themselves in the front line, "center of hell" in Bao Ninh. In the darkness of war, women are considered an eternal source of life with passionate happiness, but endless pain by war. They, however, are on the "periphery" of the war. Women are mostly victims, entirely involved in the war by "feminine" reasons and "womanly" logic and faced with the barbarism of war in their way: Dieu Nuong falls tragically in love with a soldier and uses her wonderful singing to down the sound of bombs and bullets; Nga leaves her son to go to the front line in seeking her son's father; Ngà suffers in silence and abandons her man in despair. Their painful and fragile fates expose many tragedies of war. All the women in Bao Ninh are passionate and naïve. From his perspective, they are "gentle and benevolent women" (Bao Ninh 2013: 556), as though angels soothing the pain in moments of despair and misery. Although Bao Ninh's narrator rarely reveals women's psychological dimensions through indirect discourse, women's beauty and mental torments are there as the tough and repeated mental trauma, which is filled by the reader's co-creation day after day.

However, it seems that only women are capable of accurately perceiving and describing the most "weird" and craziest experiences that God gave their bodies during the war. In *Unwomanly Face of War*, by using direct language, Alexievich exposes a different truth. Only in women's discourse could it be possible to be killed by being embarrassed. An example is the story of a woman's menstrual

period, that makes her become the target of enemies. Listen to her voice: "I'm alone... among men. I was wearing trousers, but now I march in a summer dress. Suddenly I begin to have my... woman's thing... It started early, probably from the agitation. From being nervous, upset. There was nowhere to find what I needed. I was embarrassed! So embarrassed!" (Alexievich 2017: xxxi). And that girl, when seeing the river, she jumps into it. The need to clean her body due to embarrassment gives the Germans that are across the river with an opportunity aimed precisely and shoot her; Alternatively, we can remember another reality. To save a squad of 30 people, a female radio operator must manually drown her newborn baby. Only because somebody betrayed her comrades and the Germans found out where the camp of their partisan unit. The swamp hides everything, including machines and people in its wild thickets, but it doesn't silence the hungry newborn baby's cries. "The baby was hungry... It had to be nursed... But the mother herself was hungry and had no milk. The baby cried. The punitive forces were close... With dogs... If the dogs heard it, we'd all be killed" (Alexievich 2017: xxxiv). And although nobody can bring the commander's order to the mother, she figures it out on herself. "She lowers the swaddled baby into the water and holds it there for a long time... The baby doesn't cry anymore... Not a sound... And we can't raise our eyes. Neither to the mother nor each other" (Alexievich 2017: xxxiv). She saved her comrades. Is it, however, a victory or a crime? Just keep in mind that it will torment the mother till she dies.

These realities force us to rethink about hidden corners of war. War has painfully destroyed both outer appearance and the inner soul of women, as according to Alexievich's writing, and only women profoundly understand it: "Even if you come home alive, your soul will hurt" (Alexievich 2017: 17) Witnessing the brutality and "living through it" (Alexievich 2017: 136), the girls realize that they will never be normal people. The war can end, but "nothing human left of her anyway, it's all over" says a female ex-soldier (2015: 136). Women's direct discourse, irrespective of who they are, is tormented by memories of war all the time. From a female sniper who is traumatized by the loud sounds to a female partisan who is haunted by smells of a burning human body, all of them suffered

a mental disorder. The female sipper even "wakes up at night, run and fetch her cologne", and "it seems that in the cologne, too, there's that smell. Everywhere..." (Alexievich 2017: 255). The brutality of war is exposed in such dry, bare, and direct stories, deepening women's grief in the absence of figures. Although they can see everything is rebuilt after war and "everything drowns in flowers" (Alexievich 2017: 34), all their senses are still immersed in memory: "I'm worn out with pain, I still don't have a woman's face. I cry often, I moan all day. It's my memories" (Alexievich 2017: 34). Thus, telling trivial stories by using direct discourse, on the one hand, truthfully exposes women's war through their own feelings and experiences, on the other hand, it is no longer a way of seeking sympathy, but rather a means of uncovering adversities and a deep smoldering pain that requires liberation.

This artistic technique is completely absent in Bao Ninh's narratives. By unmasking women's pain in the war, Bao Ninh sympathizes with and is grateful to them. Narrated from the male perspective, women's sufferings have been refracted, and it differently impacts on readers. Women are likewise stunning, but it's the kind of beauty that is "nailed" in men's perception of desire and authority. Although their own feelings of inadequacy and meaningless in the world without women, males continue to regard women as unreal values. Women are on the periphery. They have no voice in war. They are shown as saints by Bao Ninh to strengthen the will of the soldiers fighting on the front lines.

