

VOICES IN CONFLICT: EXPLORING MEMORY AND MULTIPLICITY IN *THE SYMPATHIZER*

SAJJAD GHEYTASI

Assistant Professor, English Literature Department,
Payame Noor University (PNU), Tehran, Iran

sajjadgheyta2@pnu.ac.ir

ORCID: 0000-0001-6111-0279

ABSTRACT

The present study explores the intricate narrative strategy in *The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen to critique the concept of unjust memory. Through a metatextual approach centered on nested narratives, the novel integrates diverse voices, encompassing American, South Vietnamese, and North Vietnamese characters. Contrasting voices challenge the notion of a singular history, unveiling the multiplicity of narratives. Conflicting voices vie for control over historical memory, aiming to legitimize their actions regardless of their impact on human rights. This study contributes to understanding the intricate dynamics of memory manipulation within historical narratives, shedding light on the multifarious nature of memory's construction.

KEYWORDS: unjust memory, nested narratives, Vietnam War, memory industry, *The Sympathizer*.

VEUS EN CONFLICTE: EXPLORANT LA MEMÒRIA I LA MULTIPLICITAT A *THE SYMPATHIZER*

RESUM

El present estudi explora la intricada estratègia narrativa de *The Sympathizer* de Viet Thanh Nguyen per criticar el concepte de memòria injusta. A través d'un enfocament metatextual centrat en narracions niades, la novel·la integra diverses veus, que abasten personatges nord-americans, sud-vietnamites i nord-vietnamites. Les veus contraposades qüestionen la noció d'una història singular, revelant la multiplicitat de narratives. Les veus conflictives reclamen el control sobre la memòria històrica, amb l'objectiu de legitimar les seves accions independentment del seu impacte en els drets humans. Aquest estudi contribueix a entendre la dinàmica intricada de la manipulació de la memòria dins de les narratives històriques, llançant llum sobre la naturalesa multifacètica de la construcció de la memòria.

PARAULES CLAU: memòria injusta, narratives ennuvolades, Guerra del Vietnam, indústria de la memòria, *The Sympathizer*.

All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory.
(Nguyen 2016: 13)

1. INTRODUCTION

The Sympathizer effectively critiques the notion of unjust memory while employing a metatextual approach that revolves around its nested narrative

Data de recepció: 5/x/2023

Data d'acceptació: 22/xi/2023

Data de publicació: desembre 2023

form. In this literary technique, the narrator's overarching confession incorporates testimonies from various individuals he interacts with, including Americans, South Vietnamese, and North Vietnamese characters. The term "nested" is aptly applied here, drawing an analogy to the layers of a narrative within a narrative. Much like a set of Russian nesting dolls, the primary narrative envelops and reveals distinct perspectives, creating a multi-faceted exploration of memory. This nested narrative form in *The Sympathizer* serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it allows the narrator to convey his own experiences and reflections, providing a central thread that ties together the disparate voices within the novel. Secondly, by incorporating the testimonies of various characters, the narrative transcends individual perspectives, offering a panoramic view of the complex socio-political landscape surrounding the Vietnam War. The term "nested" thus aptly captures the intricate interplay of narratives within the novel, emphasizing the interconnectedness of memories and the impact of collective recollections on the perception of historical events. These diverse voices intertwine and blend, giving rise to what Mikhail Bakhtin terms "heteroglossia". This characteristic stylistic element of the novel entails the combination of different speech types that serve as channels for expressing a multitude of distinct verbal-ideological and social belief systems (Bakhtin 1982: 263, 288).

The novel's use of nested narratives provides a nuanced perspective on the complexities of memory and history. In this sense, Rottenberg *et al.* believe that "Narrative contains the complexity and the contradictions of life's experiences and the ability to rememory" (Rottenberg *et al.* 2016: 3). Moreover, the mentioned writers also state that the concept of "rememory" can be regarded

as a way to signify the combined ideas of repetition and memory, asserted that the action is not simply one of recollecting the past but enabling its return, re-presentation, and re-incarnation and thus the re-vision of memory itself. (Rottenberg *et al.* 2016: 1)

By incorporating testimonies from characters representing various sides of the Vietnam War, the novel highlights the subjective nature of memory and the diverse viewpoints that emerge from different cultural, political, and social contexts. These contrasting voices challenge the notion of a singular, unified history, revealing the fragmentation and multiplicity of narratives surrounding significant events like the Vietnam War.

Regarding the concept of "heteroglossia", each voice contributes its unique background and belief system to the overall story, creating a tapestry of perspectives that encapsulates the intricate layers of human experience. The novel's metatextual approach not only emphasizes the subjectivity of memory but also underscores the interconnectedness of individuals and their stories to broader context of historical events. Moreover, the novel also challenges "the nation's dominant historical memory to take account of the marginalized, suppressed, and forgotten histories" (Schuster 2006: 129). It becomes evident that

these parties all strive to promote self-serving accounts, portraying their actions as heroic, regardless of how gravely these actions infringe upon the fundamental human rights of others. Herein, the palimpsest-like nature of the confession exposes the historical revisionism and selective storytelling employed by different groups to validate their actions and preserve their legacy.

