

“THE CARRIER BAG THEORY OF FICTION” AND NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE VIETNAM WAR IN THE LITERARY WORKS OF LE MINH KHUE

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Abstract: *This article initiates its perspective from Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” published in 1986, using it as a foundation to re-examine women’s literary texts on the war, as well as the ways in which female characters are presented within these texts. In the essay, Le Guin posits that since prehistoric times, men have engaged in warfare and reveled in heroic narratives, while women have remained on the periphery of these accounts. Furthermore, if the weapon is the object associated with men, symbolizing masculinity, then women are more often associated with the bag. This perspective is broadened as Le Guin elaborates on the art of storytelling. Drawing upon Ursula K. Le Guin’s perspective, novels, particularly those authored by women addressing the theme of war, can be conceptualized as “carrier bags.” These literary forms contain essential aspects of experience often overlooked or marginalized within conventional narratives that predominantly glorify the (male) hero. Accordingly, this article undertakes a rereading of selected works of women’s war literature through this theoretical lens. It examines the portrayal and significance of female roles within these narratives, as well as their potential to deconstruct the conventional structure centered on the individual male hero. The specific texts selected for analysis in this paper are the prose works of Le Minh Khue, a representative female Vietnamese author renowned for her writings on war.*

Keywords: *Woman writers; Vietnam War, alternative narratives, Le Minh Khue.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper draws inspiration from, and initiates its line of reasoning based upon, Ursula K. Le Guin's (1929-2018) “carrier bag theory of fiction”. In her eponymous 1986 essay, Le Guin posits that since prehistoric times, men have engaged in warfare and immersed themselves in narratives of heroism, featuring bloody battles with mammoths and early pictorial representations inscribed in caves, which likely depicted primarily these feats of conquest. Conversely, she argues, women have consistently been situated on the periphery (or, more accurately, have been deliberately marginalized) within these dominant narratives (Ursula K. Le Guin, 1989). This perspective offered by Le Guin, one might readily recognize, exhibits a strong resonance with the feminist interpretations of history and gender history previously articulated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949). Subsequently, Le Guin’s arguments themselves resonated powerfully within the discourse of later feminist theorists, exemplified by Rebecca Solnit (2019) demanding recognition that the glorification of the hero, and the confinement of human history solely to heroic narratives, constitutes a fundamental flaw in thinking (Rebecca Solnit, 2019). Similarly, when Joan C. Tronto (1993) articulated political arguments for a new ethics of care, the resonance stemming from her resolute refusal to exclusively recognize the value of a few select individuals-in order to give voice to those more vulnerable and less visible, yet whose work holds greater promise for sustaining the existence of humanity and the world (as opposed to narratives focused solely on acts of violence,

aggression, and conquest/appropriation)-constitutes an undeniable echo (Joan Tronto,1993). This article commences with a focus on a recurring theme evident in the discourse of female authors: a preoccupation with history intertwined with a search for alternative historical narratives. This thematic thread encompasses critical perspectives on war-challenging its portrayal as a predominantly male event driven by masculine heroes and serving to establish masculine identity- and culminates in the articulation of a different history. This alternative history belongs to ‘the others’ and is defined by experiences of nurturance, envelopment, and endurance.

This paper delves into the works of Le Minh Khue (born in 1949 in Thanh Hoa), a female writer who directly participated in the resistance war against the United States. Notably, she stands out as a writer who resisted being swept up or subsumed by the dominant historical narratives of the war. Instead, Khue offers distinct dialogues from a female perspective. Consequently, historical events, battles, and heroic myths are re-examined through her writing, thereby establishing a new system of values on the increasingly blurred lines between self and other, us and them.

2. CONTENT

2.1. “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction” by Le Guin: A Theoretical Proposal

From “The second sex” by Simone de Beauvoir...

