

Historical Writing of *The Sympathizer* in the Context of Postmodernism

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Abstract: *From the aspect of historical narrative in the postmodern context, this paper examines the novel based on postmodern theories and explores the novel's historical presentation. First, Viet Thanh Nguyen compares major historical events with the stories of minor characters, presenting major historical events from the perspective of socially marginalized groups and pointing directly to the obscuring of the disadvantaged groups by grand narratives. Second, Viet Thanh Nguyen employs multiple postmodern narrative techniques to deconstruct the discourse hegemony of grand narratives. Non-linear narratives, open-ended endings reveal the textual nature of history. Third, Viet Thanh Nguyen constructs a multidimensional and plural history from both individual and collective aspects, resisting the unified narrative of history with the memories of individuals outside the mainstream, while a collective is a collective of individuals, and the memories of marginalized groups become a supplement to the official historical record, bringing history closer to the real past.*

Keywords: *Viet Thanh Nguyen; The Sympathizer; historical writing; postmodernism; subjectivity*

1. Introduction

Vietnamese-American novelist and cultural critic, Viet Thanh Nguyen's debut novel, *The Sympathizer*, was published in 2015, and won Pulitzer Prize for fiction the following year. The novel depicts the catastrophic results ensuing the Vietnam War observed by an unnamed agent. The unnamed narrator, who is an illegitimate child of Vietnamese and French descent and a scholarship student receiving American higher education, tells his life story of serving as a captain in the South Vietnamese secret police and sending information on South Vietnam's military actions to northern Vietnam commissar during the War. When South Vietnam is defeated, the narrator follows the South Vietnamese General to flee Saigon for Los Angeles and carries on the espionage there. When his bosom friend Bon volunteers to join the advance party to go back homeland, the narrator decides to use his double identities to protect him. Unsurprisingly, they are captured by the North Vietnamese army and put into a reeducation camp as prisoners. The North Vietnamese superiors suspect his loyalty and force him to confess his experience as an agent. He also undergoes inhumane abuse in the camp before finally being set free.

As Viet Thanh Nguyen puts "All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield and the second time in memory" ^[1], his novel shows his dedication to retelling Vietnamese memory of the Vietnam War and the fallout of that war. Nguyen's creation follows the postmodern philosophy of history and emphasizes the subversion of the objective, unified, and truthful history to rediscover those who are deemed to be insignificant and diverse interpretations of historical events. The Vietnam War stories not only should be told by American soldiers, but those Vietnamese refugees. Refugee stories are war stories as much as soldiers' stories are. In this way, the perspective of the victims of the Vietnam War is complemented. The memory of the Vietnam War is no longer confined to the sacrifices of the United States, but encompasses the pain and struggles of all sides of the war. And thus, the reconstruction of the marginalized history is made possible.

2. Deconstruction of Grand Historical Narrative

The philosophy of modernity originates from Descartes' dichotomous model of subject and object, and binary opposition which extends from it forms the modern model of rationalism, authority, center, and unity, which provides a self-evident and reliable foundation for philosophy. Postmodernism rejects all structures based on the logic of binary oppositions and completely subverts the "metaphysics of presence". What Lyotard calls meta-narrative is also a manifestation of the philosophical ideology that

seeks orderliness and unity in the way it is narrated, forming the discursive hegemony of modernism. Modern history is a history of the development of Western capitalism from a macro perspective. Postmodernism jumps out of the limitation of the traditional binary mode of thought and criticizes the philosophical interpretations of traditional grand narrative structures and modern historiography. The postmodernist view of history is precisely the view of history produced under the trend of postmodernism, centering on the rebellion and subversion of the grand historical narratives promoted by traditional history.

Deeply influenced by post-modern historical literature, Nguyen sees through the power of grand historical narrative in obscuring the individual, and strives to rebel against it. Both the novel itself and the postmodern narrative strategies applied show his effort to deconstruct a grand historical narrative. The historical background of the novel is set following the “History” symbolised as the fall of Saigon, life in the refugee camp, guerrilla movement in Thailand and secret interrogation at the reeducation camp. But, instead of depicting heroic characters and events, Nguyen focuses on individual and ethnic “history”. Similarly, the unified, coherent, certain, and scientific historical narrative is challenged by non-linear, uncertain, untamed fictional writing in the novel.

2.1 Marginalized Historical Narrative to Deconstruct Grand Historical Narrative

“History deals primarily with social units, and with individuals only to the extent that their lives and actions are important for the society to which they belong^[2]. Therefore, the existence of ordinary people is ignored in the traditional history. To counter this historical prejudice, Nguyen on the contrary, puts marginalized nobodies in the center of History to initiate talk between “history” and “History”. To combat mainstream “History”, Nguyen creates multiple narrative voices of a marginalized group. To shake male discourse hegemony, the author portrays great woman characters.

