

Laments of warriors' wives

Re-gendering the war in Vietnamese cinema

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'I grieve the wife inside an empty room
who in her finest season lies in waste'

Chinh phụ ngâm khúc
(*Lament of a Warrior's Wife*)

Abstract: This article considers the representation of war in Vietnamese cinema by engaging in a gendered exploration of the legacy of war. By taking gender as an analytical category and cinema as a form of representation, the article examines the largely unexplored issue of the impact of war on female identity in Vietnam. Through the discussion of two recent Vietnamese films, *Đời cát* (*Sandy Lives*) and *Bên không chồng* (*Wharf of Widows*), the article draws attention to the contradiction between wartime empowerment and post-war disempowerment of women in Vietnam. It argues that, while representation of the de-feminized woman/soldier received much imaginative attention because it fitted well with state-sanctioned interpretations of the war as a collective patriotic sacrifice, the representation of the impact on female identity, on the other hand, was given little consideration since it conflicted with traditional gender configurations in Vietnamese society.

Keywords: gendered representations; Vietnamese cinema; Vietnam War

The cost of war can be measured in many ways. In a scene from the Vietnamese film *Đời cát* (*Sandy Lives*), during a drinking session with his former schoolmate Huy, now a widower whose wife and children perished in the war, Canh, a soldier who has recently returned to his wife after 20 years at war, asks:

Canh: Tell me, you are in love with my wife, aren't you? Are you?

Huy: Yes.

Canh: How long?

Huy: Since my wife and children died.

Canh: The whole nine years?

Huy: The whole 14 years!

Canh: You must be stupid, why are you so stupid? You are old enough, how can you be so dim? You must have known that the war will drag on for 10, 20 years! Why didn't you give her a child?

Huy: I am not stupid, I have told her but she would not listen. She is faithful to you like a dog and she worships you like a saint.

Another contemporary Vietnamese film, *Bên không chồng* (*Wharf of Widows*), includes an emotional scene between Hanh, the wife of a war veteran, who has been scorned by relatives and villagers for not bearing a child, and her (unmarried and also childless) friend:

Hanh: We are 30 years old now, we are too old. Will you stay on your own for the whole of your life?

Friend: What can I do? Actually, I long for a husband with children.

Hanh: What about Mr Van?

Friend: You'd better think about yourself. It is sad that your husband will marry again.

Hanh's husband, pressured by his mother and the village community, is planning to marry another woman and secure an heir. Later in the film, when it transpires that it is in fact he who is infertile, Hanh's friend recommends a solution to her predicament of childlessness – to find an anonymous stranger with whom to conceive a child in secrecy:

Friend: You cannot confront this village's customs. You must take a risk.

Hanh: I am scared.

Friend: You should keep your husband. But have a baby. Go far away from here then nobody will know how you have done it. I wish I were you.

In the first film, the unusual exchange between Canh and Huy, in which

the husband seems to be disappointed by his friend's loyalty and his wife's faithfulness, alludes to a profound yet little represented legacy of war in Vietnam – its impact on women and female identity. Similarly, the scenes from the second film encapsulate the pain of childlessness as a direct consequence of the war. Hanh's determination to opt for extreme measures in order to have a child not only underpins the centrality of motherhood in Vietnamese culture, but also emphasizes the traumatic effect of war denying women motherhood. If the child embodies women's aspiration for the future, then an image of a childless woman turns into a potent symbol of the war's legacy.

These two films, which are the focus of this article, set out to rescue the memory of war from state ideology by questioning the cost of war for individual lives. Considering the way in which these films address motherhood and male–female relations will help to illuminate one essential component of the legacy of war in Vietnam.

Although the destructiveness of war in terms of material cost and human casualties has been at least to some extent examined in historical and imaginative works, the dominant image in the Vietnamese discourse on war was, nevertheless, that of a triumphant victory and patriotic sacrifice in the name of national salvation (a fact reflected in the reference to the American war in Vietnamese as 'the war of national salvation' – *chiến tranh cứu nước*). Yet war is inevitably accompanied by loss, and approaching it as a loss and sorrow permits its individualized dimensions to come to the fore. In contrast to the portrayal of war as an achievement, the representation of war as a loss de-glorifies the conflict and returns it to the paradigms of pain.

Both *Sandy Lives* and *Wharf of Widows* portray the complexities of human conditions affected by war through a consideration of its gendered consequences. By taking gender as an analytical category and cinema as a form of representation, the article examines the largely unexplored issue of the impact of war on female identity in Vietnam. In identifying the contradiction between wartime empowerment and post-war disempowerment of women in Vietnam, this article argues that, while representation of the de-feminized woman-soldier received much imaginative attention because it fitted well with state-sanctioned and ideologically driven interpretations of the war as collective heroism, the representation of the war's impact on female identity, on the other hand, was given little consideration since it conflicted with traditional gender configurations in Vietnamese society.

Both films begin with the return of soldiers from the warfront and

hence start where many war films end: in the opening sequence of *Sandy Lives*, Canh is walking through the fields towards his home village in the distance, while the first scene in *Wharf of Widows* shows Van being greeted by neighbours as he walks into his village. After the horrors of combat, their homecoming should be a joyous occasion, a celebration of survival. Alas, suffering does not end with the return home from war or even with the restoration of peace, and both films soon progress beyond the battlefield into domestic life to demonstrate that the war wounds, both physical and psychological, have an enduring effect on those who have survived, and deliberate in particular on the war's impact on women.

A famous eighteenth century Vietnamese epic poem, *Chinh phụ ngâm khúc* (*The Lament of a Warrior's Wife*),¹ contemplates the fate of a wife abandoned by her husband who has departed for war to fight for the king. As Jamieson observes, 'the suffering of war is noted at the outset of the poem and immediately followed by the question: who shall we blame? The plight of women left behind when men go off to war is eloquently evoked' (Jamieson, 2001, p 333). The poem captures within a society founded on Confucian principles the rarely articulated personal anguish of a woman deserted by a man in the name of higher obligations. If the Confucian state ignored female suffering, its communist successor remained equally deaf to the laments of modern-day women/wives whose men/husbands had left for war, so as not to weaken the commitment of the population to the war. Attitudes in Vietnam to gender, femininity and sexuality have traditionally been saturated with contradictions and tensions, and the war exacerbated this already complex situation even further, making it more poignant for women not to have their pain and suffering recognized by the society around them.

