

Dehumanization Of People In The Vietnam War

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War, State Power, and the Dehumanization of Vietnamese Citizens

Wars force people to act in a way that they might think of doing at times of peace. Jade Ngoc Quang Huynh discusses his experiences of being dehumanized at the hands of his own government and people in his book "South Wind Changing." (Huỳnh, 2000)

He was born in Vietnam to farmers with enough to eat and living with 17 siblings. He continued his education despite the war in the country, but when the North Vietnamese took over in 1975, Huynh was arrested for being a student and lost contact with his family. He is sent to the camp, and the dehumanization starts. The South Wind Changing tells the story of Jade Huynh, who was sent to a labor campus to re-study for being a student, where he was dehumanized at the hands of fellow Vietnamese. The paper will examine the dehumanization of people in the Vietnam War that was inflicted by fellow Vietnamese for political gains. The paper argues that war destroys not only families but also affects rationality and humanity in people through the experiences of Hunyh in South Wind Changing.

In most of the wars, political gains were intended, and the Vietnam War was intended to achieve control over the Capitalist South and to minimize the capitalist influence in their country. Although the North took over the South, it was tainted with horrifying memories and losses. The South Wind Changing discusses the damage the war inflicted on the people in Vietnam South and North. It killed thousands of people, damaged families, tortured people, and destroyed the lands and homes of thousands of people, making them vulnerable and homeless. The political gains cost Mr. Huynh's six siblings and other relatives, who were scattered among family members. The lands where Huynh had grown and played were destroyed. The home where his mother used to cook for the big family and his father strongly controlled was destroyed in the war. The mother who had seen only the smiles of her children had to bury six of her children, and the other one she could not meet for decades. It was a success story for the politicians, but for Huynh and many others, the war had destroyed. It had destroyed their peace of mind, torturing them and separating them from their families. It had dehumanized them in many ways.

Education, Imprisonment, and Life in the Labour Camp

The only crime Huynh had committed to end up in the labor camp was his education. The Hanoi government criminalized the basic human rights of an individual to get an education. The camp was surrounded by “barbed with wire fences” to keep the prisoners from escaping, and the barracks packed with 500 hundred human bodies with no toilet and place to wash reduced their needs and humanity. It is a so-called “re-education camp” intended to dehumanize individuals. The set-up of the camps did not resemble the places where humans could live. It did not even resemble the prison cell where the washroom and food were provided to the inmates. In the barracks, 500 people were forced to live in a group of 20 with no toilet or other basic facilities. The “re-education” was to force them to believe that they are nothing more than machines who need to listen to orders and work without proper food and rest.

The working conditions of the camp implied that either the people there worked as machines or they would die a painful death. The first experience of the Huynh in the camp was to “convert the whole airfield into a garden” (1). The only tools available were three axes. They were forced to work throughout the day without resting under the “boiling sun” with “blistered hands.” The prisoners were ordered to build dams in the cold winters. Even though the prisoners were not willing to go into the cold water, the fire shots made them run into the water (). Moreover, the jungles were cleared to create rice fields and gardens (). The constant work from five in the morning to seven in the evening every day without rest or food was inhuman, but it was the “re-education.” The re-education gave no choice to the prisoners, treating them as machines even worse than machines because machines would get fuel or necessary oiling for maintenance, but the prisoners were the tools of the government. The tools would work throughout the day to make the country beautiful and build the country. It was a way to rebuild the country without paying for the labor. It was a way to let them die slowly with improper death, excessive work, and lack of empathy, which was difficult to endure, and it was slowly killing the prisoners. They worked hard and produced the crops but were not allowed to eat or enjoy any of them. They were not allowed to be proud of their work (). They were the tools they were using to produce, and after the production of the crops, the tools were not needed until the next task. They could not speak or discuss any of their concerns because of the fear of being punished or killed.

The soldiers in the camp shot anyone as if their life did not matter at all to anybody to show them the insignificance of their presence and life. Although it is argued that human lives matter and are important, the camps were taking that significance from the people killing them. The rules in the camps were to obey or be killed and punished. The people showing resistance to obey the orders were shot “in front of all,” showing them their insignificance (). Punishments and killings left people with no hope of returning to family and normal life. Beating and punishments become part of the routine: “We were beaten whenever the guards felt like it” (73). The harsh treatment confirmed every

day that they were no individuals, no humans, and not worthy.

On top of all the humiliation, the socialization was restricted. The people were not allowed to discuss or talk about anything. They could only communicate through whispers or eyes. Although the prisoners were living with hundreds of others, it was difficult to build personal relationships with anyone. The only brief discussions the people had were about their previous lives. One of the reasons for overworking was to keep them busy so that they “never have any time to scheme against them” (). Humans socialize, but that socialization factor was removed, and they were treated worse than animals. The guards made the prisoners fight each other as a punishment, and that would not stop until “we could not move our hands” (74). All the techniques used were to reduce human contact and the humanness in the individuals.

Forced Self-Criticism and the Destruction of Human Dignity

Additionally, they were forced to criticize themselves every night in front of everyone to humiliate them in front of others. It aimed at taking away their remaining pride and humility. Self-criticism raises questions regarding the self-worth of the person, taking away hope and adding to negativity in the prisoners. The humiliation and torture forced Huynh and others to think that they were “being punished for being cruel to others in their past lives” (ch 6). They felt guilty for something that they never did and accepted the violence as if they deserved it. It destroyed their self-respect and confidence, making them all sinners.

Thus, the examples and the discussion show the irrationality and cruelty that the war instigates in people. The novel *South Wind Changing Huynh* discusses the irrationalities in the Vietnam War. For instance, people were criminalized for being students, they were forced to re-education, which focused on hard labor, people working fourteen hours without proper food and resting, they were tortured and punished for other crimes, and they were expected to obey everything, they were forced to self-criticize, and they were shot. And they were not even allowed to eat lizards and other animals without permission. Additionally, all these irrationalities contributed to the dehumanization of the people who were keen to learn and work for their country and who were waiting for the peace to return. Regardless, dehumanization was used to control the people, and in order to control the guards and everyone involved was dehumanized, detaching empathy, care, and compassion that is required to be a human being.

To conclude, dehumanization is employed as a war technique to inflict force and torture to control the people and obey orders. It is used to produce order in chaos. However, it is a technique that destroys individuals, humiliates them, discourages them, tortures them, and debilitates them for their whole lives. The abuses and torture become nightmares for the people who suffered them, and the story of Huynh is illustrated through his experience as a prisoner in the *South Wind Changing*. Each example shows irrationality, but that dehumanizes them, making them insignificant and worthless in their own

eyes as well as in front of the state. The techniques of control during wars become derogatory for human beings and their humanity, destroying every factor and characteristic that they cherish as humans.

Works Cited

Huỳnh, Jade Ngọc Quang. *South Wind Changing*. Graywolf Press, 2000.