2.1.1 Marginalized “history” VS mainstream “History”

The life experience of ordinary people is gathered to be marginalized, chaotic history. Besides the unnamed protagonist, the novel also depicts the fate of ordinary people both in Vietnam and America, who are the victims of the Vietnam War and racism.

Bon is one of the narrator’s two blood brothers, who is loyal, reliable, courageous, and has a strong sense of justice. The reason why they become blood brothers is that Bon stepped up for the odd when the narrator was bullied by older boys in lycée, and he is one of few people who has never sneered about the narrator’s heritage. Then war comes, and his father becomes the victim of the collision between South Vietnam and North Vietnam. His father was humiliated and shot to death by a communist cadre, so he joined the South Vietnamese army and swore to retaliate. As a genuine patriot, Bon is devoted to his duty and carries out missions in cold blood. When he gets the order to wipe out Vietnam Communists in the villages, he would kill anyone on that list, even the one who is suspected to be a communist or a baby communist in his mother’s belly. Hatred blinds his heart. He holds dear his allegiances to his Party but discards compassion, an essential component to human nature. South Vietnamese regime lost the battle and they had to flee Saigon to America. The day before the fall of Saigon, during the evacuation, he lost his beloved wife and young child to stray bullets of angry soldiers from their own side. Although he survives, he is devastated and completely grief-stricken. His wife and son used to be his meaning and purpose of life. “I was a son and a husband and a father and a soldier, and now I’m none of that. I’m not a man, and when a man isn’t a man, he’s nobody”^[3]. Despair and overwhelming guilt reduce him to a walking dead. “And the only way not to be nobody is to do something. So, I can either kill myself or kill someone else”^[3]. When the General plans to dispatch a small advance party to Vietnam to take the Vietnam back, Bon volunteers immediately. He knows exactly it is a suicide mission, but he regards death as an opportunity to get his pride back. Yet, his wishes run ashore, and he and the narrator are captured and put into a reeducation camp. When they finally get to walk out of the door of the reeducation camp, enduring the cruelties they suffered in the camp make them look like ghosts. They joined thousands of boat people looking for their place of refuge. Bon’s case indicates the victims of the war are not only casualties but also those who have lost their families to the warfare. It is fair to say those who have survived the war but witnessed the death of their beloved ones have to live in the shadow of grief and feel traumatized for the rest of their life. Too many people have developed similar post-war trauma that go unnoticed, especially those who are on the defeated side. It is not because they are insignificant, but because their sufferings are neglected. The American mainstream narrative of the War has its focus on the nobleness of sending troops to Vietnam, yet turns a deaf ear to the wailing of the Vietnamese people.

Sonny, owner and editor of a Vietnamese-language newspaper, attains a gravity in the Vietnamese refugees in America. Just like the narrator, he is one of those excellent Vietnamese students who get the

chance to embrace the best education and aspire to use the knowledge to help their people liberate themselves from the Americans. He is a hard-core leftist who leads the antiwar faction of Vietnamese foreign students. Against his will, years of American study have changed him to a large extent. His personality has somehow got tainted by cowardice, hypocrisy, and weakness. As a result, he decided to stay after graduation. Although with his degree, he can live comfortably in California, the cultural identity crisis along with their fellow refugees' plight has stirred him to devote himself to the well-being and solidarity of Vietnamese refugee communities. He therefore started up the first newspaper in Vietnamese, in an attempt to tie the group of people together with the news that binds. His newspaper enjoys a broad readership. But the newspaper's anti-war, leftist stance jeopardizes the interests of the General, who is planning to raise money and send troops to Vietnam and take the country back. The General thus ordered the narrator to assassinate Sonny as a precondition for joining the advance party. Sonny's life ends with a bullet in the skull. Sonny is a typical example of a well-educated immigrant who seems to have not only adapted to American society, but also climbed the social ladder and fulfilled the American Dream. But distress and a lack of a sense of belonging are what he has to battle daily.

2.1.2 Female narrative voices VS Male narrative voices

For hundreds of years, women have long been the victims of the patriarchal society, and their images are depicted by men, their rights are neglected, and their career ambitions are not taken seriously. As Beauvoir concluded one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one, a woman is disciplined to have those women features which induce them to be dependent on the opposite gender. When trying to deconstruct grand narrative, Nguyen puts plenty of women's voices into the novel and shows a different picture of women. Nguyen constructs many unique female images in the novel: some are depicted to be angels in the house, and others are no longer willing to be submissive to the patriarchal power. They more or less suffer the oppression of the patriarchy, but everyone strives to resist it in her own way. Whether it is Madame who used to be a foil to the General, or Lana who is forced to be a lady by her parents, they all present their spirit of rebellion. At the same time, the male authority representative, the General, loses power when they settle in the new country. Taking a close look at the novel, readers will find female characters are liberated from cliché, while male characters suffer an unprecedented identity crisis. In *The Sympathizer*, approaching the novel from the perspective of gender inequality, Nguyen not only discusses women's deep sufferings in a patriarchal society and the phenomenon of a once marginalized group overthrowing their traditional authoritative male counterparts.