Even though both Bao Ninh and Alexievich's writings do not share the vision of making a great history with heroic characters, gender identity has had a significant influence on their works. The narrative strategy of "lack of understanding" and indirect discourse employed by Bao Ninh sharply contrasts with that of Alexievich who utilizes deep knowledge and direct discourse on women. Interestingly, when comparing these two writers' works based on the juxtapositional model, it becomes clear that their telling does not disprove each other, but rather exalt, respond to, and fill our understanding of people and war.

#### IV. Private and Public Narratives: Love Stories

Besides the difference of voices and direct/indirect discourse, private/public narratives are also used to illustrate the shift of the power in gender discourse in the narrative texts. Theoretically, private or public narrating becomes a debated issue in narratology because it reveals the power of discourse as well as the content of narratives. When we examine this phenomenon, we can look back at Spender's arguments: "The dichotomy of male/female, public/private is maintained by permitting women to write for private audience (which can be extended to encompass other women) but discouraging them from writing for public audience, that is, men. In the "private" sphere, women have been permitted to write for themselves... There is no contradiction in patriarchal order while women write for women" (Spender 1980: 192). However, this only remains within the limits of the private sphere, conflicts will arise "when women write for men" (1980: 192). Thus, Alexievich's writing in *Unwomanly Face of War* inevitably creates issues, because that private sphere is for men, to publish a different war. Making conflicts is a huge obstacle that is not easy to overcome for women. On another side of it, when women speak up, they will be granted "authority". This authority is also discussed more by Lanser when she proposes public/private narrative levels as an important additional category that concerned the study of women's texts (1986: 352). Her point is that the public/private notions apply not only to what women write, but also to how readers interpret what they read. Women's language will shape a new "field" of discourse based on "the subversion" of the masculine domination if private stories are published. Thus, in Alexievich's novel, telling women's private stories is to openly oppose the male supremacy that firmly dominates the public consciousness and has prevailed not only during the war but also throughout the post-war years. It is about dismantling masculine power and privilege, creating new perceptions, and forming a new language that the patriarchal system has deliberately erased or distorted.

This type of private discourse is densely used in Alexievich's novel. In war, because everyone is surrounded by evil and hatred,

private stories like love are also different. Women recognize that "a human being is most visible and open in war, and maybe also in love. To the depths, to the subcutaneous layers"(Alexievich 2017: xxv). Hence, Alexievich's women, although seeing "love would perish instantly" (Alexievich 2017: 240), they still confirm that "Love is the only personal event in wartime. All the rest is common-even death" (Alexievich 2017: 225). Because of realizing love's difference and fragility in deadly circumstances, women's love is almost romantic and tragic stories. Nina L. Mikhail, a sergeant major and nurse, expressed her heartfelt gratitude "Our love was not divided into today and tomorrow, there was only today. Each of us knew that you love now, and the next moment either you or this man would be no more" (Alexievich 2017: 234). Also, in the hundreds of broken stories recorded in the novel, although it does not last a lifetime, love leaves the deepest traces of separation and loss. They assert directly: "We were separated by the war" (Alexievich 2017: 230), and women who are pure girls, wives, and mothers as well as peoples who are called as "a field campaign wife. A war wife... A second one" (Alexievich 2017: 235), even when they are at their happiest, they experience suffering. They know that "the war ended, and love ended. Like a song." Even if they are alive, their lives will only be nourished by the past, because no matter how painful and bad the ending, for them, love is still the most meaningful thing, remaining the beauty between the darkness of bombs and blood. "The war as the best time of my life, I was happy then ..." a girl says (Alexievich 2017: 237), or "I think that if I hadn't fallen in love at the war, I wouldn't have survived. Love saved us. It saved me ..." (Alexievich 2017: 235). Thus, all such direct words of insiders show war's another face, deeply imprinting the women's unnamed pains, and on the other hand, confirming women's voices.