The novel highlights the struggle for memory dominance, where each faction seeks to maintain its version of the truth and solidify its position in the historical record. The recognition of such conflicting discourses challenges the notion of an absolute, objective historical truth. Instead, it underscores the subjective nature of memory and history, demonstrating how memories are shaped, manipulated, and even erased to suit individual and collective interests. Unjust memory, in Nguyen's analysis, often involves the oversimplification and distortion of historical events. It may arise from the imposition of a singular narrative that ignores the diverse experiences and perspectives of those involved in the conflict. On the other hand, just memory, as advocated by Nguyen, seeks a more inclusive and nuanced approach to remembering. It involves acknowledging the complexity of the war and its aftermath, recognizing the varied voices and experiences of individuals on all sides, and resisting the temptation to reduce the narrative to a simplistic and one-sided portrayal. Just memory encourages empathy and a deeper understanding of the human cost of war. By challenging unjust memory and promoting a more just and comprehensive understanding of historical events, individuals and societies can work towards a more inclusive and empathetic commemoration of the past.

In this sense, the present study offers a critical examination of the construction of memory and its malleability in the context of war and conflict. This exploration delves into the complexities of human behavior and the propensity to glorify one's actions while disregarding the consequences for others. "The problem of just and unjust memory is of special concern when we are confronted with the unimaginable barbarity of the last century" (Kobyliński 2020: 2). Significantly, the novel's nested narrative structure lays bare the strikingly similar and self-serving nature of their narratives. This revelation indicates that these parties are not as distinct from each other as they claim, especially when it comes to their efforts to manipulate memory. By incorporating quotes from these different groups, the narrator exposes the startling resemblance in style, vocabulary, and form of their words, thereby revealing that their ideologies are nothing more than recycled versions of one another. The examination of these parties' narratives within the nested narrative form of the novel unveils a profound truth about the nature of memory manipulation.

2. A METATEXTUAL CRITIQUE OF MEMORY IN *THE SYMPATHIZER*

As the narrator juxtaposes various identical narratives from different sides, the duplicity and artifice of their claims become evident. Their attempts to present

themselves as exceptional or unique are exposed as mere illusions, as their words and ideologies mirror each other with astonishing consistency. By laying out this juxtaposition of narratives, *The Sympathizer* delves into the intricacies of power dynamics and the politics of memory. The use of a nested narrative form provides a nuanced examination of how dominant groups attempt to influence historical narratives to maintain their control over societal perceptions and memory. In other words, they aim at constructing a discourse which “is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, and to construct a center” (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 112).

Furthermore, in this novel, the portrayal of the parties’ striking similarities prompts readers to question the reliability and authenticity of historical accounts. In this sense, it is worth mentioning that literary texts are filled with contradictions/faultlines which in turn will question the dominant, Sinfield believes:

Deviancy returns from abjection by deploying just those terms that relegated it there in the first place. A dominant discourse cannot prevent abuse of its resources. Even a text that aspires to contain a subordinate perspective must first bring it into visibility; even to misrepresent, one must present. (Sinfield 1992: 48)

Accordingly, it invites critical reflection on the complex relationship between history, memory, and identity, urging readers to be vigilant in scrutinizing the narratives presented by those in power. In the context of Sinfield’s ideas, one can consider how the dominant discourse seeks to control and define notions of freedom and independence. The power dynamics are evident in the act of representation —America not only asserts its role as a proponent of freedom but also shapes the narrative to convey a benevolent stance. However, Sinfield’s insights suggest that even within this dominant discourse, there is the potential for subversion or deviation. The subordinate perspective, even if initially relegated to the margins, can employ language and representation to challenge or reshape the dominant narrative. A US congressman in *The Sympathizer* says:

Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her [America’s] heart, her benedictions and her prayers be... She [...] is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all (Nguyen 2015: 259).

On another occasion, the congressman takes the stage to address a gathering of Vietnamese refugees, culminating his speech with an enthusiastic chant of “Vietnam Muon Nam!” (“Vietnam Forever!”). Witnessing this display, Sonny, one of the characters of the novel, shares a comment with the narrator, “Funny, [...] [i]t’s the same slogan the Communist Party uses” (Nguyen 2015: 119-120), expressing a sense of irony in the situation. Sonny astutely points out the paradox that both the American politician and the South Vietnamese refugees

are employing the same patriotic language that their self-proclaimed adversaries once used.

In this poignant moment, the narrator draws attention to the constructed nature of this practice, shedding light on the manipulation of memory and the reinforcement of biased narratives. Implicitly, the narrator condemns such actions as an extension of unjust memory, which “do not point to a just approach to the past, but to an unjust one, defined by what philosopher Paul Ricoeur calls ‘memory abusively summoned by those in power’” (Nguyen 2016: 27). Moreover, unjust memory involves the use of self-aggrandizing language that falsely portrays one’s own group as human while dehumanizing the “other”.