The typical examples of women's voice are the narrator's mother, Madame, and her daughter Lana. Although they do not enjoy the social status as high as their male counterparts do, their voice deserve to be listened to. The narrator's mother is a gentle, tenacious but pathetic Vietnamese, who is seduced by a French priest at the age of thirteen. Born into a poor family, she does not have the privilege to receive an education. Instead, she is sent to work as a maid by her parents for the French priest at a very young age. The priest takes advantage of her innocent and docile nature and seduces her to sleep with him in the name of love. The following year, she gives birth to the narrator, a mixblood. During the occupation of France, there's no doubt that both the mother and her boy are regarded as the shame of the family. To make things worse, the priest never loves them. Despite all odds, his mother is not deterred by the prospect of leading a destitute, hopeless life. She does what she can to protect the narrator and explains to him that he is the gift of God. Although they are impoverished, she always sacrifices for the narrator and makes sure he has received as much love as his peers. She repeatedly encourages the narrator to believe "you're not half of anything, you're twice of everything"^[3]. The mother's endless encouragement and fierce belief make the son brave and never back down easily. Although destiny teases her, she returns to the world with love and tenacity. Decades of malnutrition ruined her health, and she died of tuberculosis one year after her son studied abroad, at the age of thirty-four. Venerable as his mother is, she struggles to create a promising future for the narrator. The French priest, on the contrary, never for a day fulfills his responsibilities as a father. In this sense, the mother takes up the role used to be a father and leads her son to grow to be a decent man. His mother is a pious angel who overturns the authority of males through her deeds.

Another example of women who have made their voices heard is Madame and her daughter Lana. Madame holds the purse string, while the General handles other affairs. Madame does not look so much like those traditional Vietnamese wives who are willing to be a foil to their husbands. She is shrewd and decisive. In March 1975, South Vietnam's northern front collapsed and the War was approaching its doomed end. At this critical moment, America as their friend, benefactor, and protector chose to turn down their request and abandon them. The General once awe-inspiring, full of confidence, now is fidgeted and panicked. Madame acts calmer than her husband and urges him to quickly decide to retreat from Saigon. Before they leave, Madame prepares money for servants who are left behind, and tries to

take as much as money they can by sewing a considerable amount of gold into the lining of her clothes and her children's. When they finally arrive in America, they are put into a refugee camp. No matter how glorious they used to be, they are now treated as refugees just like any other Vietnamese in America. The journey to assimilate into American society is bound to be fraught with difficulties. The General is continuously mired in a profound funk. It is Madame who summons all her courage and strength to deal with household drudgery as well as outside affairs. Madame "attended to these tasks with a grim grace, in short order becoming the house's resident dictator, the General merely a figurehead who occasionally bellowed at his children like one of those dusty lions in the zoo undergoing a midlife crisis" [3]. Madame quickly adapts to the harsh reality and takes action to shield her kids and family against adversity, a role usually played by fathers. Not only does she struggle to restore order to the family, but persuade her husband to confront the difficulty and earn a living in this new country. Her efforts pay off; the General agrees to open a liquor store. Given there is no one in the family who can cook, she even learns to cook. It turns out Madame has a talent for cooking. When the narrator has the pho cooked by Madame for the first time, the sweet memory of childhood flashes back before his eyes. He compliments her on cooking and encourages her that the talent is enough for running a restaurant. Later on, Madame takes the advice and starts her own business that offers Vietnamese food. The restaurant is a big success attracting their compatriots to get together and relish the taste of their homeland. Madame earns her authority by her dedication to family and her sharp business acumen. For centuries, Vietnamese women have been disciplined by the traditional patriarchal society, so they are not aware of the social value they can produce outside the home. Throughout the novel, Madame's image overshadows the General's from every aspect. In addition, Madame's brilliance is a clear manifestation of women's potential for career success.