One of Simone de Beauvoir’s pivotal contributions to feminist theory, a turning point that also significantly shaped the second wave, lies in her rigorous investigation into the historical origins, biological underpinnings, and life-governing mechanisms through which women have been almost perpetually relegated to the role of the “Other”. The historical and social origins of the subordinate position endured by women, existing in parallel with the elevated values ascribed to violence and warfare, are gradually deconstructed by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (Simone de Beauvoir,1976). This deconstruction occurs through an examination of humanity’s aspirations to transcend nature, dominate it, become the master of all species, and transform the world—endeavors frequently lauded and celebrated as the core values of human existence. It is within this socially sanctioned value system that women, along with their activities, reproductive functions, and physiological characteristics, are relegated to a realm of worthlessness. Nothing is more violent than attack and appropriation; yet it is precisely these actions that marked humanity’s initial distinct presence in the world.

The maternal activities of breastfeeding, coupled with the domestic labor of animal husbandry, cultivation, harvesting, and food preparation for offspring, have historically been construed as lacking substantive contribution to societal advancement or to the differentiation of humankind from other species. Conversely, when men engaged in sanguinary hunts, wagering their very lives, and autonomously formulated strategic plans, their actions were posited as transcending mere existence and the base instincts of self-preservation, thereby affirming both individual identity and the perceived superiority of their gender. As Beauvoir astutely observed, a parallel argument can be made regarding warfare and participation therein: “If blood were only a food, it would not be worth more than milk: but the hunter is not a butcher: he runs risks in the struggle against wild animals. The warrior risks his own life to raise the prestige of the horde-his clan. This is how he brilliantly proves that *life is not the supreme value for man but that it must serve ends far greater than itself*. The worst curse on woman is her exclusion from warrior expeditions; it is not in giving life but in risking his life that man raises himself above the animal; this is why throughout humanity, *superiority has been granted not to the sex that gives birth but to the one that kills*”. [4, p.153]

... to “the carrier bag theory” by Le Guin

Beauvoir emphasizes that all the biological and historical factors constitute the “key to the whole mystery” [4, p.153]. It is precisely within the system of values that affirms the position of humankind as a supreme species that women have been excluded and viewed as “secondary” existences, playing a virtually insignificant role in history. Are not the recorded narratives of human history predominantly initiated by struggles against nature, and is not world history frequently documented as a progression of wars between nations and communities—conflagrations that