By presenting a juxtaposition of patriotic language used by both sides, the novel challenges readers to confront the constructed nature of historical narratives and encourages a more critical examination of the ways in which memory is shaped and used for political purposes. In this regard, Nguyen states that

the response to unjust, repetitive memory is not to cease remembering an event that has been chewed over relentlessly, but to reconsider how we remember that event, who controls the industries of memory, and who abuses memory. (Nguyen 2016: 27)

Despite the apparent similarities in attempting to influence historical narratives, the parties involved—Americans, South Vietnamese, and North Vietnamese—do not possess equal power in their respective memory industries. The distribution of power is imbalanced, leading to varying impacts of their competing memory campaigns. Notably, the United States, with its hegemonic might, employs a global campaign of unjust memory. It portrays itself as a heroic defender of liberty while rationalizing the extensive and destructive military intervention in Vietnam over several decades:

Movies were America’s way of softening up the rest of the world, Hollywood relentlessly assaulting the mental defenses of audiences with the hit, the smash, the spectacle, the blockbuster, and, yes, even the box office bomb. It mattered not what story these audiences watched. The point was that it was the American story they watched and loved, up until the day that they themselves might be bombed by the planes they had seen in American movies. (Nguyen 2015: 99)

However, *The Sympathizer* challenges the perpetuation of the hegemonized narratives that depict the Third World as helpless victims and the First World as heroic saviors. “It is the art of recalling a past event which is radical and non-normative especially in its “hegemonic storytelling and multi-perspectival discourse” (Etim 2020: 43). Instead, the novel peels back the layers of US imperialism, revealing how the United States’ memory industry sanitizes the history of its intervention in Vietnam. By exposing the dark underbelly of US imperialism, *The Sympathizer* calls for a reevaluation of historical representation

to shed light on the impact of imperialistic actions on the lives of those affected by military interventions.

You know how Americans deal with it? They pretend they are eternally innocent no matter how many times they lose their innocence. The problem is that those who insist on their innocence believe anything they do is just. At least we who believe in our own guilt know what dark things we can do. (Nguyen 2015: 107)

Furthermore, the novel's exploration of memory industries highlights the role of literature in counteracting unjust memory campaigns (Nguyen 2016: 322). Stephan Greenblatt states that

it is important to note that moments in which individuals feel most completely in control may, under careful scrutiny, prove to be moments of the most intense structural determination, while moments in which the social structure applies the fiercest pressure on the individual may in fact be precisely those moments in which individuals are exercising the most stubborn will to autonomous movement. (Greenblatt 2010: 251-252)

Significantly, through storytelling and representation, authors —like the narrator of *The Sympathizer* who is an unnamed protagonist, often referred to as “the Captain”, and a complex and conflicted character who serves as a double agent during the Vietnam War— can expose hidden truths, create faultlines and bring to light the voices of marginalized and oppressed communities. The novel commences by narrating a significant event rarely portrayed in popular US depictions of the Vietnam War, which typically avoid highlighting the failures of the US military. This event pertains to the United States' defeat at the hands of Ho Chi Minh's army, marked by the inglorious exodus of US troops from Saigon in April 1975. The narrator goes on to vividly describe not only the US military's failure to provide the necessary resources for a safe evacuation but also its cowardice in hastily retreating from the country, leaving the South Vietnamese people to fend for themselves in a time of great peril. By using the collective pronoun “we”, the narrator bridges the divide between the observer and the observed, emphasizing shared humanity and solidarity with those affected by the US military's actions.

Furthermore, this opening scene sets the tone for the novel's exploration of memory, identity, and the complexities of the Vietnam War. It creates faultlines in the readers' minds to question dominant narratives and reconsider the perspectives of marginalized communities whose experiences are often overshadowed by unjust memories of historical narratives.

As the narrative unfolds, the opening scene lays the foundation for the narrator's journey of self-discovery and the examination of his own role in the events that transpire. It provides a glimpse into the complexities of memory and the subjective nature of historical representation, urging readers to critically engage with the narratives that shape collective understanding.

We could not believe that the Americans —our friends, our benefactors, our protectors— had spurned our request to send more money. And what would we have done with that money? Buy the ammunition, gas, and spare parts for the weapons, planes, and tanks the same Americans had bestowed on us for free. Having given us the needles, they now perversely no longer supplied the dope. (Nguyen 2015: 4)

Through the use of dashes to emphasize the repeated phrase “our friends, our benefactors, our protectors”, the narrator adopts a bitter and sardonic tone, intentionally undermining the legitimacy of these descriptors. The act of abandoning the South Vietnamese people, especially after rendering them reliant on US weapons, stands in stark contrast to what one would expect from a true friend, benefactor, or protector. This contradiction serves as a significant critique of the idealized image of American heroism perpetuated by the US memory industry.

Furthermore, the use of dashes in this manner creates a visual interruption in the flow of the sentence, drawing attention to the discrepancy between the professed role of the United States as a benevolent force and the harsh truth of its actions on the ground. By subverting the legitimacy of these descriptors through bitter sarcasm, the narrator highlights the moral ambiguity and contradictions inherent in the relationship between powerful nations and their allies. This rhetorical choice calls into question the selective representation of historical events which also equates American intervention in Vietnam to French colonialism, thus further disrupting the narrative of America’s “good intentions” in Vietnam:

Hadn’t the French and the Americans done exactly the same? Once revolutionaries themselves, they had become imperialists, colonizing and occupying our defiant little land, taking away our freedom in the name of saving us. Our revolution took considerably longer than theirs, and was considerably bloodier, but we made up for lost time. When it came to learning the worst habits of our French masters and their American replacements, we quickly proved ourselves the best. (Nguyen 2015: 205)

An illustration of the nested narration within the novel involves the firsthand account of Claude, an American CIA agent, recounting his escape from Vietnam. The nested narration in this instance provides a compelling and intimate perspective on the chaotic and tense atmosphere during the evacuation. Claude’s firsthand account highlights the dire consequences of the United States’ military defeat in Vietnam. Moreover, the inclusion of Claude’s narrative within the larger nested structure of the novel enriches the portrayal of the exodus from multiple viewpoints. The nested narration further prompts readers to question the ethical implications of such actions and to consider the broader impact of war and conflict on human behavior.