Lana, the oldest daughter of the General, is a rebellious, compassionate character. She refuses to follow her parents' wish to be an elegant lady and wants to lead a free, colorful life. When she is young, she hates to wear ao dai, a traditional dress for Vietnamese girl and is fond of dressing like a boy. Her family won't let her do so. To escape the family's control, she earns a scholarship to America. Her parents regard UC Berkeley as a communist colony of radical professors and revolutionary students and determine to send her to a girls' college. She insists on Berkeley and even commits suicide twice. Finally, her parents give in, and she is allowed to pursue her dream in Berkeley. Without surprise, she doesn't return home after graduation but instead chooses to live on her own. It is at a Vietnamese wedding ceremony where the narrator meets her again. Wearing a halter top and a miniskirt, she now is a singer. Lana chooses to be a singer because she believes in the power contained in music regardless of the judgements of others. Beyond her career choice, she also has had plenty of ex-boyfriends, which is out of bounds to a traditional Vietnamese lady. The unconventional career choice combined with plenty of ex-boyfriends makes her parents believe she is out of her mind and worry no decent men would marry her. Yet, Lana has already become a successful singer and males are obsessed with her. She breaks free from the patriarchal society's discipline that women should be kept out of the public eye and be morally impeccable. Lana also has a compassionate side. This character trait is shown in how she treats vulnerable people. When the narrator finally gathers up his courage and expresses his appreciation for Lana, Lana replies "You're so much more...direct than you were when you lived with us" [3]. Contrary to the prevalent value judgment, she does not judge the narrator on his muddled identity. She treats him equally and even falls in love with him. Another example of her compassion is her reaction to Bon's misfortune. On hearing Bon has lost his beloved wife and son to the war, she gently embraces him and comforts him. Both she and the narrator are the same type of people who care about others and hold dear to their beliefs.

2.2 Narrative Strategies to Deconstruct Grand Historical Narrative

Nguyen's efforts to deconstruct grand historical narrative not only is reflected in content arrangement but in his narrative strategies. To contend with the overshadowing traditional narratives, plentiful postmodern narrative strategies are employed in the novel. Nguyen's non-linear narrative breaks the conventional story-telling structure of narrative, and interrupts the connection between cause and effect; the open-ended arrangement reveals that history is fraught with uncertainty and open to diversified interpretations.

2.2.1 The non-linear narrative

In the Postmodern Narrative Theory, Mark Currie criticized narrative linearity, a method we take for granted, arguing that it is in itself a form which represses difference [4]. Linearity links histories together into a general, metaphysical concept of history. It implies that one thing leads to another which supports an entire system of implications. Traditional historians stick to narrative linearity in writing history by arranging the order of different events to imply certain meanings. A general concept of history is thus

constructed. But Derrida holds that “there is not one single history, but rather histories different in their type, rhythm, mode of inscription- intervallic, differentiated histories” [5]. When one type of narration is widely accepted, other counterparts are excluded from consideration. Linear narratives in this sense are inherently powerful and impressive, whereas non-linear narratives are a form of resistance to authoritative history.

The Sympathizer is not narrated in a traditional temporal linearity but in a non-linear form. The nested structure combined with flashback narrative constructs a non-linear narrative structure. The author splits the narrator’s experience into three parts in writing the whole story. The first part follows the narrator’s undercover work in North Vietnam, tracing his memory from the utter defeat of South Vietnam to years after when he was caught in a North Vietnamese reeducation camp. The second is his tragic experience in a reeducation camp. The novel opens with an unnamed narrator being compelled to write a confession over and over again in a reeducation camp in reality. In the meantime, he recollects what he has done while lurking in the South Vietnamese army and writes those done to be a confession. These two parts of the story form a perfect embedded narrative. The novel consists of twenty-three chapters. The former eighteen chapters center around the narrator’s memory as an undercover, while the latter five chapters return to the real timeline. Nonetheless, there is no dividing line between these two parts of experience. Often, the narrator abruptly breaks from the memories and returns to the real timeline, forming a spatiotemporal juxtaposition. For instance, in the first chapter, as the narrator wonders how to describe the stage when the Vietnam War is over, he asks the Commandant, a man in charge of the prisoners in this camp, for advice. The act of the narrator blurs and dissolves the boundary between memories and reality, and thus brings two worlds together. In doing so, the author breaks the linear timeline, and puts two narrative time spaces together, creating intriguing scenes where the narrator encounters himself from another time space. This is not the only case, but there are altogether eleven times the Commandant is referred to.

The third part of the narrator’s experience is arranged as a range of flashbacks interspersed in the narrator’s confession. Nearly all former eighteen chapters contain flashbacks. The most representative flashback can be seen in Chapter Nine:

Only one thing was missing from the hamlet and that was the people, the most important of which was my mother. She had died during my junior year in college, when she was just thirty-four. For the first and only time, my father wrote me a letter, brief and to the point: Your mother has passed away of tuberculosis, poor thing. She is buried in the cemetery under a real headstone [3].

The narrator seeks comfort in the hamlet and its Vietnamese countryside scenery awakens his sad memories of the day he received the news of mother’s death. Nguyen ingeniously uses scenery in resemblance to link two worlds together: a shooting base in the Philippine in reality and a university in America in memory. Such a cross-temporal juxtaposition brings readers to the set of him losing his mother, and makes readers understand the character more.