determine the transformative junctures of human history—alongside a series of inventions marking humanity's capacity to dominate terrestrial spaces and, moreover, to encroach upon and attempt to subjugate the cosmos? Le Guin appears to build upon this very argument of Beauvoir to initiate her own debate. From this pivotal standpoint, Le Guin re-examines the concept of life, the role of women in history, and the narrative system that extols 'the hero'. Echoing Beauvoir, Le Guin interrogates historical accounts to expose how bloodshed, violence, recklessness, and killing—which, in her view, are entirely unnecessary for human existence and contemplation—have come to occupy a central position in our history, thereby relegating women and their life-sustaining activities to a secondary and silenced status: “The mammoth hunters spectacularly occupy the cave wall and the mind, but what we actually did to stay alive and fat was gather seeds, roots, sprouts, shoots, leaves, nuts, berries, fruits, and grains, adding bugs and mollusks and netting or snaring birds, fish, rats, rabbits, and other tuskless small fry to up the protein [...] So much time that maybe the restless ones who didn't have a baby around to enliven their life, or skill in making or cooking or singing, or very interesting thoughts to think, decided to slope off and hunt mammoths. The skillful hunters then would come staggering back with a load of meat, a lot of ivory, and a story. *It wasn't the meat that made the difference. It was the story*” [1, p.276] (italics as emphasized by the author of this article). Le Guin's arguments reveal an undisguisedly sarcastic tone regarding male indolence, the presumption of an inherent entitlement to exemption from caregiving, and the ambition to marginalize individuals and tasks responsible for sustaining everyday life, relegating them to the mundane to exalt the 'exceptionality' of acts of violence. Consequently, historical narratives lack space for the quotidian; the 'history of civilizations' refuses to accommodate repetition and the meticulous attention to the fundamental elements necessary for the enduring maintenance of life as it is. Instead, there is a persistent aspiration for history to be something progressive. Beyond engaging in “unconventional” acts of violence, by relegating other aspects to the realm of the trivial and insignificant, men also seize the role of narrator/spokesperson. Consequently, “extraordinary” images of the (male) hero are constructed within the realm of thrilling, suspenseful narratives of triumph and defeat. As Le Guin points out, “That story not only has Action, it has a Hero. Heroes are powerful”; whereas the lives of women, their commonplace experiences devoid of novelty or dramatic peaks, their confinement within familiar spaces encompassing a multitude of arduous tasks, including their reflections and songs, etc., all are “been pressed into service in the tale of the Hero. But it isn't their story. It's his” [1, p.276]. It is also at this juncture that Le Guin builds upon Elizabeth Fisher's subversion of phallogocentric interpretations regarding the origins of humankind, as presented in *Women's Creation: Sexual Evolution and the Shaping of Society* (1975), and subsequently proposes the carrier bag theory. Stemming from these propositions of an alternative evolutionary history, Fisher, and by extension Le Guin, posit that “the earliest cultural inventions must have been a container to hold gathered products and some kind of sling or net carrier” [1, p.278]. That container, for Le Guin, could primarily be the “stomach” into which humans put food for survival. Subsequently, it evolves into “a leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container” [1, p.277] for holding provisions gathered from the external world and for placing a child within during labor. It is not the “hard” and “long” implements of attack that laid the foundation for life; rather, it is “the container for the thing contained” [1, p.278]. In other words, it is not striking, piercing, thrusting, killing, not creating weapons and using them to slaughter that constitutes the 'proof' of being human. Le Guin seems to subvert an entire androcentric value system that has become too firmly established; she appears to declare a challenge: “Wanting to be human too, I sought for evidence that I was; but if that's what it took, to make a weapon and kill with it, then evidently I was either extremely defective as a human being, or not human at all” [1, p.279]. In a re-evaluation of historical discourse, Le Guin demands recognition for marginalized narratives, proposing alternative narrative architectures that move beyond the linear trajectory of the 'arrow' and embrace the multifaceted and inclusive model of 'the bag/the sack': “I said it was hard to make a gripping tale of how we wrested the wild oats from their husks, I didn't say it was

impossible” [1, p.283]. Whereas narratives are frequently dominated by the hero, who pulls everything into a unidirectional plot structure characterized by a progression from arduous challenge and struggle to eventual victory, Le Guin insists that the novel must be a ‘totality’-a totality not easily described as either contradictory or harmonious, but one that encompasses the flowing current of life and is therefore inherently open-ended. These reflections on an alternative narrative structure raise the potential for different accounts of war from a female perspective. This is not to suggest that men, when participating in epic or heroic narratives as protagonists, witnesses, or narrators, are incapable of reflecting on these very ‘stories of killing’; however, this paper aims to delve deeper into the experiences and perspectives of women, who are consistently relegated to the periphery of wars. These are individuals who endure significant suffering and loss but are often viewed merely as a backdrop, context, or support figures, almost never able to become central characters in masculine narratives of war. Yet, it is precisely because of this marginalization that their war stories may dismantle the dominant hero-centric paradigm and bestow a new ‘form’ upon storytelling.

2.2. Exploring the ‘Bag Mode’ for Narratives: A Study of Le Minh Khue’s War Stories

2.2.1. *Le Minh Khue and the Rejection of Heroic Overtones*

Based on the arguments presented above, this section undertakes an experimental re-reading of Le Minh Khue’s narrative world through the lens of the aforementioned theoretical reflections. This approach examines a mode of narration that deviates from the epic portrayal of male heroes’ progress, offering an alternative perspective and critique of the war. Examining the war from this vantage point reveals that the war narratives of a female author like Le Minh Khue do not present us with heroic epics akin to the trajectory of arrows or bullets. Instead, they unveil a world where judgments of victory and defeat become exceedingly fragile, and the clear demarcations of battle lines intended to create conflict are significantly blurred. In Le Minh Khue’s works, the traditionally central figure of the hero is consequently decentered; furthermore, skepticism towards the established mythology that interprets war as a continuous and optimistic progression towards the future, justice, and humanity intensifies significantly. Le Minh Khue’s literary works increasingly demonstrate a significant endeavor to posit a counter-thesis to the narrative paradigm centered on the male hero, which had been almost considered a rigid archetype for war narratives.

