

## Article

# Finding Justice in Memory: Exploring Viet Thanh Nguyen's Cosmopolitan Ideals in His Novels

Yingxue Zhang

School of Foreign Languages, Jimei University, Xiamen 361021, China; yingxue@jmu.edu.cn

**Abstract:** In the realm of literary criticism, cosmopolitanism research provides a fresh perspective for evaluating literary works, highlighting the importance of respecting individual specific identities while linking personal destinies to broader global narratives. Against the backdrop of the current rise in cosmopolitan thought, this article explores the cosmopolitan themes in *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* by Vietnamese American writer Viet Thanh Nguyen, drawing on Martha Nussbaum's cosmopolitan ideals. As the first writer of Vietnamese descent to win the Pulitzer Prize for Literature, Nguyen reflects on the Vietnam War through his works by constructing dual identities, critiquing power structures, and reshaping the Vietnamese national character. These themes are explored within the context of globalization, offering profound reflections on colonial history and the recognition of personal identity. Nguyen's contributions provide an important literary and cultural perspective for understanding the complex issues in today's world.

**Keywords:** Viet Thanh Nguyen; cosmopolitanism; *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*; justice

## 1. Introduction

Since the 20th century, economic globalization has accelerated political and cultural globalization, sparking renewed interest in the term “cosmopolitanism” within theoretical circles. Scholars like Martha Nussbaum, approaching from a human nature perspective, explore cosmopolitanism and build upon Stoic ideas, arguing that it should move beyond narrow nationalism and shift loyalty from the nation state to all of humanity (Nussbaum 1996). Bruce Robbins situates “ethnicity, race, gender, and class” within the context of international relations and globalization, elucidating cosmopolitan theory from both historical and contemporary perspectives (Robbins and Cheah 1998). Kwame A. Appiah advocates for a rethinking of the moral principles of cosmopolitanism, promoting a form that is rooted in democracy and supports a broader integration of humanity (Appiah 2006). In his later years, Jacques Derrida called for a universal ethic that transcends national boundaries to achieve tolerance towards the other (Derrida 2001). In the field of literary criticism, cosmopolitanism has become a burgeoning trend. American scholar Cyrus R. K. Patell, in the context of globalization, re-examines literary traditions in the literature. His book *Cosmopolitanism and Literary Imagination* covers classic works, including *Othello*, *Moby Dick*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Animal Farm*, and others. British scholar F. McCulloch's *Cosmopolitanism in Contemporary British Fiction: Imagined Identities* examines issues of identity, race, gender, religion, power, love, and existence in contemporary British novels from a cosmopolitan perspective. This work offers a new research perspective in literary criticism: rather than ignoring race, ethnicity, gender, and cultural background, it focuses on individual destiny, connecting the individual with others, the outside world, and all of humanity, and it places the concrete “individual” within a grand narrative scope.

In the context of the rise of cosmopolitanism, this article explores the cosmopolitan ideals that permeate Viet Thanh Nguyen's novels, *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*. *The Sympathizer* narrates the story from the perspective of a double agent who wavers between North and South Vietnam, and between communism and capitalism. Through the inner



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monologue of the protagonist, it presents his complex views on war and his personal experiences. The protagonist's "empathy", which is a deep sympathy for his Vietnamese compatriots, North Vietnamese comrades, South Vietnamese soldiers, vulnerable Vietnamese refugees in American society, and other ethnic minorities, reflects the spirit of benevolence in Eastern Confucian culture. Through this empathy, Nguyen not only rectifies the experiences of the Vietnamese people during the Vietnam War but also highlights the values of humanistic care and social harmony found in Eastern wisdom. *The Committed* continues the protagonist's journey but delves deeper into his inner world and identity recognition in the narration. Set against the backdrop of 1980s Paris, the story follows the protagonist, a refugee, as he seeks recognition of his identity. His quest unfolds amidst drug trafficking gangs and under the influence of post-structuralist theories. It expands the themes and settings to deeply explore the protagonist's identity recognition and moral dilemmas in the context of globalization. *The Sympathizer* centers on the direct experiences of war and empathy for various groups, whereas *The Committed* expands its scope to encompass the contexts of postcolonialism and globalization, delving into the protagonist's reassessment of his beliefs and identity within a novel setting. Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* not only express profound sympathy and understanding for the Vietnamese people but also reflect a pursuit of a benevolent and harmonious society, as well as a critique of the powerful and a longing for a more just and inclusive world.

Viet Thanh Nguyen's cosmopolitanism is particularly evident in his two novels, *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*. The cosmopolitanism in these works is primarily presented through three dimensions. The first dimension is constructing dual identities: Nguyen's protagonists often embody dual identities, being both Eastern and Western. Their "hybrid" identity enables them to cross cultural boundaries and to empathize deeply with different groups, reflecting a spirit of global solidarity and the idea of transcending national borders, which are central tenets of cosmopolitanism. The second dimension is critiquing power structures: Nguyen's works frequently offer critiques of power structures, particularly colonialism, racism, and capitalism. This critical thinking underscores cosmopolitanism's pursuit of global justice and equality. For instance, in *The Sympathizer*, Nguyen criticizes Hollywood's stereotypical portrayal of the Vietnam War, highlighting its aggressiveness, imperialism, and control over discourse. The last dimension is reshaping the Vietnamese national character: Nguyen attempts to rectify the image of the Vietnamese nation, reflecting the benevolence and social harmony of East Asian Confucian wisdom. Through his novels, Nguyen aims to evoke a profound understanding of war and its impact on refugees, inspiring empathy on a global scale.

