

Navigating the Hyphen: Exploring Duality and Identity in *The Sympathizer*

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Abstract:

This study examines Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*. It centers on its biracial protagonist as a symbol of a hyphenated existence. Through critical textual analysis, this paper shows how the hyphen shapes a fragmented identity that challenges cultural divides and offers a unique view of both Eastern and Western cultures. The article applies concepts of hybridity (Bhabha), double-consciousness (Du Bois), and diaspora (Zeleva) to illustrate how the protagonist's mixed heritage facilitates a profound critique of race and nationalism while simultaneously complicating the experience of a true sense of belonging. Influenced by the Vietnam War and exile, this mixed background is shown as a lasting wound that causes tragic self-fragmentation. The novel offers important insights on identity, representation, and the long-term effects of colonial and Cold War violence.

Keywords: Hyphen, Duality, Identity, Hybridity, *The Sympathizer*.



Introduction:

People are always trying to understand who they truly are. Yet external forces like competing loyalties, cultural pressures, and perception often fracture an individual's sense of identity. The Vietnam War and its aftermath, for instance, irrevocably reshaped global perceptions of imperialism, ideological conflict, and the human cost of displacement. Viet Thanh Nguyen's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Sympathizer*, places this tension within the context of the Vietnam War. The novel explores duality. It is not just a theme but the fundamental state of the protagonist's being. Duality is thus an intrinsic part of his identity.

The novel centers on the unnamed Captain. He is a communist mole within the South Vietnamese army. He flees to America but remains involved in espionage and conflict. The narrative shows his identity is always balanced on the "hyphen." The hyphen is a symbol of both connection and separation. This figure, who refers to himself as "a man of two faces and two minds" (Nguyen 8), exemplifies the deep psychological, cultural, and political divisions caused by colonialism, war,

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migration, and ideological extremism. His existence as a spy necessitates constant performance and internal division, forcing him to navigate treacherous landscapes where loyalty is fluid, truth is multifaceted, and the self is an ever-shifting construct.

Existing critics often place *The Sympathizer* within postcolonial and diasporic studies. They highlight its critique of Orientalism and its examination of Cold War politics. However, few analyses examine how Nguyen focuses on the hyphen itself. He transforms it from a simple grammatical mark into a powerful symbol. This symbol represents duality as a state of crisis. This article builds on postcolonial ideas like Homi Bhabha's hybridity and W.E.B. Du Bois's double-consciousness. It also includes Paul Zeleza's idea of diaspora as a constant voyage and process of becoming.

This article examines the complex nature of duality in *The Sympathizer*. Using Zeleza's theory, the Captain's hyphenated existence is more than a fractured experience. It becomes an active, often violent journey through multiple identities. This perspective lets us compare two ideas. The novel presents the hyphen as a bleak wound. In contrast, diasporic identity is more fluid but still painful. It is an ongoing negotiation without a clear endpoint. It discusses how the Captain's mixed French and Vietnamese heritage, his political double agency, his status as a refugee, and his narrative voice create an identity that is always in crisis and continually changing.

Nguyen's employs strategies to articulate this hyphenated state. He explores the protagonist's internal conflicts and fragmented loyalties. Nguyen also engages with orientalist discourse and the legacy of colonial violence. This illuminates how *The Sympathizer* transcends the specifics of the Vietnam War and offers a powerful, unsettling meditation. This meditation addresses the enduring struggle for self-definition. The struggle occurs within the crucible of competing worlds and ideologies and the inescapable burden of history. In this context, the hyphen becomes less a bridge. It becomes more a site of perpetual negotiation, interrogation, and existential tension.

This study argues that in *The Sympathizer*, the hyphenated identity is not just a cultural state but also an existential and political one. It is shaped by colonial history and Cold War violence. The protagonist's experience with the hyphen serves as a place of both connection and harsh division. This shapes the entire story. His confession becomes a performance that acts out the same fragmentation it is trying to explain. Nguyen demonstrates the significant psychological and historical burdens of duality. The hyphen is not merely a connector but an existential fault line, intensifying the Captain's psychological struggle and ethical uncertainty. It also serves as a powerful marker of historical trauma, shaped by the violence of the Vietnam War and the cultural erasures and displacements of exile.

