



Research article

Memory, Insidious trauma, and Refugee crisis in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015)

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Abstract

This article argues that refugee crises include complex forms of insidious and latent trauma, insufficiently engaged in dominant discourses of trauma studies which largely draw on Western models and cultural experiences, often overlooking various aspects of postcolonial trauma, trauma due to casual violence and racism, and other forms of everyday marginalization which are interstitial, experiential, and quotidian in quality. Through a historical examination of the America-Vietnam War and its subsequent diasporic subject-formations, we aim to offer an original reading of Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel *The Sympathizer* (2015) using a complex framework of memory studies that highlights an interplay of nostalgia, spectrality, and posttraumatic stress manifestations. The study argues how trauma may be examined as a quotidian and experiential phenomenon of slow disintegration emerging from a profoundly political context, and how the medium of fiction offers a unique cognitive, affective, and focal framework to articulate and empathize with the same.

Keywords: Memory; PTSD; Refugee Crisis; Trauma; Vietnam War fiction; Postmemory



[Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions](#)

Insidious Trauma and Refugee Crisis

Recent developments in contemporary trauma studies highlight a shift from the Eurocentric model to "everyday forms of traumatizing violence" (Rothberg, 2008, p. 226). In the last decade, there has been a tendency to view trauma as a global phenomenon, acquiring a transnational or transcultural status (Bond and Craps, 2020). The recognition of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - III* in 1980's led to the rapid institutionalization of the nervous condition. This addressed concerns around the marginalization of the psychodynamic perspectives of trauma, medicalization, and subsequent denial of political

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agency to survivors. However, it restricted other traumatic experiences except the ones induced by direct exposure to war, thereby legitimizing trauma of certain groups above others (Bond and Craps, 2020). This consolidated a largely Western model of trauma, one which offered an insufficient understanding and engagement with the suffering of non-western, non-white subjects and communities.

The event-based model of trauma, found as PTSD in the DSM III, eludes the chronic psychic suffering caused due to structural violence such as racism, classism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and other such forms of injustice (Bond and Craps, 2020). Our study foregrounds the need to include type II traumas such as insidious trauma, postcolonial syndrome, posttraumatic slavery syndrome, postcolonial disorder, and other oppression-based trauma (Craps, 1996) in the discourse around trauma and traumatic subjects. This resonates with the feminist psychotherapist Laura S. Brown's move away from an event-based model of trauma towards insidious trauma, which involves violence inflicted upon the soul and spirit instead of direct physical violence (Buelens and Craps, 2008). Within the context of nonwestern trauma studies, our study focusses on refugee crises corresponding to notions of everyday marginalization and other forms of insidious trauma.

The identity of a refugee is marked by a common signifier of the mass exodus of people from wars and disasters, which may be created due to abrupt events as well as due to slow erosion of advantage and agency. The experiential state of being a refugee is also marked by a dialectic of remembering and forgetting the existential past which in turn is influenced by the interplay of collective experience and individual consciousness (Hollifield and Jenkins, 2008). Refugee subjects in the USA of certain ethnic origins – Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Cuban – have historically experienced political, economic, and military disruptions defined as movements against communism, terrorism, or other peacekeeping operations (Espiritu, 2006). The Vietnamese emigrated from Vietnam between 1975 to 1989, primarily in the mass efflux to America in 1975. This entailed a persistent confusion of identity between the Vietnamese "self" and "other" (Hollifield and Jenkins, 2008, p. 384) in terms of tensions between their Vietnamese past and their American present, with complex repercussions politically as well as existentially that further led to experiences of latent trauma out of casual racism and alienation.

From 1975 to 1979, numerous Vietnamese subjects left their native land to travel for refuge and resettlement to places like Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, and Malaysia but soon these places closed their borders due to overcrowding (Nguyễn, 2017). The closing of borders and pushbacks of the refugee boats rendered the Vietnamese refugees vulnerable to perilous conditions at sea, including the lack of food and attack from pirates. Corroborating such conditions, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated the loss of 10 percent Vietnamese refugees at sea pertaining to pirate attacks, drowning, and dehydration (Nguyễn, 2017). Hence, the phrase, *I was a boat person* resonates with Vietnamese refugees alike and finds mention in many narratives of Vietnamese American literature. Incidentally, Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* also ends with a similar reference as the narrator leaves Vietnam for one last time as one among the many boat people (Nguyen and Fung, 2017, p. 202). Ironically, water is critically associated with refugees because different nation-states contest on water while also disallowing refugees floating in. Therefore, the fluidity and contested territoriality of water emerge as interesting metaphoric

associations with Vietnamese identity and subjectivity, not least as the Vietnamese term for water “*nuoc*” translates as homeland, country, or nation (Nguyễn, 2017, p. 99).

Giorgio Agamben’s concepts of “*homo sacer*” and “bare life” (Agamben, 1998, p. 8) are relevant to the study of refugees as displaced and representative of political history (Agamben, 2000). The liminal position of refugees raises complex questions regarding their status as *homo sacer*, or the sacred man. Agamben’s notion of the sacred man represents the subject as a killable entity under the control of the sovereign (Agamben, 1998). In this sense, refugees embody bare life in their political identity because of the disintegration of notions of “nativity and nationality”, making it difficult to politically define refugee-subjectivity (p. 131). This aporetic condition of refugees is often produced through acts of “medically mediated and mutated” (Parui, 2022, p. 179) political construction or as a rendition of “bare life” (Agamben, 1998, p. 131).