## 2. Constructing Dual Identities

Martha Nussbaum, a prominent representative of contemporary cosmopolitan philosophy, posits that cosmopolitanism is not just a set of universal values but also a profound understanding of the responsibilities and obligations of global citizenship. She underscores the importance of cosmopolitan education in shaping individuals as global citizens, advocating that education should enable people to recognize the similarities and differences between themselves and others and comprehend the moral duties they bear towards both their nation and the global community (Nussbaum 1994). In Viet Thanh Nguyen's novels, this cosmopolitan ideology is profoundly reflected. In *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*, the protagonists, as mixed-race individuals and double agents, experience trials of loyalty and betrayal, compassion and conflict, morality and survival, and other aspects of human nature. These internal struggles and conflicts not only reveal the moral dilemmas within humanity but also reflect the psychological struggles of individuals in different cultural and political contexts. Through the experiences of his protagonists, Nguyen deeply scrutinizes human nature, aligning with Nussbaum's advocacy for a cosmopolitan perspective that focuses on the capabilities of individuals.<sup>1</sup>

The story of *The Sympathizer* unfolds on the South Vietnamese battlefield after the Vietnam War. As a member of the refugee community, the protagonist "I" personally

endured every step of the escape, witnessing the hardships of refugee life and the inner torment, especially the tragic deaths of his friend Bon's wife and son during their escape, which caused him a huge psychological shock. However, upon arriving in the United States, these Vietnamese refugees found that the country did not live up to the "paradise" they had envisioned. Instead of the secure placement and warm greetings they had hoped for, they were confronted with the harsh reality of poor living conditions and a dangerous social environment. The protagonist employs meticulous techniques to depict the tragic lives of refugees in the United States. For instance, he utilizes rhetorical techniques like metaphor, parallelism, hyperbole, and irony to portray the pitiful plight of Vietnamese refugees fleeing the country. He sarcastically points out that refugees' inability to integrate into American society is akin to a cancer that consumes them. A considerable number of refugees in the United States have only two activities: waiting for relief days and spending their time aimlessly.

*The Committed*, although set in France, is essentially another refugee story. After undergoing a year of re-education in a camp in Vietnam, the protagonist, referred to as "I", decides to flee. Following 2 years in a refugee camp in Indonesia, "I" escapes to Paris as a refugee and continues a life of exile. "No, boat people were victims, objects of pity fixed forever in newspaper photographs. Part of me, my mama's baby, wanted that pity. But the part of me that was a grown man neither wanted nor deserved pity, neither wanted to be called a victim nor deserved to be seen as such, not after all my deeds and misdeeds. If the price of being human was to be recognized through being pitiful, then to hell with humanity! I was a rotten bastard—recognize that!" (Nguyen 2021, p. 36). He attempts to escape his past and prepare for the future by engaging in one of the purest forms of capitalism—drug dealing. In the novel, although the protagonist is no longer in physical danger, he remains haunted by the suffering he experienced in the re-education camp. While trying to integrate into Parisian society, he is both fascinated and uneasy about the city. After arriving in Paris, he transitions from being a professional spy to a gang underling. Soon after becoming addicted to drugs, he becomes a drug dealer himself. Amidst mental chaos, he continuously questions his own existence.

After the end of the Vietnam War, the South Vietnamese refugees did not receive the proper assistance publicized by the United States, leading to significant psychological trauma for both the author and the protagonist in his novels. Ultimately, they all became "others" in America in various ways. In these two novels, the protagonist's escape route spans across Asia, Europe, and America, where he encounters individuals from diverse countries and cultural backgrounds. He meets Cambodian sex workers, Arab robbers, rule-abiding Japanese, Japanese American editors, native French people, and Americans, among others. These experiences have provided him a profound understanding of different cultures while also showing his struggles and adaptations as an individual in the context of globalization. Each transformation of the protagonist's identity serves as a test of his personal values and moral concepts, as well as an exploration of his sense of responsibility as a global citizen. His story is not just a personal history of escape but also a deep reflection on the fate of individuals in the globalized world at the end of the 20th century.

The protagonist of *The Sympathizer* is a North Vietnamese spy who operates undercover in South Vietnam. His dual role as a spy allows him to perceive the situation between South Vietnam and North Vietnam with clarity, earning him the moniker of a "man of two faces" (Nguyen 2015, p. 15). At the beginning of this story, the protagonist expresses his ambivalence: "I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds" (Nguyen 2015, p. 15). Additionally, the protagonist possesses a "hybrid" identity—his father is a French priest, and his mother is a Vietnamese maid. In the sequel to *The Sympathizer*, titled *The Committed*, the protagonist continues to maintain this dual identity—"I am also still a man of two faces and two minds". "With two minds, I am able to see any issue from both sides" (Nguyen 2021, p. 3). Wandering between Eastern and Western countries, his thoughts gradually become more complex. As the story develops, "I" evolves from a North Vietnamese spy to a person who sympathizes