The traditional temporal linearity would arrange different events to form a logical causal relationship. The non-linear narrative used in the novel on the other hand provides readers with another historical interpretation. Take North Vietnamese superiors’ suspicion of the narrator’s infidelity as an example. Given what he has hidden away and sympathy for enemies expressed in the coded notes, the superiors of North Vietnam have every reason to suspect the narrator is on the verge of becoming a turncoat. They fall prey to linear thinking and consider it necessary to reeducate the narrator. But Nguyen uses spatiotemporal juxtapositions and flashbacks to immerse readers in the scene, explaining the logic behind his actions. In this way, he is able to create another narration of his own history. With the help of a non-linear narrative structure, *The Sympathizer* cedes the subjectivity of the text to the Other, giving the Other an outlet to express himself, and thus constructs another historical narration.

2.2.2 Open-ended arrangement

As for open-ended plot arrangement, it seems to be the ultimate quest for traditional historians to find a basis and a conclusion to any piece of recorded history. The closed ending provides readers with a strong sense of security as well as relief. Readers tend to anticipate such endings as marriage and death that resolve all the problems and conflicts. *The Sympathizer*, however, is featured by a lack of definite ending. Instead of following historical narrative tradition to end the story, it has an open ending to highlight the open nature of history. At the beginning of the story, the narrator is held in captivity in a North Vietnamese reeducation camp and forced to confess what he has done during undercover operations. In the end, all the secrets that he has hidden are revealed and the superior decides to let him and Bon off the hook. After what seems like forever, the narrator and Bon finally become free men again. Clambering on board the skiff, they sailed for the other side of the sea.

Nguyen does not give a clear end to the story but leaves room for imagination. Readers will never know whether they would safely arrive at a destination and embrace a new life there, or unluckily be attacked by pirates and never manage to get to the destination. The novel ends with a promise that “even as we write this final sentence, the sentence that will not be revised, we confess to being certain of one and only one thing—we swear to keep, on penalty of death, this promise: We will live” [3]. The promise seems to indicate that whatever happens, they will try everything they can to survive, but the novel never quite confirms the fact. Thomas Elsaesser contends “we often construct chains of cause and effect with hindsight. In this way, the outcome is invented, or even the cause is chosen. It is true that in storytelling, the end of the story determines the way the story is told, in other words, the syuzhet determines the fabula, not the other way around” [6]. As a consequence, our interpretation of history is inevitably influenced by this “retrospective” view of history, or to be more precise, by how we imagine “endings” [6]. To avoid the narrative becoming a priori discourse, an open ending is indispensable. The indefinite ending of the story spells there is no presupposition of their fates, rather they are masters of their destiny. In doing so, the author’s authority is weakened, and the characters are endowed with subjectivity. The open-ended arrangement virtually deconstructs all narratives of finality, and showcases the struggle and complicity between historical meaning and historical narrative.

3. Reconstruction of Multidimensional History

In the traditional historical-critical perspective, each era has a unified zeitgeist, and literary works are a reflection of it. But postmodern historians argue there is no such thing as a unified zeitgeist, but each era is filled with conflicting ideas none of which can provide an overarching explanation of the times. Therefore, literary works cannot reflect the full picture; each work can reveal only one aspect of history. Compared with a unified history, a multidimensional history is an existence closer to the truth of history.

While dissolving the authoritative history, Nguyen’s novel constructs different dimensions of history through the care of marginalized groups, presenting chorus and cacophony of different aspects of history. He constructs a diversified history from different narrative perspectives with different narrative subjects, reflecting his postmodern historical consciousness of pluralism and the pursuit of equality.

Since the 1970s, historians have refocused their study from a critique of historical sources and methodology to a critique of history itself. French historian Pierre Nora introduced “collective memory” into the historical study, and made a clear distinction between “history” and “memory”. He believes the traditional history-memory consistency has broken down, and “memory” takes on the features of “history” in the history-memory dichotomy [7]. In other words, individual memory has the value of traditional historiography. At a time featured by postmodern historical sensibility, people feel at a loss as to their own existence and identity, and thus the national memory that different groups share to maintain their cohesion takes on the quality of historical writing. In *The Sympathizer*, the narrator recollects his memory by writing a forced confession. Memory is used as a crucial writing strategy to record specific history narrated by an individual. It is believed that personal memories are critical in resisting the encroachment of a unified narrative of History. Ethnic history, in the same vein, refers to the collective memory of Vietnamese refugees settling in America. Nguyen delves deep into the arduous journey of the narrator to rebuild his own identity and the Vietnamese refugee community’s efforts to restore and reinforce their collective memory.