In a similar vein, in a series of lectures organized as the Aarhus Lectures in Sociology, Zygmunt Bauman offered interesting insights into the migrant situation through his notion of liquid modernity. In one such lecture titled, *Zygmunt Bauman: Liquid Modernity revisited*, Bauman engages with liquid modernity as referring to the state of constant flux leading to an ambiance of uncertainty and claimed that the migrant situation aptly embodies this notion (08:40-9:20). Migrant population constitutes for 11 percent of the GNP (Gross National Product) however they are still treated as second class citizens and are not given the right to vote in the host country. In his lecture, Bauman attributes this emergent migrant tradition to two factors – order building and economic progress. This facilitated the creation of “redundant people” or people who do not fit and hence migrate to other places (56:35-1:00:24). Bauman’s theories on ambivalence regarding the simultaneous order and chaos of modernity also help elaborate on the concept of liminality associated with refugee crisis. He states that ambivalence and fragmentation, arising out of building order, are directly linked to chaos (Bauman, 1991). This in turn drives movement in the form of efflux and influx, facilitated via economic changes and further enhancing Bauman’s idea of liquid modernity. Liquid modernity and ambivalence resonate with the idea of spectrality when applied to refugee crises, especially regarding the question of *home*.

Spectrality and Refugee Crises

In case of trauma studies, the metaphor of spectrality closely corresponds to the idea of being haunted by a past event, loss, mourning, and recovery from the same. This is particularly relevant to foregrounding posttraumatic stress as a malady of history rather than that of the unconscious (Bauman, 1991). Based on a similar premise, concepts of spectrality and liminality find convergences with trauma studies, especially refugee-trauma, as *home* remains a contested word for the Vietnamese refugees. This originates from their inherent cultural belief that Vietnamese people should and must remember to return to their homeland, irrespective of the distances they have travelled, a belief corroborated by the Vietnamese practice of burying a newborn’s umbilical cord in the garden (Lam, 2005). The identity of a refugee hence becomes a spectral and liminal identity with respect to their nostalgia regarding home which becomes a hauntological presence. This echoes Dominick LaCapra’s theories of loss and absence and Derrida’s insistence on reading history as a spectre because the past is both present and absent in the present (Blanco and Peeren, 2013).

Andrew Lam illustrates this situation in his work "Living in the Tenses in Saigon" (2019). While visiting Saigon and *revisiting* his homeland, Lam puts forth the constant battle of memory and history in juxtaposition with the aspect of belonging. Even though his childhood memories correspond to Saigon as home, a city where he was born, the present is contrary to his association with home. He feels the absence of a sense of belonging and although he tries to blend with his roots, he is seen as an outsider and he feels like an outsider – "Naturally, I also live in the past tense" (Lam, 2019, p. 49). Belonging is a vague emotion because Lam, like other Vietnamese refugees, identifies with America and belongs to Vietnam with a clause that he can leave anytime – "Mine is after all a complicated sense of home" (p. 50). Having spent the majority of his life in America and speaking in his third language, after Vietnamese and French, Vietnamese refugees like Andrew Lam possess a multicultural sense of belonging and the notion of *home* exists in plurality. For Lam and other migrants like him, time is inversely proportional to homesickness in terms of migrant nostalgia (Hage, 2010), similar to Svetlana Boym's concept of reflective nostalgia which is "ironic, inconclusive, and fragmentary", characterized by a sense of defamiliarization with the ruined home (Boym, 2008, p. 93).

Notions of spectrality and liminality associated with the idea of being haunted by the past establishes an entanglement between personal and collective memory, and history (Blanco and Peeren, 2013). Migrant memory may be compared to Derrida's notion of the absent present as the subjects seem to believe in their own constructed version of the past. This leads to spatiotemporal discontinuity and spectrality whereby the shadow lines of memory are shaped by affective and liminal experiences of presence and absence, becoming and un-becoming. Derrida refers to this in his work *Spectres of Marx* (1994) when he describes the spectral moment as "a moment that no longer belongs to time" (p. xix). Cut off from their past while also suspended in an alienating present, the refugee subjects tend to remember their homeland exactly how they left it, failing to acknowledge the "presently existing space of the past", thereby experiencing spatial haunting (Hage, 2010, p. 427). Additionally, such study of spectrality facilitates an understanding of other forms of marginalization, historical injustices, and associated personal/collective memory.

Memory and Nostalgia

Viet Thanh Nguyen refers to memory as "a device for measurement, the ruler of narrative" (Nguyen, 2012, p. 912). He brings to light two types of memory narratives with respect to nostalgia and history – retrospective nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. While the restorative nostalgic views the past from a corrective lens of nationalism, the reflective nostalgic uses methods to overshadow the nation's dark past (Nguyen, 2012). Nguyen exemplifies the concept of restorative nostalgia with the account of "Little Saigon", a mnemonic estate which allows the Vietnamese refugees in America to retain a sense of their Vietnamese identity, while simultaneously allowing them to counter longing and disremembering with acts of belonging and membership (Nguyen, 2016, p. 52).