In Alexievich's novel, although the blood stains on the snow and the brutality of war cannot be hidden by women's faces, their direct, honest, and determined voices remain the glimmer of light in the dark shadows of the violent war. They can be a sniper, an anti-aircraft gunner, underground fighter, a tank driver, a senior pilot, a sapper, a foot soldier, telephone operator, doctor, surgical nurse, medical assistant, a baker, or an art singer, medical volunteer, or a

partisan, for instance. All those people live, fight, do everything in each their various position, and have their love in the front. Despite pain and despair, their love is the most humane aspect of human beings in the war, and only those private narratives, we can imagine about women's history and hear their own voices

In contrast, Bao Ninh's narrative strategy shows that women's happiness and pain in love are observed and narrated by indirect discourse from men's perspectives. It leads to many differences between the two writers in presenting private narratives. If women's private world in Alexievich's novel is a vivid and truthful picture and full of colors between happiness and sufferings narrated directly, so instead women's love stories in Bao Ninh's works are an illusion, beauty, and pain in a different way. Regardless matter whether women are on the periphery or not, they are swept into the war's inhumane and barbaric reality.

It is illustrated by the silent and strong love affair between Dieu Nuong and Tuan in *The Wild Wind*, which ends painfully with the image of two people dead wrapped around each other; and Ngà's painful and torturous love with a communist from the opposing side in Bao Ninh's *Rightist Deviationism*. If the bullets drills through Dieu Nuong and Tuan and tighten the two bodies together as a symbol of the darkest period, the humiliation of the word "betrayer" not only kills the pure and passionate soul of Ngà, but it also makes her love forever "nourished with open wounds, the pain of dying again and again, and the constant horrors" (Bao Ninh 2013: 221). In both these stories, love has been turned into tragedy as an unavoidable consequence of war. Nobody can be immune to the pain of loss. Narrated from the third-person point of view and observed from a lack of understanding narrator, their love still sinks in sharp pain.

Thus, although the private/public narratives of Bao Ninh and Alexievich are completely different due to sexual differences, both techniques allow readers to feel the paradox, fierceness, and disaster women in war. When a woman, however, writes about herself, shares her secrets, and exposes her private stories, which means, her awareness and status are established.



## V. Conclusion

Alexievich wrote "a book about war that would make war sickening, and the very thought of it repulsive. Insane. So that even the generals would be sickened ..." (Alexievich 2017: xxii). The anti-war voices in Alexievich and Bao Ninh are profoundly heard on each of their pages. When they're put side by side using the juxtapositional model of Comparative Literature, it can uncover other dimensions that could be missed if they are analyzed separately.

Based on examining the two writers' works from the feminist narratological approach, the paper distinguishes between the two types of narratives of women. More importantly, if feminist narrative studies have separated the poles of authoritative and non-authoritative voices associated with male/female discourse, distinguishing features between Bao Ninh's and Alexievich's discourse do not create contradictions, but tend to overlap, blurring sharp demarcation. The image of women indirectly narrated from Bao Ninh's masculine discourse, on the one hand, makes the author's masculine authority faded, on the other hand, it serves as indirect support for the argument that women need to have their own voice and language. The history of women must be built through their own experiences. Bao Ninh's women are beautiful, yet their beauty is referenced by a patriarchal system and filled up by men's aspirations. However, the narrator's "lack of understanding" in Bao Ninh's works, interestingly, shows the truthfulness in his narrative strategy, bringing profound changes in the humanistic spirit; simultaneously, it acknowledges that men's authority language has not been sufficient for expressing women's world. When describing a world that it does not belong, the masculine language unveils its weaknesses. Alexievich, in contrast, applies a completely different narrative strategy. She remains all women's voices with their feelings and experiences to compose women's war/history. Therefore, women's language in Alexievich's novels is the active, direct, and determined discourse. With no need to hide or disguise, women "accidentally" fully reveal their natural characteristics: emotions and differences. They are not looking for equality to men, all they desire is to be asserted their voice and position. Even though women's

language in Alexievich's novel is an active and powerful voice, they do not try to look for the physical and emotional similarities with men. They are two separate entities. Women, once again, gain power by being different. Thus, juxtaposing Bao Ninh and Alexievich's works, we can recognize many different features, but contextually, these differences will not exist at the two poles, but rather appear to respond to and toward overlap each other. The sexual difference forms the two types of different discourses and transforms the narrative structure; however, it also reveals as well as enriches our knowledge of the so-called authority and non-authority of women's language, contributing to better understanding women's real position and roles in war, and human beings in general. Regardless of the active or passive voices, telling from a male/female point of view, women's fates (and people's future in general) are only as the worms and ants' fates (Bao Ninh 2015: 52-87) in the war. They are small and weak, and they'll all perish because of the catastrophic destruction of bombs and bullets. Loss and suffering are constant companions throughout their lives. War, no matter how they look at, it is always opposite to women, putting them together, only increasing the paradoxes, pain, and brutality.

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