The people in front of me couldn’t see I was an American and no one was turning around just because I was tapping them on the shoulder, so I yanked them by the hair, or pulled them by the ear, or grabbed them by the shirt collar to haul them out of my way. I’ve never

done anything like that in my life. I was too proud to scream at first, but it didn't take long before I was screaming, too. Let me through, I'm an American, goddammit. I finally got myself to that wall, and when those marines reached down and grabbed my hand and pulled me up, I damn near cried again. [...] I was never so ashamed in my life, but I was also never so goddamn glad to be an American, either. (Nguyen 2015: 84)

In this revealing moment, Claude candidly admits to acts of cowardice that challenge the prevailing heroic image of American agents, who are often depicted as champions bringing the "light" of democratic liberty to the supposedly "uncivilized" East. He attempts to justify his use of violence by leveraging his US nationality, yet his expression of shame over his actions suggests that he recognizes his citizenship offers no valid reason for pride. This admission sheds light on the falseness of the United States' unjust memory practices, which aim to deny the possibility that an American intelligence officer like Claude could exhibit such levels of cravenness.

In presenting an American intelligence officer grappling with moral dilemmas and demonstrating vulnerability, the novel challenges monolithic and dehumanizing depictions of individuals from different nations. It encourages readers to move beyond simplistic stereotypes and to recognize the shared humanity and fallibility of all individuals involved in historical events.

The Sympathizer persistently challenges the United States' unjust memory industry by portraying the narrator's tumultuous transition to refugee life, defying the smooth and integrative experience often depicted in popular US narratives. Instead of finding a welcoming refuge, the narrator faces the harsh reality of routine racist comments from xenophobic Americans, which further exacerbate his psychological distress. In this sense the novel calls for what has been called by Toni Morrison the process of rememory —thinking back:

It is only through a process of rememory that readers can move beyond blaming trauma victims, understand our complicity in maintaining an unjust status quo, and possibly exorcise the ghost of slavery. (Gras 2020: 274)

Moreover, by problematizing the United States' unjust memory industry, the novel calls for a more truthful and empathetic representation of refugee experiences. It highlights the need to confront historical amnesia and to acknowledge the human stories behind the statistics and geopolitical narratives.

I was thankful, truly! But I was also one of those unfortunate cases who could not help but wonder whether my need for American charity was due to my having first been the recipient of American aid. (Nguyen 2015: 62)

Through the portrayal of his distressing refugee journey as a direct outcome of US intervention, the narrator boldly challenges the misrepresentation propagated by the US memory industry regarding American involvement in Vietnam, which is often depicted as purely humanitarian. By shedding light on his own lived experiences, he deconstructs the articulated narrative and brings

to the forefront the grim reality of the consequences of such intervention. This serves as a powerful testimony against the prevailing hegemonic discourse of a benevolent intervention, debunking the attempts to whitewash the darker aspects of history.

As the narrator navigates his challenging journey of survival and adaptation, he reveals the intricate web of cause and effect that has been obscured by the memory industry's selective portrayal. Through his words, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in conflicts and their aftermath, prompting a reevaluation of our perspectives on historical events. Nguyen states that:

I did not want to write this book as a way of explaining the humanity of Vietnamese. Toni Morrison says in *Beloved* that to have to explain yourself to white people distorts you because you start from a position of assuming your inhumanity or lack of humanity in other people's eyes. Rather than writing a book that tries to affirm humanity, which is typically the position that minority writers are put into, the book starts from the assumption that we are human, and then goes on to prove that we're also inhuman at the same time. (Nguyen 2016: 227)

One striking instance that exemplifies the United States' adept utilization of its memory industry to portray a triumphant and heroic image revolves around a Hollywood movie centered on the Vietnam War, with the narrator acting as a consultant. Occurring in the later part of the novel, this episode is a significant moment in the narrative, shedding light on the manipulation of memory and representation in the context of the Vietnam War. It also reveals how the United States constructs and controls its narratives, especially those related to its involvement in Vietnam. However, its purpose extends beyond a mere retelling of historical events, as it unapologetically employs various tactics of unjust memory manipulation. Consequently, the narrator is led to bitter contemplation of the Vietnam War, recognizing it as a pivotal moment where history would be rewritten not by the victors, but rather by the defeated, thanks to an immensely potent propaganda machine (Nguyen 2015: 134). This eye-opening revelation brings to the forefront the disconcerting reality of how historical events can be deliberately reshaped and distorted by those in power, leveraging the intricacies of the memory industry.

The ramifications of this manipulative cinematic endeavor transcend mere entertainment, significantly influencing how history is perceived and remembered by the masses. The narrator's bitter reflection on the Vietnam War underscores the unsettling potential of propaganda to mold collective memory and foster a skewed interpretation of past events. Nguyen writes that "the first war where the losers would write history instead of the victors, courtesy of the most efficient propaganda machine ever created" (Nguyen 2015: 134).