In addressing the concept of ecofeminist thought within the works of Virginia Woolf, Diana L. Swanson also employs Le Guin’s reimagining of the novel as a bag or a container’ to reinterpret Woolf’s narrative approach. More broadly, this involves a re-evaluation of how female writers dismantle the conventional narrative framework of exposition-rising action-climax-resolution: “Le Guin clearly connects the male-centered anthropological theory of Man-the-Hunter with the conflict-centered theory of what makes a good story. The two go together. The inaccuracy of these theories is that they exclude women and the feminine from the human and the valuable; the danger of these theories is that they valorize violence, war, death, and sacrifice for abstract goals such as honor, freedom, and nation while they negate cooperation, peace, survival, and the maintenance work of daily living” [5, p.27]. From this vantage point, as early as her works such as “*Những ngôi sao xa xôi*” (“*The Distant Stars*”) (1969-1971), Le Minh Khue introduced notably distinct nuances into her wartime narratives. This short story by Le Minh Khue can primarily be interpreted as a reflection on how the heroic imaginings of women, regarding their self-identification with the image of the hero, were demythologized. Amidst a prevailing discourse that elevated women to the stature of men to mobilize the entire populace for the front lines, and at a time when the image of female volunteer youth was romantically lauded as powerful and fierce, akin to a conquering figure, the images and accounts of/about these young women in Le Minh Khue’s story offer the reader a divergent perspective, one that is more quotidian and unassuming. Định, the young protagonist and narrator in “*The Distant Stars*,” initially harbored unrealistic romantic ideals regarding the image of female combatants: “I thought that we would be carrying guns, marching in force within a forest so deep we couldn’t even see the moon or the stars. Our speech had to be strong and brief, just like the

slogans.” However, the first task assigned to her and her fellow female youth volunteers was a duty she had not anticipated: “Young volunteers have to do this? Haul dirt?” (I couldn’t have imagined it)” [6, p.315]. Furthermore, the stark realities concerning the very tenuousness of existence were also laid bare: “Many meals we had no broth, so we girls poured drinking water over our rice. We did this in public and we looked so miserable that some of the men cried out in pity” [6, p.315]. In her portrayal of female combatants, Le Minh Khue’s narrative diverges from depictions featuring elaborate strategic schemes or actions escalating to climactic battles aimed at resolving conflict and achieving victory. Instead, the work of the three young women is characterized by repetitive yet continuous tasks performed in constant confrontation with death, constituting a fundamental action for the preservation of the prevailing peace and the sustenance of life: bomb disposal. It is precisely this departure from the conventional narrative framework of conflict-action-climax that has often led to “The Distant Stars” being perceived as a story lacking a discernible plot. Instead of a pointed arrow, Le Minh Khue appears to be bestowing upon the reader a ‘pouch’ or a ‘bag’-a ‘pouch’ filled with inchoate emotions and nostalgia for the homeland, for Hanoi, for the warmth of family, for the simple childhood joy of holding an ice cream cone [6, p.314]; a ‘pouch/bag’ containing the fleeting stirrings within young women; the scattered thoughts devoid of deliberate planning; the unhealed wounds upon their bodies [6, p.312]; and the quotidian activities that are not considered actions, and certainly lack any heroism in the conventionally understood sense: such as embroidering pillows, transcribing songs, or absentmindedly listening to the radio. Undeniably, the experiences of these young women, constantly thrust into the liminal space between life and death, inherently possess a perilous quality characteristic of heroic narratives.