Svetlana Boym's (2008) theories of restorative and reflective nostalgia, presented in *The Future of Nostalgia*, and cited by Nguyen, play an important role in this context. Boym argues that nostalgia transcends spatial and temporal boundaries of memory because it incurs a sense of yearning for

a different space in a completely different time and therefore offers an entanglement of personal and collective memory. Like Viet Thanh Nguyen, Boym also identifies nostalgia as reflective and restorative. In her studies, restorative nostalgia represents an attempt at reconstructing the homeland, irrespective of spatial and temporal factors. It aims at rebuilding the home and fabricating memory gaps through national and antinational revivals manifested in the form of reconstructing old monuments and traditions. Reflective nostalgia thrives on the idea of longing and ironically delays the actual act of returning home by repeatedly dwelling on the notion of belonging. It lingers on ruins and exists in an alternate spatial and temporal reality through dreams representing a "longing and imperfect process of remembrance" (Boym, 2008, p. 80).

Reading *The Sympathizer*

Existing scholarship on Nguyen's *Sympathizer* revolves around politics of war, conflict of identity, and the representation of America with respect to its involvement in the Vietnam War. Anjali Prabhu (2018) offers a dialectical reading of *The Sympathizer* by foregrounding the emergence of an interpellation of both the Vietnamese and American identities in the reader. She attributes this to the element of dynamism which allows the narrator to alter his material reality throughout the narrative and present a two-way perspective, both as a Vietnamese native and American refugee (Prabhu, 2018). Yu-yen Liu (2019) situates *The Sympathizer* as a post-apocalyptic text with respect to the Vietnam war, Pacific, and Middle Eastern wars, one which presents a narrative questioning the role of America. Drawing on as well as departing from such overtly political readings of Nguyen's novel, this study highlights both the collective and individual manifestations of insidious trauma and refugee crisis, elaborated through three major themes - the crisis of representation as a Vietnamese refugee, nostalgia and alienation associated with food memory, and the various states of post-trauma. In doing this, we attempt to show how political conditions shape individual memory and trauma at quotidian and experiential levels, generating slow disintegration, and how the medium of fiction is uniquely equipped to represent the same.

Crisis of Representation of Vietnamese Refugees

While Nguyen's non-fictional text, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and The Memory of War* (2016) is restricted to discussions around the historical and political aspects of the Vietnam War, *The Sympathizer* offers a complex fictional representation of a post-1975 Vietnamese community in America. It is a community that witnessed a horrific war, lost everything, and were struggling to survive in a new country, culture, and conditions of life (Phan and Phan, 2018). Historically, the text is situated at a time of the receding Vietnam War when American forces were gradually pulling out its officers and people back to USA from Saigon. At the very outset, the narrator claims the truth about him being "two faced" - a spy working for America in return for freedom from Communism (Nguyen, 2015, p. 1). The introduction of a mixed-race protagonist and themes of espionage create politico-racial categorizations to destabilize the American perspective of "winning" this lost war (Nguyen and Fung, 2017, p. 202). Moreover, the narrator is described as "a man of two faces...a man of two minds" which allowed him to look at both sides of the war (Hoy, 2015, p. 686) and function effectively as a spy, exemplified by his friendship with Bon and Man,

representing opposite ideologies. Bon was a republican and accompanied the narrator but lost his wife and child in the mass evacuation from Saigon (Nguyen, 2015, p. 19). They proclaimed that fleeing from Saigon was not an act of desertion, but a strategic retreat and they promised to come back to reclaim their land (Nguyen, 2015, p. 45). Man stayed back in Vietnam to witness its fall under communist regime and returned at the end of the text as a Communist official - the commissar (Nguyen, 2015, p. 421).

The scene in *The Sympathizer* where the protagonist's family leaves Saigon along with other Americans and Vietnamese refugees amidst unrest is uncannily similar to the tragedy of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in 2021 which showed numerous men helplessly falling out of airplanes in an attempt to escape, and in a spectacle of shock and existential devastation (*News 18*, August 16, 2021). After surviving two settlement camps, Nguyen's narrator finally settles in California, which becomes a diasporic space (Hoy, 2015). In the process of settling into his new life as a Vietnamese refugee, the narrator also kept secret correspondence with his Communist superiors in Vietnam (Phan and Phan, 2018). Later in the novel, the American CIA agent Claude describes the intended process of evacuation from Saigon in detail. According to him, the cue for the final evacuation was the playing of "White Christmas" on American Radio Service. Ocean Vuong's poem "Aubade with Burning City" (2014) vividly describes the mass evacuation of soldiers and refugees from Vietnam to USA, based on the recollected memories of his grandmother who herself was a refugee. One of the lines from the poem – "A helicopter lifting the living just out of reach" (p. 430) resonates with the sentiment described in Nguyen's novel: "Let's just hope history forgets the snafus" (Nguyen, 2015, p. 112). This statement is a direct comment on the relationship between memory, experientiality, and history in the narrative of Claude because he witnessed the plight of the Vietnamese killing each other to escape from Saigon. Claude is part of the same experiential fabric as Alden Pyle is in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1955) (Phan and Phan, 2018). Robert S. McNamara made a similar comment in the documentary "Fog of War" (2003) claiming that in a war situation innocent people suffer for the errors made by certain leaders. This underlines the Sisyphean quality of wars and the human loss caused by the same. Nguyen's novel serves a similar political purpose to make the Americans and the world deliberate on the issue of the Vietnamese subjects and to acknowledge a narrative shaped by Vietnamese voices (Nguyen, 2016).