Through this approach, the novel skillfully directs metatextual focus towards the process of constructing truth via narrative, highlighting that those

who possess the ability to manipulate historical memory hold the reins of truth itself. In essence, the novel serves as a profound commentary on the intricate interplay between storytelling and the shaping of reality, underlining the significance of controlling historical narratives as a means of asserting authority over what is perceived as true. It serves as a stark reminder that history, as we come to understand it, is often the product of selective storytelling and strategic omissions, wielded by those in positions of influence. The subtle message it conveys is that the construction of truth through narrative is a power play in which competing voices vie for dominance, seeking to establish their version of events as the definitive reality.

By raising awareness of the constructed nature of historical narratives, the novel empowers readers to approach information critically and to consider the underlying motivations behind the stories they encounter.

See the view. I'm talking about the Hollywood sign right there. Never get tired of it. Like the Word of God just dropped down, plunked on the hills, and the Word was Hollywood. Didn't God say let there be light first. What's a movie but light. Can't have a movie without light. And then words. Seeing that sign reminds me to write every morning. What. All right, so it doesn't say Hollywood. You got me. Good eye. Thing's falling to pieces. One O's half fallen and the other O's fallen altogether. The word's gone to shit. So what. You still get the meaning. (Nguyen 2015: 129)

In this sense, the primacy of the physical sign diminishes in comparison to the profound implications of what it represents. In other words, the signified carries greater significance than the signifier. Under the narrator's penetrating gaze, the Hollywood sign's disrepair takes precedence over its conventional meaning. By showcasing such contrasting interpretations of the same signifier, *The Sympathizer* offers a metatextual analysis that exposes the inherent faults of writing as a medium. While words can indeed function as political symbols, as evidenced by the Hollywood sign, they also exhibit unreliability as signifiers, susceptible to deconstruction, as demonstrated by the sign's state of decay.

3. DISTORTED NARRATIVES AND UNJUST MEMORY

The novel astutely represents the deteriorating sign as a reflection of both the constructed nature of language and its potential for deconstruction, revealing the faultlines within the machinery of Hollywood's narrative construction. In doing so, it draws attention to the power dynamics at play and raises thought-provoking inquiries regarding the potential subversion of the propagandistic narratives propagated by the US memory industry. In essence, the novel unveils the complexities of discourse construction, where the interplay between signified and signifier shapes our understanding of reality. It sheds light on the hegemony exercised by language and narrative, emphasizing that what may appear as a cohesive and persuasive message may indeed harbor fractures and

contradictions beneath the surface. The novel employs language not just as a means of conveying a narrative but as a dynamic force that shapes and challenges dominant discourses. The allusive language of the narrator becomes a method of resistance, a way of reconceptualizing prevailing narratives, and a means of expressing the multiplicity of perspectives present in the novel.

The narrator of *The Sympathizer* reflects these multiple perspectives through not only his heteroglossic character, as a mixed-race double agent, but also his highly allusive language. In fact, I argue that Nguyen's allusions operate as linguistic sites of memory, through which the narrator implements strategies of resistance and reconceptualizes hegemonic paradigms. (Stanley 2020: 286)

Moreover, it implicitly claims that no narrative is impervious to deconstruction, and beneath the veneer of polished stories lie opportunities to question and challenge hegemonic ideologies. Unjust memory is not exclusive to the United States, as other nations, including both the South and North Vietnamese governments, also partake in advancing self-serving narratives. These governments endeavor to construct memory industries that mirror the self-aggrandizing tendencies of the United States, albeit with less extensive reach due to their constrained power and resources. The novel serves as a cautionary tale, illustrating the far-reaching implications of memory industries that prioritize self-serving narratives over objective truths. The narrator highlights the construction of

highly complex and contingent commemoration efforts to counter an erasure of the history of the Republic of Vietnam while denouncing the US betrayal of its former allies as well as the failure of Vietnamese communism. (Nguyen 2015: 137)

On the other hand, South Vietnamese refugees aim to "remember the Republic of Vietnam as only free and democratic, North Vietnam as only ruthless and communist." (Nguyen 2015: 138)

The General, a prominent figure in *The Sympathizer*, stands resolutely committed to the ideals of the Republic while harboring a deep-seated aversion to communism, a disposition that renders him vulnerable to confirmation bias. This cognitive tendency leads him to readily embrace any information aligning with his anti-communist convictions, without subjecting it to critical evaluation. As the narrative unfolds, the General's unshakable faith in the righteousness of the Republic intertwines with his inclination to accept information about the refugees in the newspaper, uncritically: "evidence that those communist bastards are purging the country!" (Nguyen 2015: 160).

By employing a nested narrative centered on characters from North Vietnam, it becomes evident that the postwar regime is engaging in a comparable endeavor of distorting just memory. This orchestrated effort portrays every action executed under the banner of communism as valorous, while painting any endeavors aimed at resisting communism as malevolent. This skewed and

unilateral portrayal not only overlooks the numerous instances of human rights transgressions perpetrated by the leadership in North Vietnam but also perpetuates an unjust representation of historical events. In this sense, Caroline Kieu-Linh Valverde states that the nascent communist regime introduced a series of coercive measures including “confiscation of property or land, discrimination in the workforce and education, detainment, incarceration, and expulsion to desolate lands known as New Economic Zones” (Kieu-Linh Valverde 2012: 9). Amidst perpetrating such acts of brutality, the postwar administration strived to portray itself as a heroic defender, attempting to craft a facade of valor and righteousness putting “great emphasis on centralizing and controlling commemorative practices” in order to construct an articulated discourse using “a genealogy of heroic resistance wars against foreign powers” (Kwon 2006: 4).

