

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Problem

In the 1960s, the United States experienced significant upheaval both domestically and internationally. Among the most notable of these challenges was the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Although it was not the sole cause of the Vietnam War, the Cold War provided a critical geopolitical backdrop for the conflict. Concerned about the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, the United States took active measures to support South Vietnam's government in order to stem the influence of communist ideology in the region.

The Vietnam War was a military conflict between the communist forces of North Vietnam and the anti-communist forces of South Vietnam. North Vietnam, led by members of the Communist Party, sought to unify the country under communist rule with the backing of other communist nations, including the Soviet Union and China. In contrast, South Vietnam, supported by the United States and other Western allies, aimed to maintain its autonomy and resist communist domination. The war, which lasted from 1955 to 1975, exacted a devastating toll, with significant losses among civilians, medical workers, and soldiers. The United States suffered an estimated 58,152 military casualties, with the majority from the Army, which had the largest deployment of forces (Statista Research Department, 2024).

During this period, domestic upheaval within the United States further complicated the nation's position. Social movements, including the Civil Rights Movement, the feminist movement, and the anti-war movement, challenged traditional power structures and called for significant societal change. These movements placed immense pressure on the government to address both domestic and international crises. Kristin Hannah's historical novel *The Women* (2024) offers a poignant portrayal of this era, shedding light on the sacrifices made by young men and women during the Vietnam War. The novel particularly highlights the experiences of women who served in Vietnam, whose contributions were often overlooked or dismissed. Many women recounted being told, "There were no

women in Vietnam," a phrase that encapsulated the erasure of their service and sacrifices (Collins, 2023).

From 1962 onward, the escalating conflict in Vietnam underscored the urgent need for additional military nurses. However, the United States faced significant challenges in meeting this demand. The civilian healthcare sector struggled with a nationwide shortage of nurses, and both the Army Nurse Corps (ANC) and Navy Nurse Corps (NNC) had been significantly reduced in size compared to their strength during World War II (Severson & Johnson, 2020). Between 1963 and 1969, the U.S. military presence in Vietnam grew dramatically, increasing from 16,000 to approximately 550,000 personnel. Notably, until 1965, American forces were officially classified as advisors to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) (Severson & Johnson, 2020).

Author Kristin Hannah wrote *The Women* to honor the army nurses who served during the Vietnam War. She sympathized with and appreciated those who fought and sacrificed on the battlefield.

In *The Women* (2024), Kristin Hannah crafts the story of Frances "Frankie" McGrath, an idealistic young nurse from Coronado Island in Southern California. Raised in an affluent family, Frankie's father was a successful contractor, and her mother was a socialite. Her brother, Finley, had recently graduated from the Naval Academy. Determined to prove herself both as a professional nurse and a patriot, Frankie joined the Army Nurse Corps during the Vietnam War. However, her experiences profoundly transformed her. After two years of service, Frankie returned home deeply affected by her time in Vietnam, grappling with depression, anxiety, and agitation. Through Frankie's story, Hannah sheds light on the struggles of Army nurses and the lack of recognition they received from both the government and society upon their return.

This lack of acknowledgment for women's contributions during the Vietnam War inspired my interest in analyzing Kristin Hannah's novel through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism. De Beauvoir, a prominent French philosopher and feminist, explored gender inequality in her seminal work *The Second Sex*. She argued that society conceptualizes women as objects within a

patriarchal system, perpetuating their subordination to men. By applying de Beauvoir's theoretical framework, this research aims to illuminate the ways in which *The Women* critiques the marginalization of women veterans and challenges the patriarchal narratives that have historically excluded their stories.

The goal of this research is to assist readers of historical fiction and scholars of literature in understanding the messages conveyed by Kristin Hannah through the character of Frankie McGrath. As a combat nurse, Frankie exemplifies the bravery and dedication of women who served alongside American soldiers in Vietnam. Although they did not wield weapons, these women worked tirelessly to save lives under harrowing conditions, demonstrating extraordinary courage and resilience. As the soldiers' creed declares, "No man left behind," it is imperative to extend this principle to the women veterans of the Vietnam War: "No woman should be forgotten."