with anyone who suffers—“Sympathy is my talent” (Nguyen 2021, p. 152). Among them were both Vietnamese and Americans, as well as military personnel and ordinary people. In the end, he transforms from an initial communist believer into a two-faced person who can accept both Eastern and Western cultures. “When I looked in the mirror, I saw someone neither French nor American nor Vietnamese” (Nguyen 2021, p. 182). His multiple identities have turned him into a profound thinker, examining topics such as self, friendship, love, revolution, and more within the context of war. At the same time, his multiple identities also provide him with a multidimensional perspective, enabling him to transcend the constraints of a single identity and explore the essence of war through the lens of human nature’s complexity. Through the voice of the protagonist, Viet Thanh Nguyen explores the complex nature of war, stating that war is as complex as humanity itself. It entangles victims and victimizers together, and, in the process, ordinary Vietnamese people are the main victims of the war. Philip Caputo’s review of Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer* in *The New York Times* characterizes the novel as a tragi-comic exploration of the enduring miscommunications between East and West, and the complex moral choices between right and right, rather than right and wrong (Caputo 2015). In her essay “Between ‘I’ and ‘We’: Viet Thanh Nguyen’s Interethnic Multitudes”, Caroline Rody argues that *The Sympathizer* provides a nuanced, intimate, and rebellious portrayal of the narrator’s “I”, who is both a sympathetic and enigmatic figure. She suggests that Nguyen’s narrative technique opens up the protagonist’s multifaceted identity for a diverse audience, enriching American literature with a more inclusive perspective (Rody 2018). By depicting refugee stories, Viet Thanh Nguyen addresses the threats of war in the era of globalization. Under the shadow of war, anyone could potentially become a refugee. This possibility allows humanity to collectively experience the fears, sympathies, and compassion of refugees. It also encompasses other complex emotions such as passion, movement, jealousy, and hatred. These emotions form the basis of our understanding of the fate of others. Hidden in the historical memory of humanity, they constantly seek the meaning of existence and explanations for death.

Nguyen’s works demonstrate the deep psychological state of humanity in the face of death, a state that reflects on war and deeply explores the diversified understanding in the context of globalization. His novels go beyond personal refugee narratives, exploring the global impact of war on human communities and how we can find common ground in our shared fears and hopes. The multiple identities of the characters in Nguyen’s novels are often a literary response to his own multiple identities (Ghadiali 2021). As a Vietnamese American writer, Nguyen himself possesses cross-cultural experiences and dual identities. He is both an inheritor of Vietnamese culture and an active participant in American culture. This background, spanning different cultures and ethnicities, provides him a unique perspective. In his novels, the complexity of the protagonist’s identity mirrors the author’s own experiences—the narrator, a North Vietnamese spy raised in the South, is influenced by Western education, and his identity encompasses both political and cultural. This character navigates between different cultural and political systems, experiencing conflicts and contradictions within their identity, echoing Nguyen’s own experience as an immigrant straddling two cultures. Nussbaum emphasizes that education and cultural exchange can foster a sense of global citizenship, thereby reducing conflicts stemming from nationalism and cultural relativism. Viet Thanh Nguyen uses his protagonist’s dual identity—being a spy for the Vietnamese Communist Party and a Vietnamese who was educated and trained in the United States—to subvert the traditional American narrative of the Vietnam War. The dual perspective in Nguyen’s works not only grants the protagonist a unique viewpoint but also instills in him a cosmopolitan sentiment, enabling him to navigate and reflect on the cultural and political landscapes of both American and Vietnamese societies, challenge traditional narratives, and advocate for a more inclusive global community, thereby embodying the Stoic ideal of the “citizen of the world” and encapsulating the core aspects of cosmopolitanism—identity and responsibility.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Criticizing Power Structures

In her cosmopolitan philosophy, Martha Nussbaum introduces the concept of “de-world centering”, a significant discourse. This concept calls for transcending the traditional nation-state framework, highlighting the interconnectedness and shared responsibilities among global citizens. She argues that traditional cosmopolitanism often reflects a Western-centric bias, overlooking the rich value of global multiculturalism. Therefore, she advocates for a more inclusive and diverse post-national structure that values everyone’s human rights and dignity equally. Nussbaum’s discourse on de-world centering is evident in her “capabilities approach”, which asserts that “everyone should have equal opportunities to fulfill their potential, irrespective of their geographical location” (Nussbaum 2021). The “capabilities approach” highlights the universality of human dignity and the universal importance of basic capabilities, rather than assigning superiority to specific cultures or nations. In *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*, Viet Thanh Nguyen reveals and critiques the impact of Western power structures on marginalized groups. These works not only show the struggles of marginalized groups under hegemonic politics but also reveal how these groups seek survival and self-identification within an unequal global order.