Furthermore, the novel positions the hyphenated condition as a catalyst for profound fragmentation. The critical perspective demanded by navigating competing worlds and loyalties, it argues, necessitates the dissolution of a coherent, unified self. Through this lens, *The Sympathizer* actively dismantles romanticized notions of cultural bridge-building. Instead, Nguyen presents duality itself as a crucible of violence and revelation. The protagonist's fractured existence within the hyphen serves as a radical commentary. This commentary focuses on the pervasive, often brutal, politics of race, nationalism, and belonging. This struggle plays out within a globalized world. However, this world remains irreparably fractured by its histories and power structures.

I. The Hyphen as a Structural and Embodied Condition of Identity

The hyphen in a "hyphenated identity" goes beyond its grammatical role to become an important philosophical and cultural symbol. It visually represents the idea of being in between, showing the reality of existing in different worlds. This in-between state does not mean a simple merge; it reflects ongoing negotiation, suggesting both connection and division. As Kainat, M., Amjad, J., Anwar, L., and Afreen, S. point out, this idea has developed to describe how individuals intersect across various categories like "racial, ethnic, and social classes, as well as gender and sexual orientation" (185). Therefore, the hyphen serves as both a label and a sign of the tensions that come with navigating multiple identities.

In *The Sympathizer*, Viet Thanh Nguyen brings this theoretical concept to life. He gives the grammatical hyphen a strong narrative weight. He reimagines it as the main metaphor for his protagonist's divided mind, which clearly challenges any idealized view of hybridity. For the Captain, the hyphen is not a bridge. It is a divide that traps him in between. This state is defined by intense alienation, not enrichment. This "bastard consciousness" comes from colonial neglect and historical betrayal. It is the key lens through which he sees all other dualities. These include political, cultural, and linguistic conflicts. He feels them all as irreconcilable.

I. 1. The Hyphen: From Grammatical Marker to Metaphor of Fractured Self

Unlike Du Bois's double-consciousness, which envisions agency amid racial oppression. This origin strips hybridity of liberatory potential, rendering it a historical prison. The captain's spying, Hollywood complicity, and ultimate torture of his communist mentor manifest not strategic resistance but entrapment in illegitimacy. His body is broken during interrogation. This makes the hyphen a literal, open wound. The wound bleeds the contradictions of colonialism and the Cold War: "proof that some fractures never suture" (Nguyen 290). The "fracture" refers to physical, psychological, and symbolic pain. In this context, the hyphen is not just a line connecting ideas; it is the exact spot where his body is torn apart. This

realization makes the novel's main argument clear: some dualities are wounds that cannot be healed. This moment goes beyond theory about hybridity and shows its brutal, physical cost.

Postcolonial theory often romanticizes fragmentation as pluralistic, Nguyen reveals it as irreparable loss: the bastard belongs nowhere because his existence indicts all nations. He notes. "We are living reminders of their defeat" (Nguyen 261). Thus, bastard consciousness is not just a metaphor but forms the core of the novel's critique. When identity is shaped by violence, redemption becomes impossible, and the self is left in a state of deep isolation. This viewpoint is only visible to those who already exist on the margins of marginality.

II. Performing Duality Through Language and Instability

For the protagonist, loyalty and treachery are not opposites. They depend on each other. The protagonist betrays himself when he gives American directors reductive stereotypes to sanitize Vietnamese history for an *Apocalypse Now*-like film: "Don't you see that the Americans need the anti-American? While it is better to be loved than hated, it is also far better to be hated than ignored. To be anti-American only makes you a reactionary" (Nguyen 245), here, his hyphenated identity serves as a tool of embodied complicity, reflecting the moral concessions made by his spying by selling his heritage to survive in exile. Every allegiance demands a corresponding betrayal; fidelity to one identity necessitates the denial of another.