Imaginative representation of war in Vietnam

In the late 1980s, a wave of critical reflection swept Vietnam as the country embarked on the process of renovation (*đổi mới*) and political liberalization. Profound changes manifested themselves in all areas of social life. Political and economic transformation provided a catalyst

¹ *Chinh phụ ngâm khúc* (*Lament of a Warrior's Wife*) was originally written in Chinese by Đặng Trần Côn around 1741. It became popular in Vietnam through chữ nôm versions by Đoàn Thị Điểm and Phan Huy Ích.

for a broader process of contestation, re-evaluation and negotiation. The country's intellectual community found itself in the vortex of social change – restrictive parameters of the past were loosened, providing a space for experimentation and inquiry into changing reality and, consequently, there developed an innovative imaginative discourse, which critically scrutinized emerging identities and transcended many conventionally subversive themes. History has become a vital element in this process of re-evaluation. New perspectives on history, including new perspectives on war, grew out of a sense of social crisis precipitated by the introduction of renovation policies. Revisionist elucidations of the past contested Marxist historiography's flawed and biased rendering of history.

Despite the magnitude of the importance of war for Vietnamese history and identity, only incomplete and inadequate representation of conflict emanated from the creative treatment constructed within the paradigms of socialist realism. The state's control over the contents of national memory and methods of remembering subjected the past, including war, to a process of cautious selection and elimination through an ideological lens that removed the complex individual experience and substituted it with a carefully constructed myth. The creative representation of war was totally subsumed by nationalism, revolution and a sense of collective duty, purposefully omitting the humane and compassionate dimensions of war experiences. Instead, imaginative works applied themselves to motivating, mobilizing and educating. In 1978, Vietnamese writer Nguyễn Minh Châu dared to take a first step towards a more objective appraisal of the war's imaginative representation in his essay *Viết về chiến tranh* ('Writing about war'); while recognizing that many wartime works had been conceived with the intention that they should 'contribute to the war effort, along with the nation as a whole', he was nevertheless convinced that such works, by suppressing everything that was not conducive to victory, inevitably presented a sanitized version of the war, a dream-like reality riddled with anomalies between official accounts of war as an historical event and the personal memories of the participants. He concluded: 'As we look back at our war-related works, the characters tend to be portrayed one-dimensionally – usually too virtuous and yet lacking in truth. It would seem that all those multitudinous facets of human nature which must be exposed in real life can go into temporary hiding on the pages of a book' (Nguyễn Minh Châu, 1997, p 435). Nguyễn Minh Châu's pointed critique proved too controversial for the time when it was

written for it to be given wider support, and the theme of war had to wait until the renovation period for a reassessment.

Whereas during the pre-1986 period cultural production in Vietnam was rigorously tied to politics and the drive to deploy art centred on providing unambiguous positive models, renovation concerned itself with the unravelling of multifaceted accounts of history. The war was a deeply felt historical experience, as for many creative intellectuals it was not only an historical event they had witnessed, but in many cases a reality in which they had actively participated. Taking advantage of the revisionist mood in society, they explicitly rejected the simplistic representation of war and, by contemplating its manifold legacies and engaging with a wider range of themes and styles, they imparted an individualized antithesis to the image of collective heroism and sacrifice embodied in socialist revolutionary art.

Women and war

In Vietnam, the rediscovery of individuality during the renovation period advanced the process of rediscovering gender differences. Any discussion of gendered versions of war in Vietnam has to consider the broader social and political context out of which they emerged. In the course of Vietnamese history, the social positioning of women and issues of gender identity have been mediated by a broad range of influences – from indigenous Vietnamese tradition, through the tenets of Buddhism and Confucianism, to Western modernism, revolutionary tradition and communist ideology, and more recently globalization and consumerism. Although the core set of values and attitudes towards gender and sex in traditional Vietnam was set out within the Confucian principles of a patriarchal society with tightly prescribed patterns of male supremacy and female subordination, indigenous Vietnamese culture was a matriarchal culture, in which women had powerful influence, a fact reflected in oral literature and in the existence of a vast pantheon of goddesses and warrior heroines of the past. Omar points out that ‘before the firm establishment of Chinese Confucianism in Vietnam, indigenous family customs, codified in written law in the fifteenth century, were based largely on the traditions of bilateral kinship and the right of inheritance for women, allowing for the development of a relatively balanced system of gender relations’ (Omar, 2004, p 52).

Confucianism, however, significantly restricted the authority enjoyed

by women in Vietnam by prescribing a strict code of female morality and sexuality and by defining the moral profile of a good woman: loyal, submissive, virtuous and sexually restrained. As David Marr points out, 'most of the dogma on what a proper Vietnamese woman should be and do was taken from orthodox Confucian texts' (Marr, 1981, p 192), which stipulated the three submissions (to father, husband and eldest son) and four virtues (labour, physical appearance, appropriate speech and proper behaviour). Additionally, women were relegated to 'private' domestic space, adopting the role of the 'upholders of the inner realm' or 'generals of the interior', while the outer public realm was reserved for men.² Within the inner space of the family, gender configurations were defined in terms of a system of loyalties, and women were identified as faithful wives, caring mothers and chaste widows. However, indigenous legends of women warriors were regularly revived during periods of wars and conflicts to incite patriotism and encourage women's participation in the nationalist cause. For most of the twentieth century, during the turbulent years of wars and revolution, individual aspirations had to be forsaken for the higher goal of national liberation and consequently, the three traditional female submissions were reinterpreted to encourage women to replace men and free them for combat, assume control of the family and encourage husbands and sons to enlist, and to take part in combat when necessary.

Whereas Western war literature, in general, epitomizes war as a fundamentally masculine experience, in Vietnam, given that 'the war came to them, to their homes, cities, and villages' and given the guerrilla nature of the conflict, the war created an all-encompassing and inescapable military space. This required the total involvement of even the female population and brought into focus women's role during the struggle. The political leadership actively encouraged women's involvement in the war by manipulating and effectively temporarily suspending traditional Confucian gender stratification. 'Now women were neither subject to the father, husband, or son, but to the needs of nationalist cause, which brought women out of traditional domestic roles to the public role of farming and fighting' (Omar, 2004, p 53). Many Vietnamese women were active combatants and their engagement in the fighting invaded the traditionally masculine space of combat. Their presence at the warfront demanded a degree of 'defeminization' and concealment of gender identity by political/class

² For more, see, for example, Whitmore, 2000; Marr, 1981 and others.

identity. While war in Vietnam did not accentuate gender distinctions and coerced women to surrender their female identity, the female subject gradually lost herself to collective identity. The empowerment of women through the imposed containment of female gender characteristics inhibited the representation of uniquely female phenomena and of how they were affected by the war. The concept of a revolutionary heroine without sexual identity promoted by the authorities subsumed considerations of the biological make-up of womanhood. Socialist realism deemed sexuality almost invisible and, by actively silencing discussion of personal life, it eliminated any suggestions of romance and reinterpreted it as asexual camaraderie. Pre-renovation accounts of war, both literary and cinematic, present female–male interaction almost exclusively as comrade *versus* comrade; love and emotions, if they were allowed to emerge at all, were treated in a highly formulaic and didactic way. ‘Love was not considered true and lasting if it encouraged people to place their own happiness above that of the community or the nation at large’ (Phan Thi Vang Anh and Pham Thu Thuy, 2003, p 204). However, as Karen Turner Gottschang stresses, Vietnamese society did not banish conventional notions of male–female relations forever, but ‘buried them temporarily’ (Gottschang Turner and Pham Thanh Hao, 1998, p 135).