3.1 Rebuilding the Narrator’s Self Identity

The novel begins with the narrator’s confession of himself as a spy but it is not until the end of the story that his whole life history is revealed. The process of recalling is a painful experience for him, because he has to face the identity crisis that he has long been avoiding touching. However hard it is, he manages to tell his own story and the introspective journey helps him to sort out who he is despite the opinions of others.

3.1.1 Emerging from hybrid dilemma

Born to a traditional Vietnamese family, the narrator is an illegitimate son of a Vietnamese maid mother and a French priest father, during the colonization of France. He is ostracized both by Vietnamese society and French colonizers for as long as he can remember. “Strangers and acquaintances had enjoyed reminding me of this ever since my childhood, spitting on me and calling me bastard, although sometimes, for variety, they called me bastard before they spit on me” [3]. Throughout his childhood, he has been trying to figure out the puzzle of why people called him an unnatural boy. The devastating answer that

his father is a French priest ambushed him when he was eleven years old. And it takes a long time before he understands that “love son” in his mother’s version is the production of seduction in common sense. At the very beginning of his life, he is thrown into the mire of identity dilemma. Vietnamese society refuses to give the mixed bloods the same treatment as its people and called them bastards. It is one thing to be labeled as a bastard; it is another to accept the stigma. Despite all the disadvantages of his poverty-stricken, muddled heritage, his mother’s whole-hearted love and fierce belief encouraged him to believe “you’re not half of anything, you’re twice of everything”^[3]. He steps up for himself and fights for his rights. Guided by that spirit, the narrator is able to get rid of his troubled heritage and chooses to give himself the identity of Vietnamese. His affirmation of identity also can be seen in his pursuit of Lana his true love. When he sees Lana on the stage singing rock music, he is totally fascinated by her performance. The narrator could not help but be drawn to her rebellious nature and pure heart. As one of the General’s daughters, she is expected to marry a decent Vietnamese man. The narrator is not counted as one of “their kind”, but a bastard in the General’s eye. He does not let the opinions of others get in the way and considers himself a good match to Lana. It must be someone of the same kind can he be a match for an innocent, compassionate woman. His action was a testament to his self-chosen identity.

3.1.2 Bestowing oneself identity

Living in turbulent times when the Vietnam War is raging, young people in Vietnam are impassioned to pick a side, and the narrator is no exception. Memories of his adolescence are warm because he had the company of his two blood brothers: Man and Bon. But their different life experience and beliefs drift them apart. After Bon’s father was shot to death by a local cadre, he becomes a genuine republican. Yet, the narrator follows the lead of Man and observes communist belief. He is a committed communist and defers absolutely to his superiors. Since he has an edge on language, he is assigned to learn to be a spy. Being one of the top students, he earns a scholarship to an American university. Rather than major in such useful enterprises as highways and sewage systems, he takes the order to study American ways of thinking. Later on, he becomes a captain in the South Vietnamese secret police sending information to the North side. Childhood memories of muddled identities haunt him, so it is the last thing he will do to be stuck into another identity dilemma. He makes his decision to be an undercover, not because he doesn’t understand the cost of it, but because he sticks to his belief. There is a difference between free choice and forced destiny. As the story develops, Bon volunteers to join the advance party sent by the General back to Vietnam. It is a suicide mission. In order to protect his friend, the narrator also joins the group. Just as he has expected, they are quickly detected and put into a reeducation camp. He thought his undercover work and loyalty to North Vietnam would help them round interrogation, but this is not the case. Ironically, the superiors are suspicious of him because he has been a spy. Writing confessions at the reeducation camp is the most hopeless period of his entire life. He is turned back on by his allegiance. On the verge of a nervous breakdown, it finally dawns on him that what he observed is as hypocritical as its enemy. He is once again turned down by both sides, so an identity crisis ensues. Challenges and sufferings never deter him, and he summons his courage to bestow himself the identity essential to human beings.

3.1.3 Constructing subjectivity

An identity crisis occurs as well when the narrator following the General takes refuge in America. In America, they are put into a refugee camp, and become refugees. The narrator is lucky to have the professor’s help and gets a position in the Department of Oriental Studies. Yet, having a job won’t change his identity as a Vietnamese refugee. In white-or-black society of America, skin color that is neither white nor black leaves the narrator’s identity in suspension. Only when he wears the mask of a role that already exists in the concept of society can he be accepted by this society. To gain room for survival, even if they do not agree with the mainstream values in their hearts, Asians in the position of “the Other” can only accept and play the identity assigned by the society for the time being. This has become a tactical behavior that they have to do, a strategy with a serious purpose. In the Department of Oriental Studies, the Chair is an Orientalist, but Oriental is but the Other in his study. He likens Oriental to weeds, the mixed blood to tragic consequence. “Foreign weeds choke to death much of our native foliage. Mixing native flora with a foreign plant oftentimes has tragic consequences, as your own experience may have taught you”^[3], he says to the narrator. The narrator replies: “yes, it has”, reminding himself that he needed my minimum wage. The Chair ends the talk with a humiliating homework assignment of writing down both his Oriental and Occidental qualities. In order to survive, he can only adopt a strategy of “appeasement” that appears to conform to mainstream society. However, every time he plays the role of Asians in the eyes of others, he changes and mutates to form a new interpretation of himself. In the process of playing the roles assigned by the society, he does not accept the roles unchanged, but rather, he uses his own initiative to integrate his self-concept into the established roles, and transforms, deconstructs and