Nguyen carefully examines the myth of American exceptionalism. He shows how cultural systems, particularly Hollywood, create and spread stories that justify this belief. As a communist spy employed in the American film industry, the narrator observes how well Hollywood operates: it's "Hollywood was much more efficient, imagining the countries it wanted to exploit" (Nguyen 107). This exploitation is clear in *The Hamlet*, a film about the Vietnam War. The film shows America's failure to understand or portray the Vietnamese experience. The filmmakers ignored the facts and the human cost. They were more focused on telling a heroic American story. Accuracy and nuance were not their concern.

The narrator sarcastically notes, "It mattered not what story these audiences watched. The point was that it was the American story they watched and loved, up until the day that they themselves might be bombed by the planes they had seen in American movies" (Nguyen 136). Critics agree, viewing the film within the novel as a clear example of "America's cultural imperialism and its capacity to rewrite history for its own consumption."

His political performance is tied to his role as a cultural and linguistic mediator. He translates not just ideologies, but entire worlds, for powerful masters. When the protagonist first started working in the department of Oriental Studies, the chair assigned him an exercise to list his oriental and occidental characteristics. Despite his reservations, he accepted the task calmly. This exercise revealed a lot about his

own internal conflict. His oriental qualities highlighted his inability to be truly free or honest. He felt he constantly had to manipulate opinions, fake his emotions, and act hypocritically. He described himself as: "self-effacing"/"respectful of authority"/"worried about others' opinion"/"usually quiet"/"always trying to please"/"say yes when I mean no"/"prefer to follow"/"comfortable in a crowd"/"self-sacrificial"/"follow my ancestors" (Nguyen 54).

On the other hand, his occidental qualities seemed to offer a sense of liberation, though still with some limitations. These include: "occasionally opinionated"/"sometimes independent"/"now and then carefree"/"talkative (with a drink or two)"/"once or twice have not given a damn"/"say what I mean, do what I say"/"yearn to lead"/"ready to take the stage"/"live to fight another day"/"forget my ancestors!" (Nguyen54).

After analyzing the given exercise, the Department Chair remarks on the seriousness of the situation; given how "the oriental qualities diametrically oppose the occidental" (Nguyen7), resulting in significant identity concerns. He urges the captain to strengthen his oriental side and suggests that from these two sides, a singular identity may emerge in the future; as "he meant to be kind", the protagonist embraces his oriental personality and adapts accordingly. Urging him to select a singular identity when both are integral to his being implicitly suggests a demand for identity alteration. These dual aspects of his character constitute his identity, enabling him to empathize with people and understand their emotions.

II. 1. The Battleground of Language: Translation as Betrayal and Survival

In *The Sympathizer*, language is a key area of conflict. It serves as a way for power to assert itself, while the hyphenated self is negotiated. The protagonist's role as a translator makes this struggle concrete. Every act of translation has the potential to betray, not just words but also worlds, cultures, and his own divided loyalties. The narrator is both a translator and a spy. He is a linguistic double agent. His job is to make one culture understandable to another. At the same time, he must hide the betrayals within the act of translation itself. He embodies the treachery of his in-between position.

Translation transcends mere lexical betrayal of words, but of worlds. Here, translation becomes a metaphor for cultural mediation under asymmetric power dynamics: a process fraught with violence, distortion, and loss. His work as a cultural consultant brings the metaphor of the hyphen to life. It creates a space where his duality does not build bridges; instead, it compels him to betray his identity. The better he navigates American and Vietnamese cultures, the more he feels he must use his own position to erase his people's history. He physically acts out the internal struggle he describes. In *The Sympathizer*, The protagonist's fluency in English doesn't secure a sense of belonging. Instead, it actually intensifies her alienation.

Mastery of the language fails to bridge differences and gaps. It only underscores the impossibility of assimilation. Fluency is thus shown to be insufficient for true belonging.