From the late 1980s, a period of re-evaluation and introspection brought about a renewed interest in the aesthetics of film, which in turn gave rise to more psychologically focused films. In the 1990s, a number of films and books about revolutionary history and war entered the market, and these renovation versions of the war portrayed the divergent gendered dimensions of the consequences of war by foregrounding issues such as love, marriage, motherhood, widowhood, infertility and other wider sociocultural consequences of military struggle. In order to make the past comprehensible and legitimate for a contemporary audience, revolutionary history had to be depoliticized and individualized. In a study of post-war gender dynamics, Cynthia Enloe points out that assigning to women unconventional (masculine) roles during wartime gives rise to a conflict over ‘femininity’s compatibility with otherwise disruptive nationalist wartime mobilization’ (Enloe, 1996, p 302). She goes on to emphasize that this theme has a distinctly post-war significance because a discord surfaces with the end of war, when the special circumstances have been removed and the temporarily suspended gendered identities are expected to be restored.

Meanwhile, Hue-Tam Ho Tai asserts that 'women's very real contributions to the war effort did not alter gender relations or their symbolic role in the public discourse' (Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 2001, p 176). While many unconventional gender situations were explained and excused by special wartime circumstances, the post-war expectation of the reinstatement of gender roles in an unaltered (pre-war) way became a source of tension. The empowerment of women during wartime turned into disempowerment in the post-war period. The government mounted concerted campaigns to relegate women to traditional gender roles and reinstall them in a domestic setting. Soldiers returning to their wives ready to resume their masculine roles in the family were coming home to women who might not have been willing to surrender their newly acquired authority resulting from taking over the masculine duties during the war. Moreover, the post-war setting could no longer disregard the biological determinants of female identity, especially issues of reproduction and fertility, and society was inevitably forced to confront the 'temporarily buried' issues of widows, childless wives of war veterans, and unmarried women. Ironically, by insisting on women's return to their traditional gender role of motherhood, the government exacerbated the trauma of women by failing to acknowledge the war's effect on their reproductive abilities and the gender imbalance of post-war years.

The non-combat trauma experienced by women during the war is inextricably linked with loss – of family, of men and home, of health and beauty, and of fertility or opportunities to reproduce. Yet there were only two groups of women whose predicament received attention from media and art, as Turner observes – the single women veterans who returned home unable to marry and/or bear a child and the mothers of martyrs. The childless war widows, or women who did not participate in combat but were unable to marry and bear a child through the lack of available men taken away by war, are for the most part ignored.

In Vietnam, as in many other Asian countries, reproduction is the key to defining womanhood, and biological motherhood is considered not only natural but a compulsory constituent of female identity. If 'fertility stands as a fundamental marker of femininity' (Belanger, 2004, p 108), then the absence of motherhood places a woman in breach of traditional expectations and unable to fulfil her obligations and desires. Interestingly, 'a married infertile woman may be worse off than a single childless woman, whose ability to reproduce has not been

discarded yet' (*Ibid*). If 'biological children, particularly sons, give women power, status and prestige' (*Ibid*), then the absence of a child is culturally problematic. It goes beyond the dimensions of private pain, for it touches the deeply rooted belief in continuity of family lineage; filial piety requires that the children extend the ancestral lineage, and the absence of a child (son) breaks the continuity. Childbearing is conceptualized in Vietnam in terms of the patrilineal Confucian doctrine and, as Phinney illustrates, it only has value and meaning for a married woman. 'A married woman gains status when she bears a child, particularly when she bears a son who can continue her husband's ancestral line' (Phinney, 2005, p 268). An unmarried woman's reproduction does not figure in this patrilineal ideology, and bearing a child out of wedlock constitutes a severe violation of filial piety (Phinney, 2005). Similarly, Daniele Belanger and Khuat Thu Hong confirm that in Vietnam, marriages and motherhood are strong social norms, and legitimate alternatives to married life are almost nonexistent. This lack of legitimate alternatives leaves women whom war prevented from marrying in a difficult predicament, and situates them outside the parameters of conventional social relations. In a society largely structured around the marital and familial relations, single (and also married or widowed) childless women are confronted with feelings of loneliness, inadequacy and discomfort. Single women are exposed to harsh criticism and are dismissed as selfish and as damaging the reputation of the entire family. Although those women who cannot have children because of war may be pitied after the war, they are, nevertheless, ostracized if they decide to find a solution by having a child outside of marriage. Moreover, the Vietnamese cultural context associates the absence of motherhood or marriage with negatively affecting a woman's *tâm sinh lý* (psychosocial psychology) (Phinney, 2005, p 280) and eventually turning her into what is rather insultingly referred to as *khó tính* (having a difficult character), thus burdening childless women with yet another layer of blame. As Omar observes, these women were, in effect, considered deviants, who were moving away from reinstated post-war ideals of womanhood (Omar, 2004, p 56).

The lack of a son not only diminishes a woman's standing in society, but it also denies her care in old age and filial worship after her death, and curtails the continuation of family lineage. By interviewing war veterans of both genders, Turner was able to identify many practical examples of female suffering resulting from the inability to reproduce

as a result of war. For example, the extreme pressure stemming from not having a child is manifested in desperate acts of 'asking for a child', ie seeking out one-night stands with men for the single purpose of conception, which many women turned to (as Hanh's plight in the film *Wharf of Widows* demonstrates). By transgressing the regular familial parameters, these women substituted one problem with another – they exposed themselves to further stigmatization resulting from having a child out of marriage, a situation which they evidently considered preferable to remaining childless. As Gottschang Turner states, 'in film, literature, and media presentations, the celebration of motherhood marginalizes women who cannot or choose not to bear children. The public glorification of motherhood leaves childless women (both single and married) outside the official commemorative space (Gottschang Turner, 1998, p 175).

Among the multiple identities of women in Vietnam, the one that comes to the fore in relation to war is, as Hue-Tam Ho Tai shows, the self-sacrificing heroic mother (Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 2001, pp 177–182). The grieving mother is not only a symbol of war suffering, but also a symbol of redemption, since sacrificing a child for war can restore the status of the family. Hue-Tam Ho Tai observes that it is the mother rather than a wife who is the cultural vector of grief and memory in Vietnam, re-emphasizing that the absence of a son, even a deceased one, diminishes female status in Vietnam (Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 2001, p 177).

The war in Vietnam compromised women's reproductive capacities, by, on the one hand, exposing them to extreme hardship and appalling living conditions, diseases, malnutrition, stress and war chemicals and, on the other hand, by taking most of the male population away and removing any opportunities for marriage or motherhood. War's effect on female reproduction is interminable; while the dead can be mourned and mothers of heroic soldiers honoured, a woman to whom the war denied motherhood stands outside the social norms and the state-sanctioned public commemoration of war. Despite her childlessness being a direct consequence of war, her sadness is a private one unacknowledged by the official commemorative practices.