Through her narrative approach focusing on the inner lives of young women, and by depicting the quotidian existence of the sisters amidst the harsh realities of the battlefield, Le Minh Khue intricately weaves a diverse tapestry of nuances into the conventional war narrative. This is akin to the character Nho’s embroidery on a pillow or Thao’s transcription of her sister’s improvised songs, which serve to soften the seemingly rigid structure of wartime accounts. Consequently, the author introduces profoundly human and distinctly feminine dimensions to the portrayal of conflict. The female characters’ struggle against the imminent threat of bombs and bullets, in this context, transcends a mere representation of heroic valor, resonating more closely with a fundamental yearning for survival and an instinctive resistance against death rooted in their primal will to live: “I tried to scream but I choked. Dirt filled my mouth. Damn! I spat out a clump of earth. Groping around, my hand touched Thao’s hair. I turned around and, pushing myself forward, used both hands to claw at the dirt. I found her, but I couldn’t sense her breathing. Then, suddenly, she flung an arm around my neck and shakily stood up” [6, p.318]. It is not coincidental that “The Distant Stars”, composed during a period when the nation was still embroiled in the flames of war, is appraised as a remarkable work concerning the conflict. It signifies a divergent approach to warfare, deviating from the conventional glorification of heroic feats to delve into more quotidian aspects and a closer proximity to lived experience. The fervent aspiration for peace among the female characters in the narrative-young women who day after day perform the same repetitive tasks: nerves taut like a tripwire defusing bombs-looking back-exhaling in relief-running back to the shelter-is not associated with idealized visions of a triumphal procession or a victorious stance. Instead, it originates from longing, from the hope that the day will come when they can return to peaceful scenes of life, to attend school in one place, to work in another, to engage in different sports, to contemplate marriage or remaining single... to fully reintegrate with life.

2.2.2. *Le Minh Khue: Anxiety and Interrogation Regarding the “Legacy” of War*

Furthermore, aligned with the “bag theory of fiction”, it is worth noting that Le Minh Khue was also among the early writers to address the burgeoning issue of escalating crime within the post-war social landscape. Her post-war works starkly expose the reality of war, not as a heroic journey endured to achieve a bright and peaceful present, but as an abyss that annihilated humanity. Consequently, the nation has had to grapple with the exorbitant costs of those protracted years of

war and bloodshed. In the novella “Bi kịch nhỏ” (“Little Tragedy”), Le Minh Khue directly employs individual ‘micro-narratives’ to confront the grand narratives of heroism that have excised countless painful truths to serve as propaganda tools and become integrated into official history. Narratives recounted in a linear, rigid, clear, and forceful manner (such as “news reports: the G bridge shot down an AD6 aircraft. The soldiers and civilians of the G bridge were extraordinarily brave”) are juxtaposed by Le Minh Khue with more marginal accounts, encompassing a greater degree of painful truth and loss: “The youth volunteers? Never have I seen so many deaths. They had no guns, they were utterly small, empty-handed, running like a swarm of ants on the bare riverbank, at which point the bombs decimated all the vegetation” [7, p.14]. The figures lauded as heroes in Le Minh Khue’s narratives are divested of their grandeur, ultimately revealing nothing more extraordinary than “potatoes” [1, p.278]. A prime illustration of this can be observed through Sóm – the protagonist in the short story “Cuộc chơi” (The Game). Sóm’s birth occurred on the vessel carrying northerners migrating south prior to the Bến Hải River, the 17th parallel north, being officially designated as the military demarcation line dividing Vietnam according to the 1954 Geneva Accords. Amidst the power struggle between the two authorities, Sóm repeatedly cycled through imprisonment, and each release brought a renewed witnessing of the relentless and horrific barbarity of the ongoing killings outside. However, Sóm eventually succumbed to the very trap inherent in heroic narratives, albeit not during combat but in the aftermath of the war. Following the reunification of the country on April 30, 1975, Sóm was considered, favored, and promoted by the authorities, addressed as comrade, and lauded as a staunch individual. Initially, Sóm attempted to object, asserting that the praise was misplaced; however, the heroic self-narratives that elevated Sóm to a central figure possessed an overwhelming allure and persuasive/seductive power. This was particularly amplified when Sóm was reconstructed into a heroic archetype within the narrative of a propagandistic playwright. The influence of the play further cultivated an admiring public that idolized the constructed Sóm character within a narrative arc that depicted a trajectory from hardship, misfortune, and adversity to becoming an armed fighter for justice and freedom, ultimately culminating in the zenith of a hero. However, through her writing, Le Minh Khue undertook a reverse endeavor: she demythologized those narratives. The author appears to be intent on exposing the techniques and artifices that heroic narratives typically employ to manipulate the emotions of listeners/viewers, propelling them into collective frenzies. Le Minh Khue seems to have accomplished precisely what Le Guin sought to achieve with her novels—receptacles “full of beginnings without ends, full of initiations, losses, transformations and translations, more tricks than conflicts, more snares and delusions than triumphs” [8, p.84]. Le Minh Khue cast the very narratives of men into her own receptacle, allowing readers to perceive the extent to which those heroes are constructed from tricks, contingency, and delusions.