*The Sympathizer* demonstrates how the United States, before and after the Vietnam War, appropriated the narrative rights of the Vietnamese people through various cultural media. During the Vietnam War, the United States not only engaged in military operations but also crafted a heroic self-image, depicting the war as a “just struggle” through media, cultural products, and political propaganda. As an emerging medium of communication in the 20th century, film became a primary means of shaping national ideology and public memory. After the Vietnam War, the United States spared no effort in seizing public media resources, such as film, to embed the war within the discourse of American narratives. The adaptability of film has altered the public’s understanding of history and created opportunities for the development of collective memory. To a significant extent, the formation of public memory relies on the characteristics of the media. Social organizations that control media resources can use films and other media to construct historical narratives and shape collective memory. The protagonist personally witnessed the process through which Hollywood transformed the memories of the Vietnam War into an American narrative. Like *Apocalypse Now*, the film *The Hamlet*<sup>3</sup> is a typical Hollywood-style film. It adopts the commonly used American heroism narrative mode: American soldiers not only saved Vietnam, but they also won the hearts of Vietnamese girls. The film conveys concepts like “only the West can save the East” and “only Western men can save Eastern women”, which are filled with Orientalist arrogance and ultimately distort the historical facts of American aggression against Vietnam. In the context of the Vietnam War film, Sylvia Chong analyzes the American response to visual representations of the Vietnam War, such as the photograph of the “napalm girl”, “news footage of the Tet Offensive”, and feature films from *The Deer Hunter* to *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. She argues that Americans have largely derived racialized fantasies from images of Asians as either the perpetrators or victims of extreme violence (Chong 2011). The protagonist in the novel is an intellectual who has been exposed to both Eastern and Western cultures and possesses the ability to think independently. “Frankly, there just weren’t any qualified Vietnamese actors. Most of them were amateurs and the handful of professionals all overacted. It must be the way they were trained. You’ll see. Just withhold judgment until you see these actors act. Unfortunately, withholding judgment was not one of my strong suits. What Violet was telling me was that we could not represent ourselves; we must be represented, in this case, by other Asians” (Nguyen 2015, p. 204). Faced with the arrogance and rudeness of Hollywood directors, he remained humble and did his best to add Vietnamese elements to the film. For example, he showed the director how Vietnamese people’s cries of anguish differ when facing slaughter. The absurd performance in the film is not only the protagonist’s satire of Hollywood’s “otherness” narrative style towards the Vietnam War but also reflects Nguyen’s “revenge” on Hollywood’s discourse system. Hollywood is a component of the American military-industrial machine, with the ultimate goal of reproducing power

and inequality to meet the needs of war machines (Nguyen 2016b). Nguyen believes that Hollywood films, exemplified by “Apocalypse Now”, share a similar nature on the global film screen as the discourse war on the Vietnam War and the Pentagon’s war of attrition on the Vietnam battlefield. He argues that: “Hollywood’s blockbuster strategy is only the cinematic equivalent of American military strategy, a celluloid campaign of shock and awe meant to obliterate all local competition, as American stealth bombers overwhelm enemy air defenses” (Nguyen 2016a, p. 14). Nguyen has not only secured a discourse space for the Vietnamese in the narrative of the Vietnam War but also challenged American cultural hegemony and the memory industry of war.

In *The Committed*, Viet Thanh Nguyen sets the scene in 1970s Paris, narrating the story of the protagonist, a refugee, who seeks his identity amidst drug trafficking gangs and post-structuralist theory while offering a profound critique of power. In her critique for *The Guardian* titled “*The Committed* by Viet Thanh Nguyen review—challenging colonialism”, Aminatta Forna observes that the novel is unabashedly political, and it tackles a range of complex themes, such as the emergence of capitalism and communism, the experiences of immigration and assimilation, the advent of hyper-capitalism, and the rise of religious extremism (Forna 2021). Through the lens of the protagonist, Nguyen scrutinizes the political situation of colonialism, communism, and American capitalism. In Chapter 7, the protagonist poses a deafening question about the world history of the 20th century: “What is to be done about slavery? What is to be done about colonialism? What is to be done about occupation? What is to be done about racial inequality? What is to be done about class exploitation? What is to be done about the decline of Western civilization? What is to be done about the woman question and then (the) male ego?” (Nguyen 2021, pp. 108–9). These questions highlight the responsibility for historical wrongs, such as slavery and colonialism. They also underscore the necessity for the ongoing struggle against systemic issues like racial inequality and class exploitation. Nguyen argues that both individuals and society have the responsibility to take action to fundamentally change social structures and institutions. He further emphasizes his critique of colonialism and its lingering effects on the collective memory and identity of the colonized: “Whether the thesis or the antithesis was communism or anticommunism, the point was that they composed the polar opposites of what the West unironically called the Cold War, as fought between the USA and USSR. But the synthesis was the recognition that this war had been extremely hot for us Asians and Africans and Latin Americans. Seeing the failures of both communism and anticommunism, I chose nothing, a synthesis that neither capitalists nor communists could understand” (Nguyen 2021, p. 62). Viet Thanh Nguyen sheds light on the complex opposition between various ideologies during the Cold War era and examines how these confrontations shaped individual destinies. Rather than viewing the Cold War as a simplistic binary between capitalism and communism, he holds that such a dichotomy fails to account for the profound suffering experienced by regions such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Additionally, Nguyen’s novels explore the marginalization of women within societal power structures. Although they do not directly address female empowerment, the nuanced portrayal of female characters indicates a deep concern for the challenges women face within social power structures—a concern that enriches his narrative and uncovers the complex situations of women across different cultural and historical contexts. In Chapter 3 of *The Sympathizer*, three prostitutes are depicted as they wait for evacuation to the United States: they jest, groom themselves, and use newspapers as fans, displaying their charm. The protagonist converses with them and discovers their resigned acceptance of their profession. *The Sympathizer* reveals the astonishing number of prostitutes in Saigon and its surroundings, most of whom come from impoverished rural areas. They lost their homes and livelihoods due to the war and, desperate for survival, were forced into sex work in exchange for the protection offered by American troops. “Now am I daring to accuse American strategic planners of deliberately eradicating peasant villages in order to smoke out the girls who would have little choice but to sexually service the same boys who bombed,