Furthermore, translation in the novel is not merely linguistic. It is political and ontological. The protagonist constantly translates his thoughts, loyalties, and identity. He does this for different audiences: his communist superiors, his American handlers, and the reader of his confession. Every act of speech or writing is a performance shaped by surveillance, ideology, and survival. In this context, authenticity becomes impossible. As the narrator himself implies, language is not a conduit for truth but a strategy of endurance in a hostile world.

Nguyen also illustrates language as a tool of domination. American characters consistently dismiss or misinterpret Vietnamese perspectives, enforcing a rigid hierarchy of narrative legitimacy where only the American viewpoint is recognized as legible. The protagonist's role as interpreter places him at the center of this imbalance, both empowered and endangered by his linguistic dexterity. His ability to move between languages allows him to subvert expectations and manipulate meaning, but it also marks him as perpetually suspect, a figure of doubled speech and divided loyalties.

In *The Sympathizer*, the protagonist's confession initially promises access to the truth, presenting an opportunity to forge a coherent self and reconcile his past. However, this pursuit proves fundamentally impossible. His existence, fractured by race, ideology, exile, and inherent duplicity, makes authentic selfhood not merely elusive but conceptually untenable. As he declares, he is "a man of two faces[...]a man of two minds," a subject constitutionally incapable of achieving the unity he ostensibly seeks through confession. The deeper his confession delves, the more apparent this inherent contradiction becomes. While this doubleness generates excruciating, deep existential conflict, it also grants him a unique vantage point. As someone who straddles ideological and cultural divides, he sees what others cannot.

II. 2. The Confessional Frame and the Fragmented Voice

The Captain's personal fracture echoes and amplifies within the diasporic community. It transforms his individual hyphenated existence into a collective condition. He reinterprets the hyphen as more than just an individual wound; it becomes a communal scar. The refugees eat American food while chewing dried squid, which represents more than just survival. It serves as a daily, ritualized performance of their broken reality. This "cud of remembrance" (Nguyen 59) creates a noticeable tension between fitting in and keeping their roots. The community, like the Captain, finds itself constantly negotiating. Each effort to blend in also serves as a reminder of what they have lost.

In this way, the hyphen becomes a common space of broken belonging. It forms a shared identity shaped by the displacement that its members aim to overcome. Thus, the protagonist's personal in-betweenness, "I am simply able to see any issue from both sides" (Nguyen 8), reflects a broader condition Where hybridity causes not only individual displacement but also irreducible communal contradictions, refugees reject duality while relying on it to maintain identity. The hyphen, then, is less a third space of possibility than a collective wound, a fracture in which belonging is always deferred.

The most fundamental formal element is the confession frame. The entire narrative is a coerced document, written by the Captain for his Communist captors, who are also his former comrades and friends. This setup creates an immediate and pervasive tension between the protagonist's true thoughts and the performance he must enact to survive the interrogation and reeducation process. The battle between the Captain's need to confess his complex, nuanced truth and the Commandant's demand for a simplistic, ideologically pure narrative. The narrative is thus inherently unreliable and performative, mirroring the Captain's life as a spy, where every word and action was a calculated performance for an audience.

III. The Hyphenated Self: Narrative Instability and Diasporic Identity in *The Sympathizer*

Nguyen further dissolves the boundaries of the self through his deliberate stylistic choices. The prose often eschews traditional quotation marks, blurring the lines between dialogue, internal thought, description, and memory. This technique, combined with long, digressive, stream-of-consciousness paragraphs, formally replicates the Captain's "two-minded" consciousness, where perspectives and voices constantly bleed into one another without clear demarcation. This stylistic hyphen makes it impossible to separate where his sincere confession ends and his performed compliance begins. His voice itself becomes a site of conflict, criticized within the novel by the Commandant who declares, "your language betrays you. It is not clear, not succinct, not direct, not simple. It is the language of the elite"(Nguyen 245). This meta-commentary highlights how the Captain's Western-educated, intellectual voice is itself evidence of his irredeemable hybridity and duality.

