

A GENDER STEREOTYPES FROM AMERICAN AND VIETNAMESE WAR FILMS – A CASE STUDY OF VIETNAMESE WOMEN’S REPRESENTATION

Hoang Thi Nga

Faculty of History, Hanoi Pedagogical University No2

Abstract. In the media, the movies have a strong impact on the perception of gender and gender roles, including the image and role of women. The question is: Are there any hidden gender stereotypes contained in images, words, and plot in a movie? Therefore, this report refers to the image and portrait of Vietnamese women described in the Vietnam War films under a comparative perspective from both the US and Vietnam. From these different views, the filmmakers in Hollywood and Vietnam presented their different perceptions, even their opposing views to the Vietnamese women and their role in the war. Even more interesting, it is characterized by two opposing sides and due to always having the appearance of the familiar conventions of war films, in which one is the hero, one is the villain. Thus, the common portrayal in American films is nameless and faceless persons, such as street vendors, teachers, tailors, peasants, prostitutes and so on. These “mute characters” appear at a glance, the audiences recognize them by the traditional costumes and conical hats. In Vietnamese movies, the women seem to be multiple tasks: wives, mothers and soldiers at the same time. By comparison, the report would indicate the gender stereotypes and its negative impact on the formation, maintenance and strengthening the traditional notions of gender, particularly for Vietnamese women. The relationship between gender, gender equality and the media is also examined in the study.

Keywords: gender stereotypes, women's representation, Vietnam war films.

1. Introduction

The history of women and war has been largely forgotten by the record of men's military achievements. Actually, the role of women in the war should be recognized, not simply keep the “home fires burning”, this can be proved by many historical figures in World War I, World War II, Civil War... Particularly for the Vietnam War, its distinctive feature is the confrontation of a wealthy American country and an outdated Asian country, that makes the recognition of gender, the enemy brings many unique points, reflects the origin different.

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Contact Hoang Thi Nga, e-mail address: hoangnga102009@gmail.com

In the mass media, Vietnam War films have a strong impact on gender awareness and gender roles. It is a fact that, in the prominent issues of the Vietnam War, gender in general, Vietnamese women in particular, is rarely mentioned in American films. If so, the presence of Vietnamese women also leads to gender stereotypes, from the American perspective, from Western cultural perspective. Although everyone agrees that sex and sexuality framed American perceptions and experiences of the Vietnam War [27; 125]. This important work challenges what they think not only about a war, but also about a country named Vietnam. Therefore, researching about the representation of Vietnamese women in films from the opposing sides of a war brings a comparative perspective on the position and the role of an entity special object (women) in a special context (a war), where always the default is the land of the men, in a unique space (Vietnam). Through images and actions of women characters in films, the viewers also have certain perceptions of gender stereotypes, the role of two views.

In conventional logic, the two opposing sides of the war are always the default by convention: we are the righteous and the hero and the other side: “they” are negative and antagonistic. Therefore, it is not difficult to see a familiar motif for Vietnamese women in Vietnamese films as images of heroic women on the battlefield, taking care of the family life in the home front. They are versatile people that they can handle a lot of work, so they always bear a high expectation from family and society. This image also represents the Vietnamese perspective, forming the framework for evaluating a woman in Vietnamese society to this day. Some films such as *Em bé Hà Nội* (Girl from Hanoi) of Hai Ninh (1974); Dang Nhat Minh's *Bao giờ cho đến tháng Mười* (When the Tenth Month Comes) (1984); Nguyen Hong Sen's *Cánh đồng hoang* (Free Fire Zone) (1979); Dang Nhat Minh's *Đừng đốt* (Don't Burn) (2009) will be discussed in this paper.

In American films, there are also Vietnamese women, but they show up with two images: seductive and destructive. Common sense in American films is that Vietnamese women are often unnamed, faceless, and speechless such as street vendors, teachers, tailors, farmers, prostitutes... They are “dumb” characters, appearing briefly, the viewers recognize them through traditional attire or their work. If they were guerrilla women, instead of looking at them as brave soldiers, they were described as blindly fighting people. These images formed an indelible conception of the Viet Cong guerrilla in American culture [14; 310]. The representative of a guerrilla woman became a prominent tool in the Vietnam War film. They appeared in films such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and *Casualties of War* (1989).