shelled, strafed, torched, pillaged, or merely forcibly evacuated said villages? I am merely noting that the creation of native prostitutes to service foreign privates is an inevitable outcome of a war of occupation" (Nguyen 2015, p. 61). The existential predicaments faced by these women highlight the particularly devastating impact of war on vulnerable populations, with women being especially affected. In *The Committed*, the female characters' bodies and emotions are often used by male characters as a means to achieve power and desires, continuing to highlight the objectification and exploitation of women in society. In the dialogue concerning women's empowerment, "my" aunt points out: "Frenchwomen couldn't even vote until 1945! After I was born. We've barely emerged from the Dark Ages! ..." (Nguyen 2021, p. 195). This statement underscores the systemic exclusion of women from political processes, a phenomenon that has persisted despite the passage of time. The aunt's remarks extend beyond this historical context, interrogating the protagonist's engagement with feminist literature and theory. She challenges his intellectual curiosity by inquiring about the last time he engaged with the works of female authors or discussed concepts such as "sexism", "patriarchy", or "phallus". This line of questioning exposes the marginalization of women's voices within the academic sphere and underscores the pervasive power imbalances women face across various societal domains, including politics, academia, culture, and society at large. The marginalization of women is not merely an oversight of their intellectual and professional contributions, but rather a fundamental denial of their right to full societal participation. In Viet Thanh Nguyen's novels, the portrayal of these criticisms serves a dual function: on one hand, it reveals the current state of women's disempowerment; on the other hand, it incites profound contemplation and active engagement aimed at ameliorating this condition. Through this narrative strategy, Nguyen not only exposes the unequal status of women in society but also underscores the necessity for society to engage in a deep reflection on gender inequality and advocates for concerted efforts to achieve gender parity. This perspective emphasizes that gender equality is not only a moral and ethical issue but also a matter of social structure and institutional frameworks, requiring collective action and systemic reforms to address.

In *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*, Nguyen deeply analyzes the profound impact of Western power structures on marginalized groups. These works not only reveal the struggles of marginalized groups under hegemonic power politics but also demonstrate the ways they seek survival and self-identification in the global unequal order. Nguyen aims to offer new narratives for voices marginalized during the Cold War, challenging the traditional Cold War narrative centered on the West. His works focus not only on the direct experience of war but also delve into its long-term impact on human communities and how different cultures and societies seek resonance in common fears and hopes. This focus on marginalized groups resonates with the core tenets of cosmopolitanism, which emphasizes global interconnectedness that transcends national borders and cultural differences, as well as the recognition of global citizenship and its associated responsibilities. His concern for the common destiny of humanity also reflects the core concept of cosmopolitanism and the global citizenship responsibilities and obligations emphasized in Martha Nussbaum's capability theory. Through literary creation, Nguyen asserts the right to narrative for the Vietnamese in the Vietnam War's discourse and challenges America's cultural hegemony and the memory industry of war.

#### 4. Reshaping the Vietnamese National Character

In her foundational treatise *Political Emotions*, Martha Nussbaum articulates the critical role of empathy in the pursuit of social justice. She posits that the deliberate cultivation and expansion of empathetic capacities are indispensable for the actualization of equitable societal structures. Nussbaum contends that through the promotion of empathetic interaction and mutual care, individuals are enabled to transcend their intrinsic self-interests, thereby achieving a deeper understanding and shared compassion for the plight of others. This process, she suggests, is instrumental in enhancing social solidarity and propelling the momentum of social advancement (Nussbaum 2013). Nussbaum's viewpoint emphasizes

the role of sympathy in promoting social justice, especially in the context of globalization, where sympathy becomes an important emotional bond for cross-cultural understanding and social justice. Viet Thanh Nguyen's works resonate with Nussbaum's perspective, emphasizing the importance of sympathy in a globalized world through literary creation. In *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*, Nguyen deeply explores the national character of the Vietnamese people, striving to rectify the image of the Vietnamese nation. His works exhibit not only a profound sympathy and understanding for the Vietnamese people but also embody the pursuit of benevolence and social harmony as espoused by Eastern Confucian philosophy, thereby showcasing a distinct form of Eastern cosmopolitanism. By depicting the resilience and dignity of the Vietnamese people in war and displacement, Nguyen challenges the Western-dominated narrative and ensures a rightful place for the Vietnamese people in the annals of history.