Cinema and war

Like all cultural products, filmmaking in Vietnam has always been implicated in ideology and politics. The liberalization during the late

1980s brought about social changes, both dramatic in scale and fundamental in nature, which nurtured the transition of Vietnamese cinema. The acclaimed film director *Đặng Nhật Minh* confirmed that during the 1990s, Vietnamese cinema 'has unequivocally outgrown socialist realism in terms of content as well as stylistic conventions' (*Đặng Nhật Minh and Pham Thu Thuy*, 2003, p 194). What differentiates post-1986 cinema from the socialist phase is its construction of complexity and ambivalence, by means of which it challenges the perpetuated myths of the past. As such, post-1986 cinema discarded the official discourse of collective achievements presented through melodramatic self-congratulatory rhetoric and pursued instead the individual. Films began to address the fundamental question of the relationship of the individual with the state and to criticize the political and social dynamics that constrain personal freedom. Meanwhile, many critics noted that contemporary filmmaking had returned to the theme of war as an antithesis to the decline of morality and the emptiness and superficiality of contemporary consumer society, against which the solidarity and commitment of the war times seemed to offer a respite. Despite the importance of the theme of war in Vietnamese cinema and literature, there remain many unrepresented issues from wartime.

Literary and cinematic representation of war, informed by the aesthetics of socialist realism, obliterated individual experiences and conflated the image of the war as unified patriotic endeavour. Liberalization during the renovation period gave rise to a new wave of revisionist films and injected a new vibrancy into filmmaking in Vietnam. War ceased to be viewed as a triumph and achievement, and was instead scrutinized as a tragedy and source of sorrow. By putting forward visions of pain and personal trauma resulting from the war, post-1986 imaginative accounts, both literary and cinematic, were able, on the one hand, to ascertain the depth and variations of human war experience and, on the other hand, to challenge the official state-sanctioned memory of war and wartime sacrifice. The imaginative leap these revisionist accounts took would have been inconceivable before the official sanctioning of the renovation process in 1986. By foregrounding several uncomfortable issues, for example the intense psychological trauma faced by soldiers – fear, doubts, desertion, political manipulation, arrogance of political cadres and abuse of power – these revisionist accounts trod the dangerous ground of political criticism. While, as shown by *Bradley* (2001) in his detailed analysis of Vietnamese films on war, film was a particularly important means through which the

state imparted official commemorative meanings of war, it proved to be an equally efficient medium in post-1986 Vietnam for exposing the commemorative pretensions of the Vietnamese state and the betrayal of wartime sacrifices:

'Depicting a post-war world in which the patriotic and revolutionary figures celebrated in official memory occupied a marginal, often forgotten, place in society, they called into question the state's ability to honor the wartime sacrifices of its people and to sustain the foundational myths of the war experience through which it sought to legitimate its power and authority.' (Bradley, 2001, p 208)

Several films helped broaden the boundaries of war memory and reframe war experiences through the investigation of gender. 'Gendered construction of war memories served as a crucial symbolic vehicle for the critique of contemporary society' (Bradley, 2001, p 218). Interestingly, in many other countries, female war experiences have been almost entirely defined in terms of tropes of motherhood and femininity, while this perspective has until recently been missing in Vietnamese cinema. Women's involvement in war has been predominantly focused on women as warriors directly drawn into the fighting, as providers of support in the rear, and as assuming male roles in the domestic space. The exclusive representation of women as heroic combatants significantly diluted their private pain, which eclipsed the pain of their physical wounds. Representation of women in combat received much attention because it reinforced the official version of war as a patriotic exercise. Some post-war films use the gendered perspective as a means of criticism of contemporary society, but, in dealing with the relationship between soldiers and women, they do not yet make women their main theme. It is only with the appearance of films such as *Sandy Lives* and *Wharf of Widows* that a new approach to gender manifests itself in Vietnamese cinema as these films elevate women and female identity to the centre of their attention.

The true dimensions of the war experience missing from imaginative representation in Vietnamese cinema become particularly apparent when compared with the abundance of American imaginative negotiation of the conflict, which, given the different cultural sensibilities and political circumstances, elaborated widely on individuality.

Only with the introduction of renovation policies in Vietnam could the accounts of struggle become more reflective of the individual's

perception of the event. Phan Thi Vang Anh, a contemporary Vietnamese author, explains: ‘Unlike the war fiction of the previous two decades, however, these stories seek to depict not heroic battle scenes, but the impact of the war on the emotional life of its victims, portraying the anguish of those who have had their dreams of love and happiness destroyed in the ashes of war’ (Phan Thi Vang Anh, 2003, p 205).

In summary, renovation cinematography enlarged the representation of war, first by bringing an antithesis to the collective history of war through exploring the individual fates of war; second, by moving beyond the warfront to explore the legacy of war in its aftermath; and finally, by permitting the consideration of war’s consequences for women.

*Đời cát (Sandy Lives)*³

Nguyễn Thanh Vân’s 1999 film, *Sandy Lives*, chooses to appropriate the legacy of war through the suffering of women in its aftermath and, as argued above, adds a little-explored gendered perspective to the imaginative representation of war in Vietnam. Set in post-1975 Vietnam, the film tells the story of a married couple, Thoa and Canh, who were separated by the war, and involves a tangled post-war relationship between the couple and the husband’s second family.

The second half of the twentieth century in Vietnam was a period of almost continuous conflict in which the anticolonial national liberation struggle against the French turned into war against the Americans. As generations of Vietnamese endured years of war, it was inevitable that many soldiers left their homes and families for the front to return only many years later. Long enforced separation during war-time damaged conventional relationships such as marriage and family. In *Sandy Lives*, after the end of the war against the Americans in 1975, following 20 years of fighting and separation, Canh, a communist soldier, returns home to his wife (Thoa) who has been faithfully waiting for him. Thoa’s joy at her husband’s return is soon overshadowed when she discovers that during his lengthy stay in the north he formed a relationship with another woman, Tam, and fathered a daughter by her. The complicated love triangle between Thoa, Canh and Tam

³ The film *Đời cát* was made by the Vietnam Feature Film Studio, directed by Nguyễn Thanh Vân, script by Nguyễn Quang Lập according to a story (*Ba người trên sân ga*) by Hữu Phương. The film script can be found in Nguyễn Quang Lập, 2001, pp 377–466.

provides the main dramatic tension in the film, which, unsurprisingly, has no resolution.