2. Content

2.1. The Vietnamese Women's representation in Vietnamese war films

Under the Vietnamese lens, Vietnamese women are the central figure in many films. They could be a wife and also a guerrilla woman like Sau in *Free Fire Zone* (1979), a wife waiting for her husband in the home front like Duyen in *When the Tenth Month Comes* (1984) or Tram, a doctor in battle field in *Don't Burn* (2009).

The Free Fire Zone tells about Ba Do and his wife (Sau) - two guerrillas in Dong Thap Muoi, who were tasked with keeping lines of communication for guerrillas to avoid bombing and assassinations from US helicopters. When Ba Do was killed by American

helicopters, in order to avenge her husband, Sau chased after firing on the helicopter. *Free Fire Zone* receiving the highest prize in the Moscow International Film Festival in 1981 and becoming one of the most famous films in Polish cinema's history.

When the Tenth Month Comes tells story of Duyen, when she learns her husband has died in the war but she has to hide her father in law, who is seriously ill. In order to help her father, Duyen asked a teacher to write letters for him as her husband was still alive before. These letters brought joy to the family, but she must suffer the pain alone, tears swallowed in. The father told Duyen to call his son to meet him last. At this time, news of her husband's death cannot be hidden anymore.

Don't Burn tells about the return journey of a diary, which recorded by a US soldier in Vietnam for 30 years. It is a diary of a real woman in the Vietnam War named Tram, she is a courageous doctor, responsible for the care and treatment of sick soldiers in the battlefield.

The common characteristics of these women are feminine, gentle, caring for husbands, children, families, relatives. They endure and sacrifice for the well-being of others, like Duyen for the health of her father-in-law who silently endures the pain of losing her husband. While American films, the struggles and losses of armies were the main theme of the Vietnam War, the loss of these films was imagined on more material levels, such as weapons, also worth noting is that American films have been completely lacking in strong female characters, which are hardly seen in classic American films about the war [18; 119].

In fact, Vietnamese women, as survivors of the war, became national memory archives. Thinking, their voices indicate that they are direct and indirect victims of war, whether in the battlefield or in the back. Duyen is the representative of the Vietnamese women in the rear, the indirect victim of such a war. The focus of the film is on the back and the loss, it is especially related to the style of Vietnamese cinema, with emphasis on expressing feelings of mourn and humanity [28, 46]. It is not surprising that sadness and sorrow are an integral part of Vietnamese cinema because of the history of war and loss of the country that played a major part in Vietnamese history.

Character, personality as Duyen is not strange in Vietnamese society. These are the characteristics of the women that most Asians in China, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam are valued in the tradition of their history. Vietnamese history was profoundly influenced by China and Confucianism (China ruled Vietnam for eleven centuries). It provided a formal social order - the masculine society, therefore the women are considered assets or attributes of a sustainable family; especially in North Vietnam. As a consequence, in the films about the Vietnam War, whether women are guerrillas, they must first be a wife and mother in the family. At times, it is thought that masculinization of women will affect the position of women in relation to men in society; Turner's research has shown that the role of representation of Vietnamese women after the war was gradually transformed. The female guerrillas who fought with the men to save the country lost their representation on the film compared to the moral mother and wife, who nurture future citizens [23, 116].

In the movie *The Free Fire Zone* (1979), in scenes, Sau is described as a wife and a mother, but also a guerrilla woman (a fighter), in other words, she is a super woman.

Sau's image is classic in the Vietnam War films as it creates a pattern, that fits into the patriarchal society of Vietnam. The film also reflects a real war in Vietnam. Vietnamese women are always framed within a Confucian framework, closely tied to their role in the family, but in the war, the traditional role is broken, they have been long not only caring people, supporters in the rear, they are also warriors. Vietnam is probably one of the few countries, if not the only country in the world, to produce many heroines, who have fought for independence [25; 82].

Vietnamese women in the perspective of the Vietnamese are people with faces, names, voices, lives, aspirations. They are recognized by their own character. They, despite the women waiting at the back, the doctors in the battle field, the guerrillas in the cinema, symbolize the imposing, the framework of Vietnamese society. They are small but carry too many roles, honoring them in the main movie is to draw a pattern for other women. This is the paradox of celebrating women, honoring the beauty of their character, their actions, giving them the roles they all do well, is putting other women in the frame like that. Soviet women also carry these roles [26; 29], we can encounter in many Soviet films about the World War I, the World War II.