Following the capture of Saigon, the postwar regime dedicated meticulous efforts to articulate this perception. In this regard, they aimed at establishing exhibition sites that openly showcased the heinous acts carried out by the United States. Subsequently, these sites underwent a transformation into museums, effectively solidifying the narrative to memorialize “the nation’s two-thousand-year history of continuous uprisings against invaders, and invincibility in the face of powerful enemies” (Schwenkel 2009: 152); accordingly, elements were articulated into moments in the new discourse of the official national history that “is not only defensive in action, but also victorious in outcome, and thus elides stories of suffering and defeat” (Schwenkel 2009: 152).

Throughout his journey, the narrator is apprehended by North Vietnamese soldiers while executing his mission to return to Vietnam. Subsequently, he endures a grueling year within the confines of a reeducation camp, subjected to incarceration and torment inflicted by his fellow communists. Throughout this nightmarish ordeal, a sobering realization dawns upon the narrator: the North Vietnamese government perpetuates the very same egocentric narratives and authoritative methodologies once employed by their Western precursors. The rationale behind this paradox is undeniably disconcerting. The commandant justifies the incongruity by asserting that “not all comrades have the same level of ideological consciousness” (Nguyen 2015: 321). However, this explanation carries a troubling undertone, for it delineates a hierarchical framework rooted in varying degrees of enlightenment. This hierarchical structure lays bare the hollowness of the North Vietnamese government’s professed communist ideology.

One of the most distinct instances of metatextuality within the novel emerges when the reeducation camp’s commandant overtly exerts authority over the composition of the narrator’s confession. The narrator characterizes the commandant as a “diligent editor, always ready to note my many errata and digressions and always urging me to delete, excise, reword, or add” (Nguyen 2015: 170). The underlying issue lies in the narrator’s refusal to unreservedly pledge allegiance to the North Vietnamese government, prompting the

commandant's continuous efforts to mold the text to better fit the government's self-interested storyline (Nguyen 2015: 308).

This compelling moment underscores the power struggle inherent in the act of storytelling. The commandant's imposition of edits serves as a metaphorical extension of the broader narrative manipulation that pervades the regime's actions, reminding the readers of what Hollywood does. As the narrator grapples with maintaining his authenticity in the face of such coercion, the reader is confronted with the complex interplay between narrative, control, and the quest for individual expression. The clash between personal truth and external demands resonates throughout this interaction, highlighting the pervasive influence of authoritative forces on the crafting of stories and, by extension, on the shaping of historical accounts. The commandant states that "confessions are as much about style as content, as the Red Guards have shown us. All we ask for is a certain way with words" (Nguyen 2015: 312).

By insisting that the narrator echo the verbiage of fellow communists, the commandant aims to suppress the counterbalancing viewpoints of the Western and South Vietnamese origins that find expression in the narrator's text. The commandant perceives the presence of these alternative perspectives as potential underminers of the ideological stronghold that the North Vietnamese government seeks to maintain, which fuels his determination to quash any deviations from the sanctioned narrative.

In essence, the commandant's demand operates as a tactic to silence dissenting voices and enforce conformity within the realm of expression. The confrontation between the commandant's authoritative imposition and the narrator's inclination towards diversified representation serves as a microcosm of the larger battle for narrative supremacy which is also referred to as the "war in memory" (Nguyen 2016: 25). As the commandant strives to maintain the purity of the government's version of events, the narrator's struggle for individual expression becomes emblematic of the perennial tension between official accounts and the multifaceted realities they often seek to repress. In this regard, he says:

You have traveled to strange lands and been exposed to some dangerous ideas. It wouldn't do to bring infectious ideas into a country unused to them. Think of the people, insulated for so long from foreign ideas. Exposure could lead to a real catastrophe for minds that aren't ready for them. (Nguyen 2015: 170)

Moreover, the commandant reveals a shared inclination with the Hollywood Auteur and the South Vietnamese General. Each of them perceives themselves as possessing the prerogative to wield authoritative control over the shaping of prevailing narratives —albeit constrained to the distinct spheres of their influence. In an analogous manner to the Hollywood Auteur's claim over cinematic storytelling and the South Vietnamese General's grasp on military narrative, the commandant endeavors to impose his perspective as the prevailing

voice within the confined realm of the reeducation camp. His role, much like those of his counterparts, entails not only the construction of a dominant narrative/discourse but also the suppression of any competing viewpoints that might challenge the orthodoxy he seeks to establish. As Nguyen (2016) states “this is especially the case when forgetting is not accidental but deliberate, strategic, even malicious—in other words, disremembering” (Nguyen 2016: 50).

While the Hollywood Auteur shapes stories for the screen and the South Vietnamese General steers the discourse of war, the commandant commands the narrative within the microcosm of the reeducation camp. This dynamic power struggle between the wielders of narrative authority and those seeking to express divergent voices serves as an allegory for broader societal struggles over historical representation and the unyielding quest for control over collective memory which would be “a site of democratic contest, of vulnerability, power, resistance, and interest rather than a sovereign locale of legitimacy and identity” (Booth 2008: 258).