When reading the story on which the film is based, the film's director, Nguyễn Thanh Vân,⁴ confessed that he was drawn to it by its conclusion. 'The ending obsessed me from the first time I read it in 1991,' he admits. The passage to making the film was not unproblematic and in the end, it was the director's stubbornness that finally saw the film made. When he first submitted the script in 1998 to the Vietnam Feature Film Studio (Hãng phim truyện Việt Nam), it was rejected both on account of its war theme, which was deemed no longer attractive to the audiences, and for 'fear of smearing the image of a communist cadre by depicting him with two wives' (Thomas, 2001). He persevered and was finally granted permission to make the film in 1991. The film was produced on a tight budget of only \$65,000 using antiquated equipment (and a gift of five rolls of film from an overseas Vietnamese director, Trần Anh Hùng). It became an unexpected international success, going on to win several prizes at film festivals.⁵ Interestingly, the film was originally snubbed by the Vietnamese public; only following its international acclaim did Vietnamese audiences start flooding cinemas, forcing proprietors to put on extra screenings and arrange bigger halls to meet the demand.⁶

The film *Sandy Lives* reaches beyond politics to provide an alternative analysis of the legacies of war in terms of the consequences for individuals living in its aftermath. Throughout the film, the impact of war makes itself felt gradually. There is a strange calmness, quiet in the village, where everyday life goes on almost unnoticeably yet, through the memories of the past, there gradually surfaces the utmost human anguish. There are no bombs exploding, no guns or soldiers; yet the war is engraved on everything in the village, on every person, on every minute of their lives. Like grains of sand, the war invades the deepest crevices and becomes a permanent part of existence. The

⁴ Nguyễn Thanh Vân was born on 19 July 1962 in Thanh Hoa. In 1988, he graduated from the Directing Department of the Hanoi University of Drama and Cinema. He works for the Vietnam Feature Film company. His filmography includes: *Love Story in a Narrow Alley* (1992), *Unknown Eucalyptus Tree* (1994), *The Bruise of Tie* (1996), *The Broken Distance* (1997), *Sandy Lives* (1999) and *Sleep-walking Woman* (2003).

⁵ The film won Best Feature Film award at the 45th Asia-Pacific Film Festival in 2000, special prize at the International Film Festival in Amiens, France, 2000, and a prize from the Vietnam Cinematography Association in 2001.

⁶ Tickets were sold on the black market, reportedly for twice or three times their original value.

emotional trauma and pain of the film's protagonists, who are decent moral people, but who because of circumstances have transgressed social conventions, illustrates the premise that wars end at home, in family life. The triangle of characters at the centre of the film – Thoa, Canh and Tam – is crushed beneath the weight of their moral obligations.

One of the main themes running through *Sandy Lives* is the frustration of Vietnamese women confined to a traditional morality yet, at the same time, unable to comply with social expectations because of the disruption caused by the war. While the code of heroic femininity during the war required women to abandon the traditional confines of domestic space, and take on masculine roles, there remained, Pettus noted, an older section of the female population who endured a less dramatic, more long-term kind of sacrifice, namely, the emotional task of living chastely apart from their husbands for many years (Pettus, 2003, p 47). Turner also points out the irony in the fate of the war generation of Vietnamese women: they sacrificed their personal hopes, endured hardship and even went out to fight to restore peace for bringing up children, and yet missed their chance to bear a child (Gottschang Turner, 1998, p 157). The central female character of the film *Sandy Lives*, Thoa, is a 40-year-old woman who, having been separated from her husband for over 20 years, has remained childless. It is interesting to note here Harriet Phinney's observation that age is considered to be the principal factor disqualifying women from marriage and motherhood.⁷ The absence of her husband denied Thoa the basic female right of giving birth and prevented her from fulfilling the obligation imposed on her by society. Like the lonely woman in the above-mentioned poem, *Lament of a Warrior's Wife*, she loyally awaits the return of her soldier husband while her 'looks and charms keep fading year by year' and like a flower 'forsaken by the sun' she is wilting and wasting her life away (Huỳnh Sanh Thông, 1979, p 167). Thoa's earlier faith in her redemption through her husband's return seems to have died away with the appearance of, first, his daughter Gianh and, later, his second 'wife' Tam.⁸ Her husband's arrival and his

⁷ Phinney and Belanger, among others, illustrate that the age at which a woman is deemed past her prime and no longer considered marriageable has changed from around 25 to 30, with the place of residence (urban/rural) being a significant factor (see, for example, Phinney, 2005, p 268).

⁸ The 1946 Constitution prepared the way for outlawing polygamy in Vietnam, and the official ban on polygamy was enforced by the Law on Marriage and Family

determination to honour his moral obligations towards her mean that her own fulfilment now rests on the destruction of the life of another woman.

Although war estranged individuals and compromised the core value of Vietnamese society, the family, *Sandy Lives* validates the significance of marital commitment. Despite his long absence and his alternative family, the husband feels compelled to respect his bond of loyalty to his first wife. Since the family is assigned a crucial status in the Vietnamese cultural context, then the disruption of marital relationships is deemed not just to weaken the family, but to threaten the very fabric of the nation itself. This implicitly places the onus on a man and a woman to preserve the marriage, notwithstanding its problems.

An even stronger manifestation of deeply felt marital commitment is illustrated in the final scene of the film: in spite of explicit encouragement from Thoa to leave her and join his new family, indicated by her purchase of a train ticket for her husband, Canh in the end rejects the chance to escape from the marriage and gets out of an already moving train. As the train pulls away to reveal Canh standing on the track, the scene captures the powerful belief in his marital commitment and at the same time reinforces the film's dominant point – the impossibility of escaping war's consequences and its interminable hold over people's lives.

Chastity constituted the core of the Confucian-based familial and social structure, and the belief in chastity is strongly connected to fidelity. In *Sandy Lives*, the absent husband exerts a powerful influence over Thoa's life without him. During the long years apart from her husband, uncertain if he will ever return to her, Thoa has remained faithful; in rejecting the advances of her suitor, Huy, she has forfeited the possibility of satisfying her own maternal desires and, at the same time, of realizing her socially-prescribed obligation of reproduction. While sociological research has demonstrated the social stigma attached to female infidelity, at the same time, it proves the equally problematic attitudes towards childless marriages, female infertility, single

passed in 1959. Tam's status as a second wife would have been culturally rooted rather than legally acknowledged. The film, *Wharf of Widows*, also reflects the disparity between the legal status of a wife and the traditional convention of taking a second wife. Nghia cannot legally marry his second partner without first divorcing his first wife, Hanh. However, in the film, the attitude of the council of elders in the village reflects their traditional interpretation of the marital bond – taking a second wife is seen as a natural and almost compulsory solution if the first marriage is childless, and is not perceived as wrong or in breach of traditional morality.

motherhood and illegitimate children. Thoa's acquiescing to another man and even giving birth to a child other than her husband's would not only constitute a serious transgression of conventional moral tenets, but it would also be construed as putting her happiness and fulfilment before morality and would, therefore, be judged by society as selfish and immoral. However, by retaining her fidelity, Thoa is condemning herself to remaining childless.