reconstructs them in the process of playing the roles. The originally suppressed or divided subjectivity is gradually awakened and constructed, and the subject acquires an identity for himself and his ethnic group. The following day, when he showed his homework to the department Chair, the Chair praised him for being a good student, as all Orientals are. The narrator's internal activities at this point: "despite myself, I felt a small surge of pride. Like all good students, I yearned for nothing but approval" [3]. He unconsciously falls into the trap of Western stereotypes of Asians and becomes complacent in conforming to them. The department Chair proceeds to educate the narrator at length: "You must assiduously cultivate those reflexes that Americans have learned innately, in order to counterweigh your Oriental instincts" [3]. Upon hearing this, the ethnicity dormant in his blood makes him feel humiliated by the professor's words. This sense of humiliation touches his ethnicity a little, stirring it up and reviving it. Hence, he tries to salvage his pride by asking the professor: "would it make any difference if I told you I was actually Eurasian, not Amerasian?" [3]. His reaction undoubtedly reflects the revived subjectivity and ethnicity. The misalignment and inconsistency that occurs as the narrator both conforms to the socially assigned role and questions its legitimacy in the process of playing it produces a highly ironic effect, exposing how mainstream culture constructs Asian stereotypes and designs and fictionalizes the ethnicity of Asians. The dominant culture tries to dictate, constrain, and control the Asian community, and Asians use identity play to cope with the harsh living environment and maneuver with it. It is also in this constant maneuvering that roles are reconstructed and subjectivity and ethnic identity are constructed.

3.2 Reconstructing Vietnamese Refugees' Collective Memory

With South Vietnam being defeated, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese fled Vietnam to America or other parts of the world for fear of liquidation. A larger proportion of members arrived in America, and they got a new name "Vietnamese refugees". As refugees, they are not accepted by the American mainstream culture and society, and they find it difficult to make ends meet, let alone be successful. They are a shadow group that would go silent when they enter society, and in the face of the grand narrative of history, their "individual existence is but a gray clip". Nguyen relates the stories of ethnic minority through the observation of the narrator. Collective remembrance has both material and symbolic properties noted Halbwachs [8]. Based on the dual attributes proposed by Halbwachs, French historian Pierre Nora in his renowned work *Sites of Memory* further divides collective memory into three categories which are entities of immaterial, material, and ideal [7]. Thus, the collective memory of the Vietnamese refugees in America can be discussed in two parts which are immaterial and material memories in accordance with Nora's classification. The immaterial part mainly discusses ethnic history writing, while the material part, the particular space will be the focus.

3.2.1 Immaterial sites of collective memories

First, immaterial entity as the site to inspire collective memory: the narrator plays the part of a historian collecting the marginalized life experience of his fellow countrymen in the new country. As the Vietnamese people take refuge in America, they are outcasts of the society. They are ordered to be separated from one another by the government for fear that they will found a Little Saigon and "have a voice in America" [3]. Before they leave the camp, they will exchange the phone numbers and addresses of new destinations to form a refugee telegraph system to keep each other informed. Still, it is difficult to know the latest situation of their fellow compatriots. Now and then, they will gather together and trade secondhand and thirdhand stories of scattered countrymen. It is how their stories circulated in the circle. The narrator therefore is able to take down sad stories of his countrymen and contribute to the formation of collective memory. There is a vast gulf between the negligence of mainstream history and the vivid remembrance of the ethnic members. His efforts are made to repair the rift, bringing the past to the present. Just as Nora has insisted: memory is no longer a retrospective continuity but the illumination of discontinuity. In the history-memory of old, accurate perceptions of the past are characterized by the assumption that the past could be retrieved. The past could always be resuscitated by an effort of remembrance; indeed, the present itself became a sort of recycled, update past, realized as the present through such welding and anchoring. So, it is safe to say that the narrator's writing not only makes the neglected history of Vietnam refugees conspicuous to the public but also is "a bid for inclusion within other stories and other histories" [9].