While these layered accounts from North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, and American perspectives diverge in their portrayal of adversaries, they remain rooted in a common narrative framework that elevates their respective communities as valiant protagonists engaged in the struggle for liberation. As an individual existing on the fringes of society, the narrator becomes an acute observer of the intricate process through which these self-serving narratives are meticulously constructed. Empowered by this perceptive insight, the narrator embarks on a compelling endeavor to rewrite/deconstruct the historical discourse of the war through a more ethical and balanced lens, one characterized by the principles of just memory.

Immersed within the heteroglossia of different/clashing voices, the narrator arrives at a profound realization. Across the spectrum of participants embroiled in the war, a recurring pattern emerges: all factions, despite their differences, engage in morally reprehensible acts of violence, which they paradoxically endeavor to legitimize as acts of bravery. Amidst this labyrinth of narratives, a poignant sentiment envelops the narrator—a sentiment rooted in sympathy towards these parties. In the embodiment of this sympathy, the narrator actively embodies a core tenet elucidated by Nguyen in “Nothing Ever Dies”. This tenet, fundamental to the ethos of genuine just memory, underscores a crucial aspect of the human condition—the recognition that humanity inherently encompasses both humane and inhumane dimensions: “Innocence and guilt. These are cosmic issues. We’re all innocent on one level and guilty on another” (Nguyen 2015: 61). He also states that “being human also means being inhuman”, a sentiment that encapsulates the duality of human existence (Nguyen 2016: 88).

Nguyen issues a cautionary reminder, asserting that a mere act of remembering “the humanity of others” and forgetting “their inhumanity” falls short of cultivating a meaningful just memory (Nguyen 2016: 114). Such an approach, he warns, may inadvertently result in a superficially benevolent

stance, reducing the other to a mere object of sympathy rather than engaging with the intricate facets of their humanity (Nguyen 2016: 114). It is in this sense that White has stated that “what a culture remembers and what it chooses to forget are intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony” (White 2007: 380). To embark on a truly ethical undertaking of commemoration, it becomes imperative to veer away from oversimplification and embrace the complexity inherent in acknowledging the other. Nguyen underscores that the other, akin to ourselves, possesses the capacity for both “dying and killing, of tragedy and guilt, of the whole panoply of human and inhuman action and feeling” (Nguyen 2016: 115). In line with Nguyen’s discerning insight, the pursuit of just memory necessitates a profound recognition of the intricate interplay between humanity’s diverse dimensions.

Regarding *The Sympathizer*, the narrator adeptly embodies this form of ethical acknowledgment, employing a perspective that casts the American, South Vietnamese, and North Vietnamese entities as inherently human due to their potential to manifest inhuman tendencies. This strategic approach serves as a pivotal instrument, aiming to reconfigure the Vietnam War’s historical narrative through the prism of just memory. These parties, as underscored by Nguyen, are all implicated in instances of inhumanity that reverberate through the narrative. Instances of torture, murder, and rape serve as stark demonstrations of this shared propensity for inhuman actions across the factions. In delving into the subsequent analysis, the multifaceted layers of inhumanity will be thoroughly explored, juxtaposed against the backdrop of human agency and the potential for compassion. The narrator says: “I, for one, am a person who believes that the world would be a better place if the word ‘murder’ made us mumble as much as the word ‘masturbation’” (Nguyen 2015: 50). The protagonist finds himself thrust into a harrowing role where he becomes a reluctant witness, at times even a participant, and tragically, a firsthand survivor of appalling acts of violence:

supersonic fighters, napalm, white phosphorous artillery shells, aircraft carriers, strategic bombers, herbicides, and helicopters equipped with so-called miniguns that could fire six thousand rounds per minute in a blaze of lightning and thunder. (Nguyen 2016: 170)

In spite of the undeniable and compelling proof highlighting the inhumane actions carried out by these factions, the narrator remains steadfast in his capacity for empathy towards all of them. This empathy may stem from his recognition of the principle of dialogized heteroglossia that characterizes the complexity of human interactions. Rather than succumbing to the simplistic binary reasoning inherent in an unjust memory, as articulated by these disparate parties, the narrator resolutely refuses to embrace their logic. While they justify their own violent deeds, they vehemently condemn their adversaries for resorting to similar methods. In direct contrast, the narrator emerges as a beacon of an alternative ethical perspective rooted in just memory. This perspective is grounded in his remarkable ability to extend sympathy even in the face of

witnessing actions that deviate from humane norms. In this regard, he remembers his mother's saying: "blurring the lines between us and them can be a worthy behavior" (Nguyen 2015: 36).

The narrator's journey towards embracing the profound depths of just memory remains incomplete until he undergoes a harrowing experience of torture, representing one of the most extreme manifestations of brutality. The doctor collaborating with Man, who is a character in the novel and plays a significant role in introducing the prisoner (the narrator) to the study group, unveils a thought-provoking rationale behind subjecting the narrator to the torment of sleep deprivation. This method is strategically employed to facilitate a transformative perspective shift—encouraging the narrator to meticulously

observe himself as someone else. This is most crucial, for we are the ones most able to know ourselves and yet the most unable to know ourselves. It's as if our noses are pressed up against the pages of a book, the words right in front of us but which we cannot read. (Nguyen 2015: 342)

In this critical juncture, the narrative unveils a fascinating interplay between the physical and the intellectual, wherein the concept of just memory intertwines with the act of self-examination through textual interpretation. This intriguing convergence of psychological exploration and the manipulation of physical boundaries underscores the multifaceted nature of the narrator's quest for an all-encompassing understanding of just memory.