3. CONCLUSION

In sum, this paper adopts the lens of “the carrier bag theory of fiction” to reinterpret history and propose alternative narrative approaches to a perennial phenomenon such as war. The bag, rather than the sword or the gun, is not merely a suggestion of a different perspective; it also constitutes a critical interrogation of the dominant narrative, which traditionally centers on the axis of combat and heroic achievement, revolving around and valorizing male warriors while relegating “women’s faces” to a realm of non-presence (Svetlana Alexievich, 1988). By selecting the case of Le Minh Khue, this paper aims to articulate, from a female perspective, narratives that are often marginalized. In doing so, it seeks to illuminate how an ethic of embrace and care is expressed through the viewpoints of women, and how this ethic enables them to voice resolute yet poignant critiques of war. This ethical framework can be observed in the writings of numerous other female authors such as Da Ngan, Dang Thuy Tram, and Vu Thi Hong. Nevertheless, it is crucial to reiterate that this essay does not consider this a uniquely female perspective, just as caregiving is not viewed as a role exclusively suited for women. On the contrary, by moving beyond a male-centric sensibility, male writers can also offer alternative accounts of war that transcend the binary narrative

structure of us/them, which typically celebrates fighting and victorious 'heroes,' to explore different stories.

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“TỰ SỰ KIỂU CÁI TÚI” VÀ NHỮNG CÁCH NHÌN MỚI VỀ CHIẾN TRANH VIỆT NAM TRONG TÁC PHẨM CỦA LÊ MINH KHUÊ

Tóm tắt: Bài viết bắt đầu điểm nhìn từ lý thuyết “cái túi” về tiểu thuyết của Ursula K. Le Guin trong tiểu luận cùng tên xuất bản năm 1986, lấy đó làm điểm tựa để đọc lại các văn bản văn học của nữ giới về chiến tranh cũng như cách các nhân vật nữ được trình hiện trong những văn bản này. Trong tiểu luận trên, Le Guin cho rằng từ thời tiền sử, nam giới đã lao vào chiến tranh và say sưa với những câu chuyện anh hùng chủ nghĩa, trong khi nữ giới luôn nằm ở bên lề trong các tự sự ấy. Và nếu như vật dụng gắn liền với nam giới đồng thời là biểu tượng cho nam tính là vũ khí, thì phụ nữ lại thường mang theo bên mình một cái túi. Góc nhìn này được mở rộng thêm khi Le Guin diễn giải về nghệ thuật kể chuyện. Tiểu thuyết, đặc biệt là tiểu thuyết nữ viết về chiến tranh, theo quan điểm của Le Guin, cũng là những chiếc túi chứa đựng bên trong nó tất cả những gì cần thiết như bị xem nhẹ, bị gạt đi trong các tự sự chỉ tôn vinh người anh hùng (nam giới). Bài viết, theo đó, tiến hành đọc lại một số văn bản văn học nữ về chiến tranh từ góc nhìn này, xem xét vai trò của nữ giới trong các tự sự này cũng như khả năng giải thể cấu trúc tự sự anh hùng cá nhân của những truyện kể nữ giới. Các văn bản được lựa chọn đọc lại trong bài viết này là các tác phẩm văn xuôi của Lê Minh Khuê - một nhà văn nữ viết về chiến tranh tiêu biểu ở Việt Nam.

Từ khoá: Nhà văn nữ; chiến tranh Việt Nam; đề xuất khác về cấu trúc tự sự; Lê Minh Khuê.