The theme of crisis of representation of Vietnamese refugees is best elaborated in the filmmaking episode where the narrator gets an opportunity to participate in the filming of a Vietnam-War movie named *Hamlet*. This scene illustrates Nguyen's resentment against Hollywood narratives of the Vietnam War (Martinez and Rubenstein, 2016). The director, symbolically named Auteur in the narrative, appears like a parody of Francis Ford Coppola, the maker of *Apocalypse Now* (1979), another filmic narrative about the horrors of human greed and violence with a fictional depiction of the Vietnam War as background. The Auteur in Nguyen's novel employed the narrator as a consultant to make things right when it came to Vietnamese matters (Phan and Phan, 2018). On reading the script, the narrator critiqued it for the lack of Vietnamese voice and its inauthenticity (Nguyen and Fung, 2017). This resonates with Nguyen's personal recollection of such movies, which were capable of disturbing him as they only cast the "Americans as central subjects of history" (Martinez and Rubenstein, 2016, p. 213). Using dark humor, Nguyen comments that cinematic representations by Americans was "the only time history has been written by the losers"

(Forna, 2017, p. 37). Similarly, Nguyen uses “intelligent ridicule” to comment on the script of Auteur’s *Hamlet* stating that he even got the screams wrong (Phan and Phan, 2018, p. 129), indicating that the American filmmaker was incapable of capturing Vietnamese voices at all levels.

In *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and The Memory of War* (2016), Nguyen highlights the *asymmetry* between the war memory of Vietnam and America, and other nation-states such as Laos and Cambodia. Nguyen proclaimed that America overshadows war memory as compared to Vietnam and such asymmetry produces a limited and reductionist understanding of the war (Phan and Phan, 2018). Post-1970s literary representations offered an American perspective of the war to create rational dialogues regarding the sociopolitical and psychological effects of violence. This was primarily achieved with narratives of the veterans and the memory of war and its trauma (Grice, 2012). The Americans have primarily claimed the trauma associated with war as theirs alone while the Vietnamese have always been presented as secondary or spectral figures in the Great American tragedy, at best as fanatics fighting for a misguided ideology (Healy, 2010). Nguyen asserted that US literature and media simultaneously uplift and downplay the role of America in describing the state of Vietnamese refugees and the war (Nguyen, 2016), calling it a “we – win – even – when – we – lose” syndrome in case of America and its relentless portrayal of itself as rescuer and refuge (Nguyen and Fung, 2016, p. 4).

In such forms of representation, the Vietnamese appear to serve as a mere backdrop of passive victims, traitors, Viet Cong guerillas, and prostitutes, situated against the heroism and sacrifice of the US military (Grice, 2012). Vietnamese refugees were cast as people in need of rescue, “incapacitated by grief and therefore in need of care” best provided by USA (Espiritu, 2006, p. 410). As articulated by the Auteur’s assistant Violet, since the target audience of the filmmakers were Americans, it was imperative that they remain at the center, while other Asians played the role of Vietnamese characters in the movie because Vietnamese actors were inexperienced in the opinion of the makers. Hence, not only were the Vietnamese characters voiceless in a film about them, but they were also incapable of representing themselves (Nguyen, 2015), connecting to and reflective of the broader issue of agency and its absence in the lives of refugees. In the narrator’s view, the Americans were either “repressing and forgetting or appropriating and rewriting” the experiences of the Vietnamese from their vantage point of “insulated memory” (Stanley, 2020, p. 290).

The episode of filmmaking raises a question on USA owning the means of production and by effect, owning the politics of representation (Phan and Phan, 2018). He believed that movies may be individual stories but collectively they represented an “industry of memory” (Nguyen, 2016, p. 67). In one instance of misrepresentation in the film-within-the novel, Auteur asks the extra actors to act *natural* while playing the role of Viet Cong torturers, suggesting that violence was innately natural to the Vietnamese people (Chong, 2018), exemplifying the casual racism rampant in that cultural landscape. Eventually the narrator gets into a fight with Auteur regarding Mai’s rape scene, which the narrator felt was unnecessary and *heavy handed*, but which the director considered imperative to dial up the shock factor in the diegetic representation of the chosen content. Mai’s rape scene ends by offering a justification of America’s involvement in the Vietnam war because it portrayed the Vietnamese characters in the light of being rapists, hence naturalizing their racial profiling through cinematic depiction (Chong, 2018). Interestingly, besides the explicit rape scene of this movie, another rape scene involving a female communist agent – discussed later in this