3.2.2 Material sites of collective memories

With regard to Nora's theory, material entities can be spaces, objects in which multiple memories are evoked and reserved. In *The Sympathizer*, the spaces that can be seen as memory sites are the wedding ceremony and Roosevelt Hotel in Hollywood. The first wedding ceremony is held when they were "more than a year into American exile and flush times had returned for some" [3]. The bride's and groom's

parents invite relatives, friends, and even acquaintances to the wedding, making the banquet almost like a “maze”. People gather together to celebrate his happy moment, but “a touch of melancholy pervaded the huge dining hall” [3]. The happy reunion makes them recall the sad truth that plenty of Vietnamese are left behind and remain unaccounted for. Band and singers are invited to liven up banquet, and the songs picked belonged to “riotous Saigonese decadence” [3]. Snatches of familiar songs float about and bring the audience back to those old dreamy days, so they all “were cheering and clapping in appreciation” [3]. A surprise visitor, a Congressman also joins them. He gives an eloquent, exceptional speech to express his sorry for Vietnam’s loss and acclaim the tenacious Vietnamese people. With a zealous chorus of the South Vietnamese National Anthem, the atmosphere there reaches its peak. The Congressman’s speech shows respect to this marginal group acting as a boost to their self-esteem and his words brought them tightly together as proud Vietnamese exiles. So “when the anthem finished...the rest of the audience members sunk into their seats with postcoital smugness” [3]. The ceremony in this case is a place where people come together to feast on the bitter past, indulge in old rosy days in Saigon, and enjoy a sense of belongingness. The “Site of memory” offers the individual a place in the collective, thus giving him/ her a strong sense of collective belonging.

Another great example of a “site of memory” is the Roosevelt Hotel in Hollywood where Lana sings as part of a revue of their gone. The fellow countrymen are “bedecked in sequins, polyester and attitude as they headed to the lounge where Fantasia waited” [3]. Wearing their best suits, they briefly forget about their refugee status and head for a place in which their sorrows are respected and harbored. Saigon is a magic word that brings them together that night. “The word was mentioned by nearly every one of the performers and by the emcee himself” [3]. The emcee of that night is a famous Vietnamese poet who uses emotional language linking the American Dream with their deep aspiration of going back hometown, making the whole lounge ring with sincere, enthusiastic applause. Then it is Lana’s turn to perform. Contrary to her usual style, Lana performs two sentimental love songs. Her gentle, delicate way of singing takes them back to Saigon their hometown. They get carried away, and “nobody talked and nobody stirred except to raise a cigarette or a glass” [3], especially when she approaches the end of the second song “Bang Bang, we will never forget”. What we will never forget is the quest that guides the crowd to search for their most precious, indelible memories. In this part, a reminiscent prose paragraph about Vietnam is added showcasing the magic power of her songs. When Lana completed her performance, the audience claps, whistles, and stomps, but the narrator cannot even applaud, for he is stunned by it. The way they gather together and the familiar songs in the air makes the Roosevelt Hotel look like one of the nightclubs in Saigon years and miles away. In this particular space, their collective memories are revived. With the past exerting an impact on the present, their cultural identities are reinforced.

4. Conclusion

As a debut novel, *The Sympathizer* reaches an amazing level of sophistication. The novel follows a communist’s thrilling undercover adventure in America and absurd experience in a reeducation camp back in Vietnam. Readers are offered a unique perspective to observe the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese people’s exile in America. The paper explores the historical writing of the novel in a postmodern context. Unlike traditional history writing, this novel places nobodies at the center of history, questioning the unified, objective, and truthful grand historical narrative and demonstrating a distinctly postmodern philosophical stance. On the one hand, he deconstructs history by switching the positions of center and edge. By telling the story of characters from marginalized groups, the novel constitutes a collection of marginal narratives, so as to subvert the traditional “History”. On the other hand, the novel opens a dialogue between “male narrative voices” and “female narrative voices”. The traditional authoritative male group is subverted by the marginalized group of women, which in turn deconstructs the grand narrative. Nguyen’s efforts to deconstruct the grand historical narrative also can be seen in his narrative strategies. With non-linear writing that breaks the traditional narrative structure, the author intends to show the possibility of multiple causal relationships. An open-ended arrangement, on the other hand, reflects the author’s questioning of whether history has an ending.

While deconstructing the grand historical narrative, Nguyen simultaneously tries to construct a multi-dimensional history, exploring marginalized individuals and groups and reconstructing their own narratives under the discipline of the spirit of modernity. A marginalized individual as the narrator is, he recalls his own life in the form of confession, sorts out the dilemma of multiple identities, jumps out of the situation of the “Other”, obtains the same identity, and records his own history. The Vietnamese refugee community reconstructs, preserves, and deepens its collective history through both material and immaterial sites of memory.

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