2.2. The Vietnamese Women's representation in American war films

In contrast to Vietnamese films, the presence of Vietnamese women in American films reflects a variety of approaches in Western culture and hegemonic attitudes toward the appearance and stereotype of the Vietnamese people. They are unspoilt, unspoken, and most uncivilized people, who, as Westrup explains, are “lack of humanity”, which is common in American films about the war [28; 48].

These fictional women have often been considered as dangerous, but are often too feminine villains, who appear in brief and intense scenes that reflect the divide between Western expectations of traditional Vietnamese femininity and the brutality of war [20; 85]. The West believed that Asian women were often passive, tender, and attached to their families, but in the Vietnam War they encountered many guerrilla women with fierce fighting. The old, typical thoughts have changed; the expectations and the reality of the war give them experiences that differ from the description of the media.

On the one hand, Vietnamese women appear with a feminine, sexy motif that is associated with their work as a prostitute in *Full Metal Jacket* (1984). Or they appear as dumb people, no image, only identified through the work done like washing, selling in *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Sometimes they show up with aprons and cones, *Apocalypse Now*, or they are victims of sexual assault in helplessness in the *Casualties of War* (1989). More than any other Vietnamese film, the *Casualties of War* show that sexual instinct can become a murderous instinct [21].

Full Metal Jacket is a British-American war film. Its storyline follows a platoon of U.S. Marines through their training, primarily focusing on two privates, Joker and Pyle, who struggle to get through camp under their foul-mouthed drill instructor, Gunnery Sergeant Hartman, and the experiences of two of the platoon's Marines in the Tet Offensive during the Vietnam War.

“*Apocalypse Now*” is an American film set in the context of the Vietnam War. The plot revolves around two US Special Forces officers, one of whom captain Benjamin L.

Willard, he was sent to assassinate the forest, the wicked colonel and perhaps Frustrated by Colonel Walter E. Kurtz of the Special Forces.

“Casualties of War” tells about a flashback of Max Eriksson, a Vietnam veteran. Lt. Reilly leads his platoon of American soldiers on a nighttime patrol. They are attacked by the Viet Cong after a panicked soldier exposes their position. While on flank security, the ground cracks under Eriksson and he ends up partially stuck in a Viet Cong tunnel. Eriksson's squad leader, Sergeant Tony Meserve, pulls Eriksson out of the hole and eventually, the platoon retreats out of the jungle.

In *Apocalypse Now*, images of Vietnamese women are faceless, nameless. From the American lens, Vietnam is name not for a country, for a war [19; 6]. The people there have completely no face, no personality, no voice. All of them like as many strange Vietnamese person appeared in the film Coppola, although the film scene about Vietnam war and Vietnamese people. They are maybe street traders, teachers, farmers and warriors. They are displayed in *Apocalypse Now* as remote numbers; So all the viewers realize they are Vietnamese through traditional costumes and conical hats. They are almost “silent”, as well as an older lady scene that appears at the beginning of the film, or just a few words that do not make sense. They have no voice, no character, and no name. The audiences can hear their scream when the helicopter approaches or hear the moans of the woman on the boat after she was shot dead. From the helicopter's view, their white hats move through the rice fields, the audience understands that Vietnamese women are farmers, even though they cannot determine their farming practices or how do farmers live? The second scene depicts the Vietnamese during their river voyage. The boat goes at a fast pace. A group of Vietnamese children and women appear on the screen for a moment as the boat goes by. They seem confused and passive, because they have no sound and no response. It is clear that the images and themes of the movie have been planned in advance, not necessary to be the truth. Most of the script sources for the Vietnam War films were written by one of the two literary experts, who is influenced by the means of selected media. Therefore, the authors Gilman & Smith said that “Hollywood movies did not provide a fair picture of Vietnam war” [19; 6], particularly in the 60s and the first decade of the 80s, Westrup also stated as follows: “Thus, while the Vietnamese are here portrayed as soldiers, they are portrayed first and foremost as people. It is this humanity that is lacking in portrayals of the Vietnamese within canonized American films about the war” [28; 48].

Images of Vietnamese women are also linked to sexual orientation: In the Full Metal Jacket, two opposite images of Vietnamese women were depicted. The first was an image of a prostitute on Saigon's streets. Acting provocatively, inviting American soldiers to a cheap price in the laughter and laughter of two American soldiers did not first appear in American films. So, Gina Marchetti writes that “one of the more enduring aspects of the Western vision of Asia involves the East's supposedly intrinsic seductiveness” [15, 67]. In *Apocalypse Now*, even prostitutes also appeared under director Coppola. The second, the image of dangerously female guerrillas (Viet Cong) provided fertile material for novels and countless American films in the postwar years of Vietnam, but also made many literary scholars use hyperbolic female characters and stereotypes. The evidence demonstrates the real involvement of women in war and

suggests that these female characters serve to determine the central importance of the American masculinity crisis in the narratives of conflict [16].