study – drives the novel’s narrative. It marks a “delayed recognition” of the narrator’s suppressed memory of the Communist agent’s gang rape by South Vietnamese police officers (Phan and Phan, 2018, p. 130). Even at the time of witnessing this rape scene, the narrator raised a similar question to Claude, “Is this really necessary?” (Nguyen, 2015, p. 454). Rape is a common trope used in war-fiction to undercut other glorious narratives of heroism (Chong, 2018) and in the context of *The Sympathizer*, the violation of the Vietnamese body (female) alludes to a violation of a nation (Vietnam) with similar connotations of control, coercion, and territorialization (Chong, 2018). These concepts are graphically depicted in the explosion scene in the film-within-the-novel, when Auteur blows up a part of the cemetery as part of his white-male American vision (Nguyen and Fung, 2017), the blowing of Vietnamese graves symbolically emerging as a spectacular erasure of Vietnamese identity and other forms of representation (Stanley, 2020).

Nostalgia and Alienation

Most of the critical studies on *The Sympathizer* tend to revolve around memory, nostalgia, and remembrance of Vietnamese homeland and culture. Ghassan Hage defines nostalgia as a form of “enabling memory” different from homesickness, claiming that in the case of diasporic condition, nostalgia is the same as homesickness because of the sense of disempowerment which is associated with migrant status (Hage, 2010, p. 416). In Hage’s reading, nostalgia emerges as a medium of affective home-building outside the migrant’s spatial and temporal memory – despite the absence of their real home. Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer* is reflective of the collective trauma of an entire community settling in a foreign land, while also depicting the slow alienation of the uniquely experiential subject. It elaborates on their struggles to fit in and retain their identity at the same time, a theme dramatized several times in the novel through symbols of food, olfactory memory, and gustatory memory. For instance, the narrator illustrates how much they missed “fish sauce” because they were dependent on the Chinese markets for their food and Chinese food had a peculiar sweet and sour taste to it. *Fish sauce* hence becomes a marker of the memory associated with their homeland, a memory which was not welcome in the new land. Americans found fish sauce unpalatable and used the term “something fishy” to refer to it and by juxtaposition, to refer to the presence of Vietnamese refugees on their land (Nguyen, 2015, p. 92). Contrary to this was the case of Ms. Mori, a person of amorous interest to the narrator and a second-generation Japanese who experienced a sense of detachment from her culture and overly identified herself as an American, while everyone around her expected her “not to forget her roots” and expected the occidental behavior from her (p. 99). These contrasting situations offer a comparative question between the first and second-generation refugees in a foreign land, depicting the movements as well as the fault-lines of memory at collective as well as privately experiential levels.

The concept of postmemory further corroborates this chasm between first-generation and second-generation refugees and adds to quotidian trauma for refugees. Addressing the trans-generational effect of war and the percolation of memory is even more complex because second-generation refugees are struggling between survivor’s memories while simultaneously establishing their relationship to the past (Espiritu, 2006). Marianne Hirsch’s work “Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile” (1996) conceptualizes a condition for the memory of the second-generation refugees which is described as a liminal position in terms of being spatially and

temporally displaced from the war but having access to memories of eyewitnesses such as their parents or grandparents. Postmemory is a poignant form of memory even though the source of its creation is not recollection but imagination. It continues to be mediated and directly connected to the past and is characterized by a sense of exile or diasporic identity because even when the children of survivors return to their native lands, they fail to identify with it as *home* (Hirsch, 1996). Drawing on Hirsch's idea that most of contemporary European and American literature is inspired from Holocaust postmemory, this article uses that concept in order to study causal connections between Vietnamese American Literature and the Vietnam War postmemory.

Markers of memory are present throughout Nguyen's novel especially in the form of food. The General's wife, Madame, is especially an agent of food memory in *The Sympathizer*. The first time she served *pho* to the narrator it reminded him of his mother and how she concocted an aromatic soup out of leftover meat (generally just bones), ginger, and onion in an iron pot for additional flavor (Nguyen, 2015, p. 255). Cognac also had a similar effect on Vietnamese people. They may be introduced to champagne in US clubs, but one sip of cognac transported them back to Saigon (p. 306). In an interview, Andrew Lam mentions *pho* as a marker of food memory but at the same time raises a question on the extent of Vietnamese quality in it. *Pho* is a beef soup but traditionally Vietnamese did not eat beef, they only ate pork. The introduction of beef was a French influence along with herbs from China and India, subsequently becoming a renowned national dish of Vietnam with varied routes and modes of transmission (Troeng and Lê, 2016). Here food is associated with the sense of familiarity and fulfills the primal need of hunger in a culturally and experientially acceptable medium (Hage, 2010). The acts of consuming fish sauce, cognac, and *pho* emerge as triggers of nostalgia for the Vietnamese refugees and simultaneously mark a positive acceptance of America as a possible home, with food invoking cognitive, emotional, and physical recollections (Holtzman, 2006).