National character refers to the typical personality traits shared by all members of a nation, which is a specific psychological state formed by each ethnic group in its historical development, usually manifested as a sense of identification and belonging to its own culture and social life. The formation of Vietnamese national character is deeply influenced by Confucianism due to historical and geographical influences. Confucianism from China serves as a significant pillar of Vietnamese culture, and it has been deeply ingrained within the Vietnamese national ethos. In the scholarly discourse, Li Wenshi posits that Confucian culture has been a pervasive influence on Vietnam's feudal dynasties from the 10th century to the mid-20th century, with Confucian thought being deeply ingrained in the Vietnamese cultural fabric (Li 2017, p. 66). The core Confucian ideas of "loyalty and filial piety" (忠孝), "benevolence" (仁爱), and "harmony in diversity" (和而不同)<sup>4</sup> have been continuously nationalized and localized in Vietnam, gradually forming Confucian norms with Vietnamese characteristics. In his 2 works, Viet Thanh Nguyen weaves the Confucian-infused aspects of Vietnamese national memory into historical narratives, offering a rich tapestry of the national character across various Vietnamese collectives and individuals. His work challenges the entrenched biases and stereotypes of Vietnamese people, which were often characterized by timidity, isolation, indifference, and narrow-mindedness within the American colonial cultural discourse. Nguyen's narratives serve to diversify and complexify the portrayal of Vietnamese personalities, thereby countering the monolithic narratives often imposed by colonialist ideologies.

*The Sympathizer* portrays the protagonist's loyalty and filial piety. Confucian spirit of loyalty and filial piety holds an important position in Vietnamese culture. After thousands of years, the Confucian culture of loyalty and filial piety has deeply shaped the formation of the Vietnamese national character, becoming the creed and principle of the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. The Confucian advocacy of loyalty initially centered on the political moral standard of "loyalty to the monarch".<sup>5</sup> In antiquity, the emperor symbolized the nation, embodying governance and national identity, with the Confucian principle of "loyalty to the monarch" underscoring the duty of national fidelity. This principle has historically influenced political values in imperial societies. In modern Vietnam, it has evolved into a patriotic movement dedicated to national salvation. In *The Sympathizer*, the concept of "loyalty to the monarch" is pervasive, most notably in the protagonist's steadfast loyalty to the North Vietnamese Communist Party, which parallels the traditional loyalty to the sovereign. The protagonist's affiliation with the Communist Party of Vietnam dates back to his adolescence, during which period he engaged in a systematic study of the seminal communist text, the *Communist Manifesto*. Under the intellectual influence of his associate named Man, the protagonist harbored a profound admiration and aspiration for the Chinese revolution during his formative years. He regarded the Chinese revolutionaries as the "great helmsmen", who were pivotal in steering the revolutionary movement towards progress. The Vietnam War, a military contest between the US-led capitalist bloc and the Soviet-led socialist bloc, was fundamentally an ideological struggle. The protagonist's role as a Vietnamese Communist Party member obliged him to study and respect Chinese thought, especially the Confucian concept of personal development as a basis for



family, state, and global harmony, summarized by the phrase “cultivating oneself, governing the family, governing the country, and pacifying the world”.<sup>6</sup> After the “fall of Saigon”, he accompanied a South Vietnamese general to the United States, where he persisted in his espionage activities. As a double agent with ties to both the South and the North, he undergoes a profound faith crisis when confronted with the realities of the Vietnam War and its aftermath, compelling him to re-evaluate his political convictions and dedication to revolutionary principles. His inner turmoil is reflected in his contemplation of the ultimate meaning of the Vietnamese revolution and his experiences in the re-education camp, which challenge the beliefs he had previously held. The protagonist’s crisis of faith stems not only from his deep understanding of both sides of the Vietnam War but also from his awareness of the role the West, particularly the United States, played in the conflict. He recognizes the potential for authority and principles to be misused, even when they claim to pursue lofty ideals, prompting a critical reassessment of his role and the goals he supports. Despite experiencing a profound existential and ideological crisis, his respect for the revolutionary cause remains undiminished. Through a reflective memoir, he seeks to explore and explain the core nature and significance of the Vietnamese revolution. The blending of Confucian “loyalty to the monarch” with Vietnam’s colonial history has profoundly influenced intellectuals like the protagonist, who intertwine national duty with personal honor. In Chapter 9 of *The Sympathizer*, the protagonist’s poignant visit to his mother’s tomb is depicted: “What I would give to have those useless things with me now, kneeling by my mother’s tomb and resting my forehead against its rough surface” (Nguyen 2015, p. 200). His actions serve as a microcosm of the role of Confucian filial piety within Vietnamese families. By uniting his loyalty to the nation with his reverence for his mother, he illustrates through personal narrative the deep impact of Confucian values of loyalty and filial piety on Vietnamese intellectuals. This counters the negative stereotypes of cowardice, selfishness, and self-interest perpetuated by American colonial culture.