In *Apocalypse Now*, Vietnamese women are also described as guerrillas. In some scenes, we can see some women with gun and shooting. In *Full Metal Jacket*, in a ruined city, a Viet Cong sniper appeared suddenly, fighting alone to death. In the American lenses, the way the guerrillas fight without dying is a suicidal, stupid and an insane type of fight. They do not see it as a heroic fight, which suggests that it is the crazy behavior of the barbarians. Therefore, it is said that in the eyes of Americans, Vietnamese women only appear with two images: seduce and destroy [29].

Characters like the sniper in the *Full Metal Jacket* evoke images of the war that can be seen from countless sources, but considering the women's report in the 1960s, the thought of a feminine, brutal foe in Vietnam was first introduced, that described the role of women in war by using erotic but less common examples of violence to describe movement and its tactical illustration [31].

The sociologist Jerry Lembcke has written extensively about how myths have shaped popular memory of war, and in Jane Jane's book, Lembcke explores the dynamics of gender in warfare by examining the Feminization of the enemy of Vietnam. Lembcke argues that the pain of US failure in Vietnam has increased because of "growing understanding that Vietnamese women have played a central role in defeating Americans. - that the failure of the American war for a women's army - helped the wars understand that Hanoi had become a symbol" [17; 109]. Lembcke argues that bringing Vietnamese soldiers as guerrillas is a way to increase America's sense of helplessness and deepen the sense of national failure. Film researcher David Desser also argues that the popularity of women's guerrilla cinema images represents "near-hysterical reaction to the shock to the (masculine) American psyche that this physically smaller, technologically inferior race could defeat the hypermasculinized, hypertechnologized American soldier" [30; 96]

From both the US and Vietnamese films, which I reviewed, show the shallow, one-sided views of the Vietnamese women's representation, the adornment and exploitation of the real role of the Vietnamese women in Vietnam War. Their representations and experiences blur the corresponding causes. Vietnamese women in the battlefield are a mix of some images: the mother, the national spy, and guerrilla characteristics.

2.3. The gender stereotype of Vietnamese women in American and Vietnamese views through the Vietnam War films

Gender stereotypes are defined as over-estimating the specificity, difference and attributes of a certain group based on their gender. Recently, for example, Eagly and colleagues proposed an account of the origin of gender stereotypes that grants to these stereotypes what amounts to a sizable kernel of truth. Gender stereotypes make widely accepted bias estimates of certain characteristics that apply to each gender. If a man or woman acts differently than the way their sex is regulated, they do not follow the rules. Sex stereotypes are dangerous because they can create unfair treatments. When gender inequality occurs on the basis of gender stereotypes, this is called sexism.

There are four basic types of gender stereotypes [13; 744]:

- Personality characteristics - For example, women are often expected to be accommodating and emotional, while men are often expected to be confident and active.
- Behaviors - For example, some expect women to take care of their children, cook and clean their homes, while the men have to care of finances, work on cars, and repair house.
- Careers - Some people quickly assume that teachers and nurses are women, and that pilots, doctors, and engineers are men.
- Shape - For example, women are expected to be thin and graceful, while men are expected to be tall and muscular. Men and women are also expected to dress in gender stereotypes (men in shorts and short hairstyles, women in costumes and makeup).

In films in particular and popular culture in general, gender stereotypes are used repeatedly as the social way defined above. So, even in the movie capital of Hollywood, Denzin, Norman recognize that:

“Classic Hollywood cinema has never been kind to women. Irrespective of their class, but not their ethnicity, women have been treated as desired object of the male gaze, cast in stereotyped part, good or bad women, good or bad mothers, sinners or saints. Cinema does not represent women – it creates them. These creations provide audiences with gendered experiences of a racialized gendered social order built on inequality, masculinity and violence” [10, 469].

The stereotype of women in the film has not always been overcome. Female stereotypes that remain in the film are hardly recognized as independent, powerful women. In most movies, women are attractive and unrealistic. They are mostly present to please men. Almost all the female characters in the movie are praised for their appearance or physical beauty. Praise in appearance is not a bad thing when presented in a healthy film environment, but when a female pattern is restricted to this type of accolade, problems occur.