Another complex memory-scene in Nguyen's novel is the narrator's trip to Chinatown with his friend Bon, where Chinese chess sets, Buddha statues, paper lanterns, chopsticks, elephant tusks, tea, and ginseng, act as reminders of his homeland, demonstrating how memory finds objects of commercial exchange that enter and inhabit the market. There is another episode in *The Sympathizer* where the narrator finds that Madame's clock is set to Saigon time. This is a reminder of the identity-divide of exiled and displaced people, spatiotemporally vacillating across multiple existential states. Constantly inhabiting two time zones in their minds, the refugees experience a liminal existence. Just like the boat people, they are excluded from their homelands and are unwelcome in another country, existing in a suspended space-time displaced amidst endless waters for infinite hours (Nguyễn, 2017), highlighting the notions of spectrality and liminality apropos of identity, as examined in this study.

The take on the American Dream in *The Sympathizer* is another reminder of the interplay of nostalgia and alienation for the refugees. In a curious reversal of its original aspirational construct, the narrator's American Dream was to visit Saigon one last time before he died, to revisit the tombs of his ancestors, and to seek peace and closure in his homeland (Nguyen 2015, p. 307). Similarly, despite his deep appropriation of the American garb and culture, the narrative informs that the narrator's heart always belonged to Saigon (p. 308). The novel demonstrates how the notion of collective trauma due to lost identity and displaced roots is uniform throughout the refugee population, while personal trauma due to the same manifests as psychosomatic

symptoms and experiential states uniquely in the individual subject. Such instances in Nguyen's novel reveal the research gap underlined in this study, one which highlights the need to look at trauma beyond a monolithic macro-narrative lens drawing on abrupt ruptures, instead espousing a study of the slow, quotidian quality of alienation which shapes and re-shapes the traumatized subject.

Manifestations of Post-Trauma

Nguyen's contemporary Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) deals with Vietnamese refugees in USA who are traumatized by the effect of war and displacement from their native lands. It shows its narrator's mother suffering from schizophrenia, which developed as a response to tragic situations experienced during the war. This in turn elicited a chain of trauma as the psychotic mother, prone to her delirious self, would often physically harm her son thus further traumatizing him. This is an example of insidious trauma caused due to continued traumatization from "cumulative microaggressions" (Craps, 2013, p. 26) that have profound psychological and existential repercussions. *The Sympathizer* also has the potential to be examined in the light of trauma studies, unventured in critical studies so far. This pertains to numerous instances of post-trauma both as insidious trauma read in the narrator's childhood and early psychological development, as well as posttraumatic symptoms pertaining to his hallucinations and repressed traumatic memories.

In Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*, the genesis of the narrator's insidious trauma is traceable to his birth as an illegitimate child – a product of a poor Vietnamese woman and a French priest. His mother was ostracized from society for bearing a child out of wedlock. Hence, the term "bastard" had a traumatic connotation for him, while society also had a unique pejorative term for people like him – Amerasian (Nguyen, 2015, p. 27). This put him at the cross-roads of biological and racial shame, which further alienated him. The very first instance in the text when the readers get to witness the narrator's sensitivity to the term "bastard" is when two marines playfully call him one and he finds himself on the verge of shooting them in between their eyes (Nguyen, 2015, p. 111). This is reflective of the racism, nervous tension, and interplay of violence and vilification that runs throughout the novel. Another related episode in the text is a recollection from the narrator's childhood while visiting church. He and a group of boys saw a bulldog and its female companion mating when a classmate pointed at the narrator and remarked that he was the result of unnatural mating between a cat and dog (p. 270). This symbolized his Vietnamese mother and French father respectively, thus demonstrating the equation between racial abuse and dehumanization, another instance of vilification and violence contributing to the subject's trauma in the novel. In a similar recollection, the narrator mentioned that he associated his blood aunts with mental scars because in family gatherings at New Year, all his cousins got a red envelope with money, while he got half money. "That's because you're halfblooded" one of his cousins remarked and he remembered his mother weeping in bed that night (Nguyen, 2015, p. 184). The narrator's latent abandonment issues may be examined as contributing to his prospect of becoming a spy/sympathizer against his country, turning against his biological and ethnic origins as a means to avenge being abandoned and alienated by the system supposed to sustain him.

In addition, the narrator's affinity towards unnatural sex as evident in his sexual escapade with a dead squid is another marker of his traumatic condition which combines melancholia, self-negation, and death drive. There are several factors here in this episode, worthy of close attention. First, the dead squid was a gift from his father to his mother and the instinct to ravish and debase it sexually raises certain psychological questions regarding the narrator's violent state of being, exemplified by the narrator's statement subsequently that "from then onwards no squid was safe from me" (Nguyen, 2015, p. 103-105). The irony of it all was that after the deed, the narrator put the squid back for cooking and ate it. The ingestion of his own sexual refuse is further reflective of the narrator's nervous disposition and debased existential condition. There are numerous instances in the text when the narrator expresses a desire to kill his father, the patricidal instinct possibly shaped by a symptom out of psychotic rage fueled by latent abandonment issues. Sensitivity to the term *bastard*, the resentful attitude towards his French father, and the rejection of and by his mother's family, all these may be examined as having caused his stunted psychological growth and subsequent trauma that is insidious and quotidian in quality.