Sandy Lives captures the almost schizophrenic double existence of the husband, Canh, who is torn between his love for Tam and Gianh and his marital/moral obligations to Thoa. The original betrayal of his loyalty to his first wife is exacerbated after the war by the subsequent betrayal of his loyalty to his second partner and his child. The deceit and guilt that are intrinsic in this situation make even more poignant the traumatic legacy of war.

Canh's second 'wife' Tam, although presented as a good woman, occupies nonetheless, in relation to Thoa, the position of a bitter rival. In the underlying competition with Thoa, she has the advantage of having borne Canh a daughter, whereas Thoa enjoys the privileged status of the official wife. Herein appear a number of culturally sensitive dilemmas in the film's juxtaposition of society's perception of the childless wife, on the one hand, and the woman who has borne a child outside marriage, on the other. When the film stages a direct (albeit rather timid) confrontation between Tam and Thoa (for example, through the fight over who is going to massage Canh's shoulders and similar incidents), they fight for their respective privileged identities of official partner and mother. The determination with which Thoa strives to prevent Tam from spending time alone with Canh turns into a metaphoric struggle for legitimacy and adds a tragicomic layer to the film. The jealousy goes beyond the basic competition for a man and is driven by an existentialist instinct in each of the women for the preservation of their own singular female identity.

The character of Hao, a disabled girl whose legs were blown off by a bomb, expands the film's insight into the nature of female identity. With both her legs missing, Hao is dependent on help from other villagers. In the Vietnamese cultural context, women who did not marry were usually the handicapped or the extremely disadvantaged, as Daniel Belanger (2004, p 113) observes. Hao's disability marks her out as undesirable to men, yet the disability loses significance at the moment when she discovers that she is pregnant – a predicament bursting with its own cultural dilemmas. She has become a target for the

adulterous exploits of the local coffin maker, who evidently sees the satisfaction of his own sexual needs as an act of humanity towards a single, disabled, and therefore sexually needy woman. Her pregnancy becomes a confirmation of her femininity, a proof that she has been able to attain the core of womanhood – her fertility. Although Hao's pregnancy is presented as another sociocultural problem, because it is outside marriage and therefore carries a prejudice, the film poses the interesting question as to which stigma is greater – remaining childless or transgressing official morality by bearing a child outside a conventional relationship. Huy's agreement to put himself forward as the father of the child provides an additional boost to Hao's femininity. While she may be denied love and emotional bonds with Huy, since he has made his feelings towards Thoa clear throughout the film, she has gained a child, a man, and managed to legitimize her pregnancy.

As was pointed out earlier, the film culminates in a melodramatic crisis after Thoa's rush to the ticket office to buy a ticket for her husband. The climactic scene at the railway station and the film's ultimate lack of resolution leaves all the protagonists in a metaphorical entrapment – their moral and ethical values restrain them from transgressive actions that might resolve their predicament (or at least that of some of the characters). The husband remains trapped by his moral obligations towards his first wife and with the private pain of not being able to share his life with his new wife and daughter; in addition, he must bear the stigma of the betrayal of his first wife. Similarly, Tam and Gianh, his new family, are condemned to remain outside the parameters of a legitimate relationship and marriage. Thoa, for her part, is trapped in the sociocultural predicament of remaining childless. Although the film is thin on dialogue, the cumulative effect of the scenes, many of which rely on visual imagery to convey moods and psychological states, creates a sense of profound suffering. No easy solution is offered in the film – there simply is not one, in the same way as there is no escape from the traumas of war.

Although *Sandy Lives* concerns itself with trauma and suffering, it does not rely on dialogue, dramatic scenes or explosive visual imagery. The sparse dialogue is clearly subordinated to visuality, which takes over in many scenes as the main expressive role in the film's narrative structure. The human faces appear charged with multiple emotions, and the simplicity of locations contrasts with the complexity of humans' experiences. The bodily gestures, sound (or lack of it), the light and darkness – all manage to conjure the emotional intensity of

human suffering. Despite the war theme, *Sandy Lives* preserves a unique poetic quality. We watch as Thoa calmly gets on with her daily tasks, with only her face betraying the pain stemming from her husband's infidelity. The matter-of-fact manner in which Thoa takes her husband from one grave to another, and the briefness of the time spent at each grave, reflect the horrors of war and the depth of pain more powerfully than guns, explosions or dead bodies ever could. There are no confrontations between Thoa and Tam, only a small gesture pushing Tam's hand away from Canh's body betrays Thoa's jealousy. The traumas of *Sandy Lives* are played out in a few bare scenes and simple locations. The film's sense of calmness and dignity contrasts with the loudness of official political proclamations on the war in Vietnam, and contributes to the film's rejection of the official version of war memory.

Bên không chồng (Wharf of Widows)⁹

The film *Bên không chồng (Wharf of Widows)*¹⁰ was made in 2000 and, in contrast to *Sandy Lives*, focuses on the tribulations of Vietnamese women during the war, spanning the period between 1956 and 1975. Once again, director Lưu Trọng Ninh¹¹ does not spotlight the female warriors actively engaged in combat, but concentrates instead on the women who were left behind when men went to war, and who found themselves abandoned without suitors, lovers, husbands and sons.¹² A

⁹ The Vietnamese title of the film, *Bên không chồng*, would be best translated as *Wharf of Women Without Husbands*; this translation is a more correct appropriation of the film's content, since it does not concern itself with widows only, but also with single unmarried women who have no chance of finding husbands. However, since the title *Wharf of Widows* is the version under which this film has been presented to international audiences at film festivals, I will use this title to avoid confusion.

¹⁰ *Bên không chồng* is based on a novel with the same title by Dương Hương. It was published in 1991 and was given a literary award by the Association of Vietnamese Writers. The film version suppresses much of the political content of the novel by playing down the ideological consequences of the land reform, and instead makes the focus of attention the plight of women during the war.

¹¹ Lưu Trọng Ninh was born in 1956 and graduated from the University of Technology in Hanoi in 1979. After a short army career, he studied at the Institute of Cinematography and Drama in Hanoi, becoming a director in 1988. His filmography includes *The Gamble* (1991), *Please Forgive Me* (1992), *Tear in the Opening Time* (1996), *Ten Girls on Dong Loc/Crossing at Doc Loc* (1997) and *Wharf of Widows* (2000). *Wharf of Widows* has won, for example, Best Film award from the Vietnam Cinematography Association.

¹² In an earlier film, *Crossing at Doc Loc*, Lưu Trọng Ninh gave a rendering of the other aspect of female engagement with the war – the active combatant woman.

large array of female characters represented in the film affords it the possibility of exploring a range of issues related to female experiences of war.