As a 1.5-generation Vietnamese American writer, Viet Thanh Nguyen continues the concept of “benevolence” in Confucian culture. *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* chart the emotional odyssey of Vietnamese refugees amidst the challenges of a foreign milieu. These works highlight the ethnic traits of the Vietnamese community, characterized by friendliness, affection, and a sense of justice. Benevolence, as a cornerstone of Confucian ethics, primarily governs the modulation of interpersonal relationships, facilitating the fostering of harmonious coexistence among individuals. The most salient friendship in both *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* is that between the protagonist and his comrade, Bon. The beginning of *The Sympathizer* emphasizes the bond between them, as they are depicted as sworn brothers. After the end of the Vietnam War, it was difficult to obtain a flight ticket for fleeing to the United States. As a member of the South Vietnamese military, “I” included Bon in the list of evacuees for personal reasons. Tragically, Bon’s wife and son died while preparing to board the plane. In order to take care of Bon, who lost his wife and children, in agony, “I” not only managed his daily affairs but also provided careful emotional comfort. At the end of the story, Bon participated in the general’s counterattack plan against Vietnam’s armed forces, while “I” defied orders from my superiors and rejoined the counterattacking forces, motivated by a desire to safeguard Bon. In *The Committed*, the protagonist and Bon’s friendship endures after a year of hardship in a re-education camp in Vietnam, leading them to start anew in Paris. This bond exemplifies the Confucian virtue of benevolence. In Confucian culture, friendship transcends mere emotional attachment, offering a means to overcome spiritual emptiness. Historically, Vietnamese village communities have served as fundamental administrative units and the cornerstone of Vietnamese culture, shaping a national character that values emotional bonds and a sense of justice while also providing the social context for the development of such a character. Under the profound influence of the spirit and relationships within the village community, the Vietnamese people have cultivated a character that emphasizes emotions and righteousness. Vietnamese Americans in the United States have preserved aspects of their village culture. Having fled to the United States, they gradually formed a unique Vietnamese en-

clave known as “Little Saigon” in areas like Westminster, California. In the two novels, the protagonist and Bon twice found themselves exiled as refugees, first in the United States and then in France. Living together, they supported one another and faced challenges side by side. This harmonious interpersonal relationship represents an inheritance and further development of Confucian values regarding hometown and neighboring cultures. Mencius once said, “When the villagers are in the same village, they come and go together as friends, they watch and help each other, and support each other when they are sick, the people will live in harmony”.<sup>7</sup> He advocated the quality of friendship among fellow villagers, characterized by mutual care and assistance, which largely embodies Confucian benevolence in the norms of interpersonal communication. The Vietnamese community continues to uphold the Confucian concept of benevolence and values friendship among Vietnamese who share roots, origins, and hometowns. In the United States, a foreign land, Vietnamese refugees not only assist one another in daily life but also provide mutual spiritual inspiration. This spirit of friendship and unity helps to counter the negative stereotypes of Vietnamese people as ungrateful, isolated, and indifferent, stereotypes that were portrayed by American colonizers.

Within the framework of Confucian culture, the concept of “harmony in diversity” is evident in interpersonal, societal, and natural interactions, as well as in international and intercultural contexts. Viet Thanh Nguyen embeds the cosmopolitan ideal of “harmony in diversity” in his novels, *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*, exploring the complex historical dynamics between Vietnam, the United States, and France. Thus, he expresses his aspiration for a peaceful and friendly global community. In the academic narrative, the period following the mid-19th century is marked by the beginning of French colonial expansion into Vietnam. In the post-World War II era, the United States’ influence in the Asia-Pacific region grew, resulting in the United States taking over from France in the southern regions of Vietnam (Nguyen 2002, pp. 56–57). During the Vietnam War’s escalation, the United States provided endorsement and economic and military aid to the client governments in South Vietnam. In *The Committed*, Viet Thanh Nguyen challenges and deconstructs narratives of colonialism and its aftermath, offering a critical perspective on the complexities of postcolonial life; for example, how the U.S. military massacred civilians on the Vietnamese battlefield, and how Vietnamese refugees struggled to survive after the war. Vietnamese individuals, whether in Vietnam, France, or the United States, all endure the lingering effects of colonial oppression. In *The Sympathizer*, Viet Thanh Nguyen discusses the devastating effects of war and colonialism on the Vietnamese nation and its people. He argues that, under capitalism, people of color are generally alienated from themselves. He further points out that neither colonizers nor colonized individuals should be the objects of propaganda. Nguyen advocates for nonviolence as a problem-solving strategy and contends that those liberated from oppression must engage in self-recreation (Simon 2021). The cosmopolitanism advocated by Viet Thanh Nguyen, which aims to achieve communication between different ethnic groups on the basis of universal friendship, is a manifestation of the Confucian concept of “harmony in diversity” among 1.5 generations of Vietnamese American writers. The protagonist’s deep concern for the fate of individuals, especially vulnerable groups, amidst varying power dynamics in *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*, highlights the robust humanistic ethos inherent in the Vietnamese national character, challenging the shallow and narrow orientalist image of Vietnamese people perpetuated by American colonial narratives.

The core Confucian ideals in Vietnamese culture, such as “loyalty and filial piety”, “benevolence”, and “harmony in diversity”, serve as cultural bridges for Vietnamese American writers to connect with their ancestral roots. As an exemplary representative of the new generation of Vietnamese American authors, Viet Thanh Nguyen’s works are steeped in the essence of Confucian culture. The characters portrayed in his novels are a concentrated embodiment of the Vietnamese national character. The positive character images and proactive personality traits starkly contrast with the negative and passive character groups concocted by American colonial culture, offering a powerful rebuttal. Nguyen’s

novels not only reshape the Vietnamese national character but also reflect the pursuit of benevolence and social harmony, which is the wisdom of Eastern Confucianism. His works transcend personal refugee narratives; they explore the impact of war on the human community from a global perspective and how humans can find resonance amidst shared fears and hopes. This focus on the common destiny of humanity is central to cosmopolitan thought and embodies the global civic responsibilities and obligations highlighted in Martha Nussbaum's capability approach. Nussbaum's cosmopolitanism provides a framework for understanding and practicing cosmopolitanism that is inclusive of diverse cultures and values, complementing the Confucian culture implicit in Nguyen's novels, which aims for social harmony and moral cultivation.