1.2. Identification of the Problem

Based on the issues presented in the novel, the challenges faced by Frances McGrath reflect broader social issues of the 1960s in America. During this period, women did not receive the same recognition or treatment as men for their contributions to the Vietnam War. The character of Frances McGrath, a young white woman, illustrates this disparity. Despite her decision to serve as a combat nurse in Vietnam, Frances was belittled by her parents for choosing to engage in a traditionally male-dominated sphere of service. Upon her return from the war, she faced a lack of acceptance and respect, unlike her male counterparts who were celebrated as heroes. Through Frances' experiences, the novel symbolizes the struggles of other brave women who fought alongside male soldiers and demonstrates the need for society to provide these women with the recognition and appreciation they deserve for their sacrifices.

1.3. Limitation of the Problem

Based on problem identification, this research will focus on Frances or Frankie the main character as she presented herself as a military veteran at that time. Women got different attention than men when they did the same things fight for their country during the Vietnam War. It was saddening to know that these women's

heroic stories have too often been forgotten or overlooked. The society, family, and government made women as an object of the patriarchal system. Through feminist theory in literature, it can expand the view of the readers to include diverse perspectives, addressing not just gender, but also the intersections of race, class, sexuality, and other social categories that influence literary representation and interpretation.

1.4. Formulation of the Problem

Based on the limitation of the problem above, here are the formulation of the problem:

1. How are the characterization, setting, plot, and theme portrayed in Hannah's novel *The Women* (2024) in this research?
2. How does existentialist feminism theory apply to analyze the main character, Frankie or Frances McGrath, with the four concepts of oppression and objectification, freedom and choice, self-creation, and existence precedes essence?
3. How does support among female veterans reflect Simone de Beauvoir's idea of existentialist feminism?

1.5. Objective of the Research

The object of this research is to illustrate that brave women who are sent to the Vietnam War should receive equal appreciation and respect to men who fight on the battlefield. Based on the formulation of the problems mentioned above. This research will answer:

1. To explain the characterization, setting, plot, and theme in the novel *The Women* (2024).
2. To analyze the main character, Frankie or Frances McGrath, using four concepts of Existentialist Feminism Theory as defined by Simone de Beauvoir's idea.
3. To explain how the women veterans support one another reflects Simone de Beauvoir's idea of existentialist feminism

1.6. Benefits of the Research

There are two benefits of the research as follows:

1.) Theoretical Benefits

This study seeks to analyze the existentialist feminist ideology as expressed by Simone de Beauvoir. She stated that existentialist feminism is a philosophy that underscores human liberty, accountability, and the construction of meaning in life through personal decisions. This theory offers a framework for women to contemplate and contest the constraints that persist in modern society.

2.) Practical Benefits

This study is practically applicable to all social life patterns in society. This constrains women's autonomy within social and cultural frameworks. It advocates for women to resist oppression and cultivate genuine and significant lives grounded in individual choices. These days, women want more autonomy so they may pursue careers, further their education, and make decisions for their own lives. They no longer want to stay at home and take care of their husbands and kids only.

1.7. Systematic Organization of the Research

In accordance with the title of the research above, the order of the presentation is written as follows:

- Chapter 1: Introduction consists of the background of the problems, identification of the problems, the limitations of the problems, the objective of the problem, the benefits of the research, and the systematic organization of the research.
- Chapter 2: The Framework of the theories consists of the theoretical approach which is intrinsically and extrinsically.
- Chapter 3: Research Method consists of time and location, research approach and method, research object and data, data collection technique, and data analysis technique.
- Chapter 4: An Existentialist Feminism Analysis in Kristin Hannah's Novel *The Women* (2024), consists of analysis using the concept of characterization, plot, setting, and themes

Chapter 5: Conclusion, consists of the references, scheme of research, and curriculum vitae.