Many recent demographic studies have demonstrated that the large number of male fatalities during the war and the significant migration of men during and after the war have caused a demographic imbalance, with a surplus of women of marriageable age on the one hand, and a shortage of marriage partners for women on the other (Malarney, 2002, p 154). The traditional role of women in society and family has been harmed by this imbalance, which has made it difficult or impossible for all women to find a suitable partner. As a result, the lack of men has led to a decline in women's status, as they have found themselves in a disadvantaged position, which has often compelled them to lower their expectations or contravene traditional norms of behaviour and morality in order to secure a partner. The representation of this demographic imbalance provides the main theme for the film, *Wharf of Widows*. In the opening scene of the film, Van returns as a combat hero to his native village after the first Indo-China war, only to find the village inhabited mostly by women; the male population is made up of a handful of elderly men and small boys, and the few remaining young men potentially available for marriage are soon to be taken away by the war. The relationships within the community, already disturbed by the land reform campaign, are further strained by the war and its personal tragedies. The traditional family unit has almost disappeared from the village, and women of all generations are compelled to adapt to life without men. The older women in the village have lost their husbands in the war and are faced with a lonely, sexually frustrated life, while mothers in the village gradually lose their sons to the conflict and are faced with the prospect of old age without support and care from their sons. Young girls, too, must alter their expectations of courtship, marriage and raising children. The future offers little but single women, childlessness, absence of grandchildren and discontinuation of the family line and a threat to ancestral worship.

Van's return to the village is a catalyst for the unresolved tensions and emotions arising from the suppressed individual desires of many women in the village to come into the open. Despite being the only eligible man in the village, he seems to avoid relationships with women, preferring to focus on his political career and remain unattached. His masculinity is brought into question and he becomes the target of much gossip and ridicule. In spite of his war hero past, the only man in the

village in his prime appears, in contrast to the resourcefulness of the female population, emasculated. The already strained reality is further complicated by the intrusion of political realities deriving from the land reform campaign. Van has been allocated lodgings in the house of Hon, a widow who is castigated as a member of the landowning and, therefore, reactionary, class. The stigma associated with her social status exacerbates the personal suffering triggered by her widowhood. Consequently, Van is unable to empathize with the plight of Hon, who is a class enemy; a relationship is impossible between a war hero and a reactionary landowner.

Vietnam's salutation to motherhood as the only route to full female identity has many ramifications. The identification of motherhood with women's essential identity marginalizes women who, either out of choice or necessity, cannot bear children, as is clearly reflected in the fate of Hanh in the film. After marrying her sweetheart Nghia and devotedly waiting for many years for him to return from war, their marriage remains childless. The gender bias towards infertility is implied in the fact that it is the woman who is automatically blamed for not fulfilling her fundamental role in life. Hanh's mother articulates the prevailing morality when she says to her daughter: 'You came to their family to give births to sons. It is your fault if you can't!' To secure the birth of a grandchild becomes the mission for Hanh's mother-in-law, who sets out to find another suitable wife for her son and have the first marriage dissolved. 'I will only feel at peace when I have a grandchild,' she says to Hanh. Even when it becomes clear that it is the husband who is infertile (caused, most probably, as implied in the film, by exposure to Agent Orange), both Hanh and Nghia continue to conceal the real reason for their predicament, and Hanh carries the blame in public. As her friend puts it in the scene quoted at the beginning of this essay: 'You cannot confront this village's customs'. The husband is too weak either to reveal his infertility or to stand up for his wife and defend her from the reproaches of the villagers. The desperation and pressure that Hanh has to face drive her to travel to the city where nobody knows her to try to find a man to father a child. The scene in a park when, after enlisting the help of a small boy to solicit for her, she stands humiliated on display for the passing men, lays bare the enormity of the pressure on women to reproduce. In the end, Hanh decides not to go ahead with her plan and returns to her village. On the way home, she stops at a wharf of widows. The film's sequence shows her slowly walking fully clothed into the water until she is completely submerged. For a

moment she disappears from the sight of the spectators who hesitate, wondering if she has decided to follow the many unhappy women who came to the wharf to end their suffering, or if she is just cleansing herself from the action that traditional morality has compelled her to take. From the bank, an old woman watches Hanh. She makes no attempt to intervene and, as Hanh slips beneath the surface of the water, walks away in a silent symbolic resignation to the fact that nothing can be done to help to ease the fate of women.

As evidenced in many anthropological studies (for example, by Nguyen Thanh Tham or Phinney), in addition to the social prejudice faced by a childless woman, there are many 'practical' implications of remaining childless, such as a lack of support in old age, the absence of filial piety and an interrupted familial lineage.¹³ Culturally, it is less problematic to be the mother of a son killed in war than never to have been a mother. Mothers of dead soldiers have been taken under the protection of the state and included in the state-sponsored process of war commemoration. Conversely, the grief of the childless wife/woman who has remained childless because of war is officially unacknowledged and therefore does not evoke much sympathy. By way of contrasting this point, the film *Wharf of Widows* emphasizes the importance of a bond between a mother and a son. Hon's son Ton decides to become a soldier and sees his enlistment not in terms of patriotic duty, but in terms of restoring his mother's reputation. In order to remove any emotional and economic deterrent that might prevent young males from enlisting in the army, the state configured and actively promoted the discourse of pride rather than grief to be gained from a son enlisting out of patriotism, and counselled mothers to set aside their personal suffering by viewing this as part of a shared sacrifice for the nation (Pettus, 2003, pp 47–48). When Ton joins the army, his mother's status as a class enemy is overruled by her newly acquired position of the mother of a soldier.

Inserted into the film's wider discourse on wartime sacrifice is a theme not often present in the context of Vietnamese war literature and film – the exploration of the sexual needs of women. Within the paradigms of Confucian moral imperatives, female sexual desires were expected to

¹³ Research carried out by Phinney identified the main reasons for older single women wanting a child (even outside marriage) as *chỗ nương tựa*, *vui vẻ*, *thoải mái*, which she renders as someone to lean on, someone to provide a source of happiness and joy, and being at ease with herself as a woman.

be suppressed and only became relevant in connection with the female reproductive role. If sexuality was a problematic matter in Confucian-rooted ethics, then it remained equally complicated in the context of a communist morality. The issues of female sexuality and frustration are raised in the film *Wharf of Widows* through the portrayal of the two widows in the village, Hon and Nhan. A palpable sense of frustration surfaces in the film when a widow who, according to traditional morality, should remain chaste and faithful, openly displays her need for emotional connection and sexual contact. The sexual frustration the widows are forced to endure is so overwhelming that on several occasions they openly proposition the only suitable male in the village – Van. Hon explicitly offers her body to him, and while on the surface her proposition is made in exchange for her son's protection, her angry reaction to Van's rebuff shows that the satisfaction of her sexual needs was an intrinsic part of her approach to him. Van's refusal to engage in a sexual relationship with Hon, or with any other woman in the village for that matter, is seen as cruel and uncompassionate.