For the Vietnam War films, a gender stereotype was created both in Vietnam and in the US, but not in the same way. Under the lens of American film makers, US women have virtually no role in combat, which is understandable because they are not in the battlefield. Instead, women act as a carer or lover who is waiting and supporting their men in the back. The most visible representation of American women in war is the playboy girls who appear on the stage built over the water where Willard and his crew stop refueling. Hundreds of people sit in a stadium, excitedly waiting for the show. The helicopter appears to drop three girls in short skirts, a small T-shirt, and a cowboy hat. The way they dress, as well as their sexy choreography with pistols, is enough to spur the soldiers away from loved ones often thousands of miles away. It is not surprising that some people jump onto the stage and create chaos. As Coppola admits, he did not have trouble creating this scene, as recruited soldiers were actually “American” soldiers performing missions at Philippine military bases at that time. They are all really excited [6]. Coppola showed a perspective on the role of American women in the Vietnam War: as a recreational object. Although this is the longest scene in the *Apocalypse Now*, in which American women are represented, it does not provide much content for their characters because of their high moral character and objectivity. Their role in the War, if not carer or lover, is to entertain, not to fight. The look with Vietnamese women is no different; they

are also seen as female prostitutes, men's fun as in the *Full Metal Jacket*, *Good Morning Vietnam*. Because of the historical contexts of the wars that have arisen in the wars:

“The Wars with the Philippines, Japan and China in World War II, and more recently, Korean and Vietnamese wars, Asian women were perceived by American soldiers as prostitutes and sexual objects who provided rest and recuperation from the war zones. This perception was not restricted to Western soldiers overseas, but was portrayed and perpetuated through film and other media in the United States and Europe” [8, 34].

But Vietnamese women are not the only default in this pre-concept. American soldiers had a cultural shock when Vietnamese women were soldiers directly facing them on the battlefield. Obviously, gender stereotypes have been broken with such presence. However, the images of guerrilla women only appear transiently, no name, no voice, no their own story. Even the film makers set them up as stupid fighters. Obviously there is the racism here. And so there is the opinion that “on these fields of gender, the irresolvable tensions in America ideology became clear. Vietnamese women were at one damsels in need of rescue and dragon ladies who must be slain” [22; 6].

Under the lens of Vietnamese filmmakers who are influenced by not only China's ideological system, also the traditional patriarchal social structure, Vietnamese women show up on film with the high expectations society in different multi-tasks... Thus, Hall once stated, “Films do not mirror the real world, they make their version of it” [22; 28] Traditional Vietnamese women have a role in caring for their children, looking after their families and waiting for their husbands in the backyard like Duyen in *When the Tenth Month Comes*. Although they are female guerrillas, they must first be attached to the role of someone else's wife, the mother of someone like Sau in the *Wild Tiger*. Their desires or aspirations are not tied to personal happiness but to their families, homelands and countries as Tram's dreams in *Don't Burn*.

3. Conclusions

The presence of Vietnamese women in the films related to the Vietnam-US war varies in interesting ways. The most important thing is to visualize the generated movie set in a comparative context. The purpose of this study is not to prove that Vietnamese women's representatives are rightly or wrongly described, more or less valuable or more despicable than previous descriptions, but to recognize survival. At the time of a special representative for the Vietnam War, among them had previously been less interested and thoroughly researched from both sides. By extending the lens with films from the Vietnamese side, we can work to gain a public understanding of the war that reflects the political, cultural, and social complexity inherent in itself and complements the differences in aesthetics and similarities due to the different practices and philosophies, when they are brought together side by side. It is the idea and the desire to find comparative angles complement each other in considering the same object as Vietnamese women from two cultures, two different ethnic groups, two opponents on the battlefield. Two conflicting concepts such as gender, gender bias and war led to a more comprehensive picture of the role of Vietnamese women in the war. The diversity of the films surveyed was very interesting, and some of them were probably forgotten [2]. Here,

we find that gender stereotypes are harmful because they do not allow people to express themselves and their emotions, as well as their perceptions and judgments. American stereotypes created for Vietnamese women make people incomprehensible about their role in the war. But the gender stereotypes that Vietnamese films put up create pressure and a grip for Vietnamese women to this day. Obviously, we cannot deny the influence of film and popular culture on the social, cultural and cognitive structures of the human.

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