Post-trauma in this text is manifested as posttraumatic symptoms in the form of hallucinations experienced by the narrator. The theme of spectrality emerges central to such a reading of the text because of the constant hallucinations experienced by the narrator when faced with a moral dilemma. These began with the experience of killing the Crapulent Major, technically shot by the narrator's friend Bon, but which continued to haunt the narrator because he gave false information about the Crapulent Major to the General. However just before the final act, the narrator had an imaginary conversation with his mother who asked him if he was sure about killing a person and his response indicated a certain helplessness and lack of control over the entire situation – "It's too late Mama. I can't figure a way out" (Nguyen, 2015, p. 142). Unable to pull the trigger himself, Bon stepped in and shot the Major. He had evolved into a cold-hearted killer after losing his family in the mass evacuation from Saigon, while the narrator could not help feeling numb and fixating on the bullet wound in the major's head. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - V* (2013) lists flashbacks as a symptom of PTSD and delusional hallucinations as a symptom of schizophrenia and other depressive and bipolar disorders. Numbness to emotions or "feelings of detachment or estrangement from others" is another marked condition of posttraumatic stress disorder which appears in Nguyen's novel (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 2013, p. 272).

The narrator's hallucinations, where the Crapulent Major's ghost followed him around and held long conversations with him, further foreground the theme of post-trauma and spectrality in the text. Those experiences also underscore the subtextual significance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in Nguyen's novel. The narrator was scared to look at the dead major and his three eyes, the third referring to the bullet hole on his forehead. The language here highlights irony imbued with dark comedy. Soon after the first murder, the narrator received another assignment to kill a journalist called Sonny, before leaving for Vietnam. Sonny was marked as a prospective Communist agent because he wrote an inciting political article called, "Move On, War Over", on the insistence of the narrator, an indication of the increasing paranoia and egoism of the narrator (Phan and Phan, 2018, p. 127). After constant deliberation and nervousness, the narrator executed the assassination only to hallucinate about Sonny's ghost subsequently – "sharing my seat as I was with the Crapulent Major on one side and Sonny on the other" (Nguyen, 2015, p. 364). Every time the

narrator came across death in the narrative, he experienced visions of all the dead persons around him. This is evidenced at the end of the novel when the narrator is carrying the amputated leg of a dead man in Vietnam, trying to escape and hide from the Communists, when he heard the dead man's screams and found the ghosts of Crapulent Major and Sonny around him (Nguyen, 2015, p. 393).

Through a complex progression of plot, *The Sympathizer* engages with trauma in the denouement scene of the text when the narrator is made to recover a major repressed traumatic memory. After the long walk with visions of dead people, the narrator and Bon were captured in a Communist reeducation camp and were forced to "undergo a yearlong ideological detox" because of their long exposure to counterrevolutionary ideas in the USA (Phan and Phan, 2018, p. 122). At the camp, the narrator was asked to write a confession for the Commissar, his long-lost friend Man. The narrator was unable to write about every detail as some parts related to his capture and torture evaded his memory, foregrounding forgetting as the complex entanglement of embodied/existential experience, memory, and narrative agency as dramatized throughout the novel. After a period of incessant torture in a white room (sensory-deprivation room), the narrator was able to link the missing piece to his grand narrative by recollecting and reliving the guilt from the torture and gang-rape of a fellow Communist agent where the narrator was also present but did not intervene to save. This scene is significant because it engages with rewriting and remembering a particular traumatic event, which was the potential trigger to the narrator's post-trauma in his encounters with moral dilemmas and was manifested in the form of visions of dead persons like Sonny and Crapulent Major. At the beginning of the narrative there is an oblique reference to this event without any explanation as to why he chose to suppress or forget the incident of the Communist agent (Phan and Phan, 2018, p. 126). The Communist agent had a list of all spies including the narrator's name, which she swallowed to remove all evidence, not betraying her comrades despite suffering severe forms of sexual torture from the South Vietnamese policemen, as the narrator witnessed gruesome attacks on her while she protected him.

The rape scene is narrated as an interrogation in the form of violent sexual assault, under the observation of an American advisor and two Vietnamese commanding officers. The scene symbolically foregrounds the horror and violence of war in the form of rape and projects a "jaundiced stereotype of South Vietnam", catering to the political profiling of the South Vietnamese being corrupt, incompetent, and a puppet to their American master (Phan and Phan, 2018, p. 135). Ben Tran (2018) reads *The Sympathizer* as a project in collective memory which includes the social, cultural, and capitalist representations of the war in American society, interpreting the narrator's inaction during the communist agent's rape scene not as an act of "philosophical nihilism" but as a war crime (Tran, 2018, p. 413-414). In a similar vein, Sandra Kumamoto Stanley (2020) interpreted the narrator's inaction during the rape scene as a reflection of Ho Chi Minh's statement that "*Nothing* is more precious than independence and freedom" – a reminder of the colonial history of Vietnam with an emphasis on "nothing" (p. 296).