There is not a single woman in the village who has not been scarred in some way by the war. For the young girls beginning to court, there is no future in their relationships with men because of the war. The imminent departure of the young men to the front compels them to transgress traditional norms of conduct by, for example, entering into a physical relationship before marriage. Meanwhile, *Wharf of Widows* offers another agonizing indictment of war presented in the fate of a young girl who breaks off an engagement after her fiancé returns from the front disfigured. She cannot bear looking at him and begs her father not to force her to marry him. By reneging on her promise, she exposes herself to the scorn of the community, and is ultimately forced to leave the village. Another theme worth mentioning is the film's portrayal of the split loyalties of a mother forced to decide what should take priority – her daughter's wedding or taking care of bringing back her dead son's body. While traditionally, the repatriation of a dead soldier's remains would take priority over the marriage of a daughter, the wartime situation and the resulting lack of marriageable men makes the postponement of the wedding difficult. The film shows the mother standing in front of the family altar with her son's photograph agonizing over her decision, begging her son for forgiveness and asking him to continue to wait. She explains that she cannot yet go and collect his remains, since her priority has had to be to see her

daughter married. Her decision is made more difficult because of the anguish she feels over her daughter not yet being married.

If society as a whole does not acknowledge the private pain of women, they receive even less sympathy from other women in the village. There is little solidarity as Hanh, Hon, Nhan and other women in the village bear their suffering. The other women are equally likely to intensify the pain with malicious gossip, an offensive remark or hurtful laughter.

The little wharf by the riverbank in the film *Wharf of Widows* is a sorrowful place. It is a place that epitomizes the grief, anguish and suffering of women in the village, a heart-rending symbol of the deeply embedded indifference and prejudice of society towards the plight of its women. Their bravery during the war was equal to that of their men, yet their agony was made more profound since they were never allowed to distance themselves from their traditionally defined primary identities as daughters, wives and mothers. While the pain of soldiers was eventually acknowledged in the country's imaginative representations of the war, the private, intimate angst of the disruption caused by war to women's lives has been ignored for much longer by the gender-biased society. For many women in the village, the wharf has become a wharf of death, since it offered the only solution. An old woman appears several times throughout *Wharf of Widows* as a silent symbol of female suffering. Her frail, bent figure and wrinkled face mirror the depth of the immeasurable pain endured by women as a result of war.

Conclusion

The shift from cultural typecasting of war as a collective triumph to the awareness of its individualized dimensions in Vietnamese imaginative representation was not straightforward. It took longer still for gendered considerations of the war legacy to emerge. Whereas the image of the woman-soldier with her empowered, masculinized/de-feminized identity suited the ethos of patriotic heroism, the impact of war on uniquely female gender determinants moved the discourse on war to the uncomfortable paradigms of loss, pain and suffering. Consequently, this highlighted society's unwillingness to acknowledge war's unique effect on women, the deliberate disempowerment of women in the post-war period, and revealed the fundamental perplexity of issues of gender in a society based on patriarchal Confucian tradition on the one hand, and communist ideology on the other.

The cinematic rendition of the impact of war on women in *Sandy*

Lives and Wharf of Widows embodies the contradiction inherent in the country's attitude to gender. In reflecting the marginalization of the private suffering of childless women in Vietnam, both films expose the underlying repression and confinement of women within the patriarchal cultural tradition. In exploring the contradiction inherent in the centrality of motherhood for female identity in Vietnamese culture on the one hand, and the lack of empathy with childless women on the other, both films lay bare the complexity of the plight of women during the war and in its aftermath. The persuasiveness of the representation of the legacy of war as reflected in *Sandy Lives* and *Wharf of Widows* adds a significant layer to the memory of the conflict.

The gendered consideration of the effects of war construed in the films *Sandy Lives* and *Wharf of Widows* augments the imaginative narrative of war by acknowledging and exploring the pain of a lonely widow yearning for the touch of a man, of a middle-aged woman agonizing over her childlessness, of a mother grieving for her dead son or of a naïve young girl forced to confront problems far beyond her immature age. What makes these films important is their determination to remove the ideological camouflage and reveal the subtext of anguish intrinsic in war's impact on female identity. Equally significant is the absence in both films of convenient closure to the tribulations endured by Vietnamese women as a result of war. Like grains of sand, the war invades their lives, forcing them forever to carry the burden of their 'sandy lives'.

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Film plots

Sandy Lives

Sandy Lives tells the story of a married couple, Canh and Thoa, separated for 20 years by war. While Thoa has waited faithfully for her husband's return, Canh has formed a new relationship with another woman, Tam, and fathered a daughter with her. At the end of the war, Canh parts from his new family in north Vietnam and returns to his wife at a seaside village in the south. Missing her father, Gianh, Canh's daughter, soon decides to visit him (without her mother's knowledge). The unexpected arrival of Gianh, and subsequent arrival of her mother who set out in search of her daughter, discloses the existence of Canh's second family to Thoa, and creates a triangle of complicated relationships and divided loyalties. The resolution of the predicament is not possible without further pain, something that none of the protagonists wants. For several days, they strive to live all together. Thoa's faithfulness to her husband meant that she forsook her chance to become a mother. Tam acknowledges both Thoa's status of a wife and her seniority, while Thoa is aware of Tam's advantage through having borne her husband's child. Soon, however, their respective identities begin to clash and a quiet competition for Canh's attention commences. Thoa's determination to prevent Canh and Tam spending time together alone and her increasing frustration compel Tam to return with her daughter to the north. While at the station waiting for the train to depart, Canh and Tam manage to escape Thoa's watchful eye and steal a few moments alone. Thoa frantically searches for the couple, only to find them in a deep embrace. Realizing the pointlessness of her behaviour, she rushes to buy a ticket for Canh and pushes him on to the train to join Tam and his daughter. However, at the last moment Canh jumps from a moving train, rejecting Thoa's sacrifice and offer of freedom.

Wharf of Widows

The plot of the film *Wharf of Widows* evolves in a small village inhabited mainly by women. Most of the men have left for the war, or have perished in it. The life of the village is disrupted by the arrival of Van, a war veteran. As the only man of marriageable age, he soon finds himself the target of attention for the lonely women in the village. As a dedicated political cadre, he has no time and desire

for a private life and rejects the advances of his widow landlady. Later he falls in love with another widow, but is too restricted by his political zeal to consider a relationship with her. When the elders in the village decide to encourage the husband of childless Hanh to seek another marriage to secure a child, he comes to her defence; he is shocked by everyone's willingness to ignore any moral and legal obligations stemming from a marriage. His authority is overruled and he is imprisoned. His political ideals crushed, only now can he better understand the private pain of women in the village. Hanh decides to leave the village and spends her last night in the village with Van. She returns home many years later in order to introduce her daughter to her father – Van. Their fleeting happiness is destroyed by the vilification of fellow villagers. Finally, as many women have done before, Van walks to the wharf of widows and ends his life.