## 5. Conclusions

Viet Thanh Nguyen's novels, *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*, provide an in-depth exploration of cosmopolitan ideals that resonate with Martha Nussbaum's philosophical perspective. Nguyen challenges traditional Vietnam War narratives by presenting a protagonist with a complex identity—he is a spy for the Vietnamese Communist Party and also a Vietnamese who was educated in the U.S. This dual perspective not only offers a unique viewpoint for the character but also establishes a cosmopolitan framework for evaluating the interactions between the U.S. and Vietnam. It reflects Nussbaum's advocacy for fostering global citizenship through education and cultural exchange, which aims to mitigate tensions arising from nationalistic and culturally relativistic viewpoints. In Nguyen's narratives, the protagonist's intricate identity acts as a catalyst to delve into and redefine the Vietnamese national character, promoting Confucian values of benevolence and social harmony. The novels transcend individual refugee narratives to embrace a broader global perspective, assessing the wider implications of war on society and seeking common ground in our shared fears and aspirations. Nguyen's work goes beyond expressing empathy and understanding for the Vietnamese people; it also challenges the status quo, advocating for a society characterized by benevolence and harmony. His writing serves as a critique of the powerful and envisions a more equitable and inclusive global community. These themes align with Nussbaum's cosmopolitan ethos, which posits that by expanding our capacity for compassion and empathy, we can look beyond our own interests to comprehend and alleviate the suffering of others, thus fostering greater social harmony and progress.

It is worth noting that the cosmopolitan themes reflected in *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* demonstrate Viet Thanh Nguyen's profound comprehension of the intricacies between Vietnamese and Western perspectives, individual and collective identities, and Eastern and Western cultures. Nguyen's cosmopolitan stance is not merely a theoretical discourse but is vividly portrayed through the characters and narratives in his novels. His works encourage readers to move beyond simplistic binary oppositions and to grasp the nuances of multiculturalism and identity. He illustrates how individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds navigate their place within complex historical and social contexts. This profound exploration of complexity positions Nguyen's works as more than just a retelling of the Vietnam War; they are also a reflection on the diversity and inclusiveness of human society in the age of globalization. The multifaceted and pluralistic world he portrays aligns with Taoist social philosophy, which rejects the absolute moral judgments inherent in Western culture, often characterized by a black-and-white mindset: he offers a more nuanced and inclusive worldview that avoids simplistic categorizations into opposing extremes.<sup>8</sup>

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> On the foundation of Stoic cosmopolitanism, Martha Nussbaum uses the capability theory to connect the essence of cosmopolitanism with the equality of human nature. She believes that no matter which country or ethnicity, important capabilities in human life must be respected by all, and since these capabilities all stem from the social practices of human society, they are, therefore, universal.
- <sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that, in addition to *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*, Nguyen's other work, *The Refugees*, further explores the theme of multiple identities through short stories. The characters in these stories, despite being in different cultural environments, share universal experiences and emotions, reflecting the author's profound insight into the issue of identity recognition.
- <sup>3</sup> *The Hamlet* is a film that Viet Thanh Nguyen adapted from *Apocalypse Now*, an "anti-war" film directed by Francis Ford Coppola. According to Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Apocalypse Now* is only an "American" anti-war film where the Vietnamese are forced to keep silent.
- <sup>4</sup> In Confucian culture, "loyalty and filial piety", "benevolence", and "harmony in diversity" constitute the three pillars of moral ethics: "loyalty and filial piety" emphasize devotion to the nation and reverence for family, serving as the foundation for personal virtue and social order; "benevolence" advocates for the treatment of others with kindness and compassion, striving for harmonious interpersonal relationships and a just society; and "harmony in diversity" encourages the achievement of social cohesion while respecting individual differences and diversity. These concepts have collectively shaped the social fabric and personal conduct norms in East Asia, exerting a profound influence on ethical values.
- <sup>5</sup> The "loyalty" ideology of Xunzi (荀子), a representative figure of Confucianism, is to be loyal to the emperor and to plan for him. For the development of Chinese political thought, Xunzi provided strong theoretical support for the centralized royal rule in later generations.
- <sup>6</sup> The concept of "cultivating oneself, governing the family, governing the country, and pacifying the world" comes from the *Book of Rites*, also known as the Liji (《礼记》), which is a collection of texts describing the social forms, administration, and ceremonial rites of the Zhou dynasty as they were understood in the Warring States and the early Han periods.
- <sup>7</sup> This sentence comes from *Mencius (Teng Wen Gong Shang)* (《孟子·滕文公上》), which is a quotation-style article created by Mencius' disciples.
- <sup>8</sup> This perspective is in harmony with Taoist principles such as "following the natural way" (道法自然) and "governing by non-action" (无为而治), advocating for adherence to natural laws and respect for the organic development of phenomena, rather than imposing arbitrary, absolute moral standards".

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