One plausible explanation as to why the narrator was unable to retrieve this memory for long is that perhaps he was so traumatized by the entire episode that it was repressed in ways not meant to be remembered and narrated. It also required the narrator to acknowledge his guilt and complicity through his repressed memories (Stanley, 2020) and in the process hold himself

accountable for a gruesome act of sexual violence perpetrated on a comrade who saved him. Freud wrote about this phenomenon in his work "Screen Memories" in 1899, when he attributed the liminal existence of traumatic memories between the conscious and unconscious, and claimed that two factors inhibit the translation of raw (episodic) memory to long term (semantic) memory. These were, first, the early onset of trauma in cases of childhood sexual trauma, and second, the overwhelming intensity of other events such as combat or accident which inhibit the formation of long-term memories (Gammage, 2016, p. 408). The stress of a traumatic event leads to the production of glucocorticoids such as cortisol, which hampers the storage of memory in the hippocampus. Hence, these memories become "unlabeled spatiotemporally" and subsequently inaccessible to common processes of retrieval (Redish, 2013, p. 195). In the language of contemporary trauma studies, drawing on an intersectional framework of memory studies and neuroscience, traumatic memories are hard to forget because they were never truly experienced in the consciousness and were trapped in the unconscious, which made them repressed rather than suppressed memories (Gammage, 2016). The repression of this memory may thus be examined as a self-preservation strategy, an attempt to protect the self from guilt by choosing not to remember it, in the process producing a system of denial which eventually leads to existential disintegration and latent trauma.

Conclusion

As the reading of Ngyuen's novel above hopes to have demonstrated, the framework of fiction often emerges as an effective as well as an affective medium to study human conflict and its resolution due to its ability to accommodate and articulate complex psychological situations embedded within cultural contexts through multiple experiential frameworks and points of view. Studying violence through fiction offers an insight into the world of cruel conditions rooted in systemic social injustice and discrimination (Martinez and Rubenstein, 2016). Fictional representations thus often enable re-constructions of collective memory with their interplay of matter and metaphor, events, experiences, and their corresponding semantic codes, frequently foregrounding an entanglement of remembering and forgetting at cognitive and cultural levels (Parui, 2022). With its narrative design and descriptive depth, Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer: A Novel* (2015) illustrates the ability of fiction to offer complex social and focal frameworks representing the cultural and existential conditions emanating from the America-Vietnam War. It highlights the misconstrued notions of the Vietnam War drawing on Nguyen's own multidimensional identity as second-generation Vietnamese refugee who acquired education primarily in the USA and the subsequent complexity which he imparts to his characters (Martinez and Rubenstein, 2016).

The novel can be read as an attempt to fictionally re-construct memories of a war that ended in the author's early childhood (Espiritu, 2006), lending Nguyen's literary depictions a dimension of postmemory (Hirsch, 1996) operative in quotidian forms, through which the horrors of the war as well as the associated latent trauma may be represented and revisited. Nguyen's novel also functions as a *kunsterroman* by depicting the education and reeducation of the narrator, functioning primarily as a catalyst to the narrator's personal reflections and existential evolution (Phan and Phan, 2018). In the end, *The Sympathizer* emerges as a novel about the narrator's

political conscience and identity, which eventually makes him come to terms with his own struggles with memory, masculinity, and sexuality (Nguyen, 2016). The narrator is left liminal and suspended between two nations as well as existential states, a permanent refugee with migrant memories (Stanley, 2020), as well as forces of forgetting. The novel reads more like an “allegorical and symbolic space” to illustrate the complexities of the spy-subject’s crises of commitment rather than as a representation of the Communist reeducation camps and post-war Communist ideology (Phan and Phan, 2018, p. 123). It also functions as a narrative and fictional substrate to embed and study trauma theory in conjunction with memory studies.

Our study has attempted to examine complex forms of memory, affect, and materiality through an exploration of refugee crisis as a form of insidious trauma in Vietnamese American literature with a close reading of *The Sympathizer*. The model espoused in this study has departed from the *big-event* model of trauma and instead combined postcolonial trauma, trauma due to racism, and other forms of everyday experiential marginalization which contribute to the slow violence and alienation of the subject at systemic as well as existential levels. Additionally, this article has examined factors like nostalgia and spectrality as inherent trauma triggers for refugee-subjects whose subjectivities are shaped and re-shaped by political as well as psychological crises. In this reading, *home* itself is viewed as a spectral element because of its constant interplay of absence and presence in their everyday lives, being both “visible and invisible, phenomenal and non-phenomenal” (Blanco and Peeren, 2013, p. 39). In addition to these forms of spectrality, the migrant subjects’ existence is marked by a sense of liminality which eschews any easy classification in political narratives and available identities. This article addresses this gap in recognizing refugee crisis and its posttraumatic affects by offering a close reading of the selected novel while drawing on an interdisciplinary framework of memory studies and trauma studies with the backdrop of the Vietnam War. In doing so, it foregrounds the unique cognitive complexity and affective ability of fiction to represent events and experiences of conflict, trauma, and irresolution, through which human suffering may be engaged with interpretative agency and empathy. Such engagements are increasingly urgent amidst the geopolitical crises and existential states of migrant subjects in the world we inhabit today.

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The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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