Given that torture is transformed into a textual construct, it comes as no astonishment that following the narrator's endurance of this excruciating ordeal, he stumbles upon a rhetorical revelation: "every truth meant at least two things, that slogans were empty suits draped on the corpse of an idea" (Nguyen 2015: 371). In this sense, he at last comprehends the futility that underscores the communist revolution:

I understood, at last, how our revolution had gone from being the vanguard of political change to the rearguard hoarding power. In this transformation, we were not unusual. Hadn't the French and the Americans done exactly the same? Once revolutionaries themselves, they had become imperialists, colonizing and occupying our defiant little land, taking away our freedom in the name of saving us. Our revolution took considerably longer than theirs, and was considerably bloodier, but we made up for lost time. When it came to learning the worst habits of our French masters and their American replacements, we quickly proved ourselves the best. Besides a man with no face, only a man of two minds could get this joke, about how a revolution fought for independence and freedom could make those things worth less than nothing. (Nguyen 2015: 205)

Herein, the narrator boldly reveals the insidious influence of language aimed at establishing hegemony above all others. The lofty ideals of liberation and autonomy, he comes to recognize, reverberate with emptiness within a system—be it colonial, communist, or republican—that relies on rigid dualistic frameworks and an unwillingness to acknowledge the humanity in others and

the inhumanity within oneself. Notably, he embraces a newfound sense of self characterized by duality and compassion, transcending the confines of group allegiance and, by extension, ideological boundaries. This transformative realization liberates him from the constraints of seeking validation solely through affiliation, as he finds solace in a broader identity that exists beyond the narrow confines of predefined groups. This journey towards self-discovery underscores the power of his unyielding empathy and situates him as an individual who transcends the limitations imposed by societal divisions, embarking on a profound quest for authenticity and a more comprehensive understanding of his place within the intricate tapestry of human experience.

As the reader moves toward the end of novel, the narrator uses the pronoun “we” instead of “I” to signify the collective unconscious. Through a transformative process of self-reconstruction, the narrator embarks on a journey of renewal—a path made attainable only after enduring the disintegration inflicted by torture. Elaine Scarry, shedding light on this agonizing process, elucidates that torture wields the power to unravel an individual’s sense of self and the world they inhabit (Scarry 1985: 35). The transformative metamorphosis that emerges from the wreckage of torment stands as a testament to the narrator’s resilience, unveiling the intricate tapestry that binds the realms of physical agony, linguistic expression, and the evolution of selfhood. In essence, the harrowing journey through the crucible of pain serves as a catalyst for the narrator’s profound reimagining of himself—a narrative of rebirth that resonates with the capacity of language to mold and reshape the contours of individual identity.

In the pursuit of attaining a state of just memory, the imperative emerges to disavow the dichotomy between self and other. By refashioning his own being and casting aside the limiting constraints of binary identity politics, the narrator ventures into a realm ripe with potential—the realm of effecting a genuinely ethical act of commemoration. This profound endeavor crystallizes in the form of the narrator’s ultimate manuscript, a testament encapsulated within the very fabric of *The Sympathizer*. He describes this literary opus as his ultimate endeavor to present a reflection of “ourselves against all those who sought to represent us” (Nguyen 2015: 380), thereby invoking a powerful narrative of reclamation. By dismantling the artificial divisions perpetuated by identity politics, the narrator embarks on a transformative journey that aligns his internal essence with the broader landscape of shared human experience.

4. CONCLUSION

Within the pages of *The Sympathizer*, the narrator’s voice resounds as an unyielding testament to the resilience of memory and the potency of storytelling in reclaiming the narrative from those who seek to manipulate and dictate it. In this profound act of self-expression, the narrator not only embarks on a quest for

personal liberation but, more significantly, contributes to the reclamation of a shared history—a testament to the power of language and narrative in shaping the contours of just memory.

In its essence, *The Sympathizer* provides a blueprint that beckons us to contemplate a transformative paradigm shift. It extends an invitation to venture beyond the confines of self-serving doctrines, urging us to embark on a visionary journey towards envisioning novel constructs of societal cohesion. Rooted in the principles of mutual acknowledgment and a shared communal awareness, this narrative subtly impels us to transcend the limitations of established ideologies.

Within the narrative tapestry of *The Sympathizer*, a potent template unfurls—one that holds the potential to redefine our approach to social engagement. The narrative's resonance lies in its capacity to ignite a contemplative exploration, inviting us to transcend the boundaries erected by narrow agendas. By embracing a perspective fueled by collective consciousness and a profound recognition of one another's humanity, the narrative unveils a compelling path towards forging connections that transcend the limitations of the self.

Within the tapestry of *The Sympathizer*, a potent template emerges—one that not only redefines our approach to social engagement but also embodies multiplicity. This narrative invites contemplation, encouraging us to transcend narrow boundaries and embrace a perspective fueled by collective consciousness. In doing so, it unveils a compelling path towards forging connections that transcend individual limitations, illustrating the intricate relationship between memory and the multiplicity inherent in shaping a just and inclusive understanding of the past. In essence, *The Sympathizer* serves as a lodestar guiding us towards an alternate vision of society—one founded upon the transformative power of mutual recognition and the collective synergy of shared consciousness.

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