The narrative voice seamlessly shifts between these registers: from the tense, action-driven prose of a spy thriller during the fall of Saigon, to the satirical critique of a campus novel, to the darkly comic absurdity of the Hollywood sections. This heteroglossic conflict, the cacophony of genres within a single voice, is a formal manifestation of the Captain's inability to settle into a single, stable identity. He is, by turns, a loyal friend, a ruthless assassin, a cultural critic, and a tortured prisoner,

and the narrative style shifts to accommodate each role, refusing the reader the comfort of a consistent tonal center.

III. 1. The Political Act of Refusing a Unified Identity

Nguyen's refusal to offer a unifying vision of Vietnamese identity is a political act. It challenges American Cold War views, which defined Vietnamese refugees only by their opposition to communism. It also counters the common narratives in the diaspora that often praise fixed ideas of patriotism and moral certainty. By rejecting these simplified views, *The Sympathizer* emphasizes that diversity, contradiction, and complex uncertainty are the true and honest reactions. The novel argues that these complex qualities are essential for understanding the difficult legacies of war, colonization, and forced migration.

The fragmentation in the Captain's identity across biology, politics, and culture shows up most clearly in the instability of his own narrative voice. The protagonist cannot offer a coherent account of self because such coherence is denied by those who divided by history, ideology, and exile. His voice is split by what Du Bois called "double-consciousness." This is the sense of always seeing yourself through the eyes of others. This split voice is the novel's clearest expression of a fractured identity: "ah, the Amerasian, forever caught between worlds and never knowing where he belongs!" (Nguyen 53).

The protagonist's confession functions too as a metaphorical declaration of narrative instability. This structural unreliability reflects the character's deep internal split. His narration does not unfold from a place of integrated identity but emerges from a psyche fractured by competing allegiances and histories. The protagonist's fractured consciousness and the resulting narrative instability can be further illuminated by integrating Paul Zeleza's conceptualization of diaspora. Zeleza defines the diasporic experience as "a kind of voyage that encompasses the possibility of never arriving or returning, a navigation of multiple belongings, of networks of affiliation," as well as "a state of being and a process of becoming" (79).

This concept of a perpetual, navigational voyage offers a more fluid and active metaphor for the Captain's condition than the structural implied finality of the hyphen. His confession is the logbook of this fraught voyage, where the inability to arrive at a stable identity or a singular truth is the defining characteristic. Zeleza's framework helps to explain the Captain's deep alienation, not only from his homelands, but from all fixed affiliations, whether national, ideological, or cultural. His espionage is the ultimate manifestation of this navigation of multiple belongings, a relentless and exhausting performance that prevents any sense of secure arrival. Applying Zeleza's theory enriches the analysis of the broader refugee community, framing their experience as a collective navigation of an uncharted and often hostile social landscape, where strategies of survival from eating American food while

chewing "the cud of remembrance" (Nguyen 59). are active, daily negotiations of belonging and memory, not just passive states of duality.

This destabilization is amplified through heteroglossic conflict, manifest in the text as the protagonist's seamless shifts between satire, philosophy, and trauma. The protagonist frequently shifts between tones, such as biting satire when describing Saigon's elite, philosophical reflection on his dual agency, and visceral accounts of trauma, such as his description of the boat journey, echoing the internal cacophony of someone caught between the ideological and cultural demands of multiple worlds. This dual role as translator inevitably betrays the nuances of Vietnamese experience, casts pervasive doubt on his narrative, rendering his language inherently unstable. Thus, the confession becomes not the resolution of instability, but its most potent demonstration.

In satirizing these cultural processes, Nguyen also asserts the necessity of alternative narratives. The protagonist's confession, however fractured and unreliable serves as a counter-narrative to the dominant histories told by victors. His voice, though unstable, insists on complexity, contradiction, and the legitimacy of Vietnamese subjectivity. By forcing the reader to confront the limitations of official memory and the violence of representation, *The Sympathizer* opens up a critical space for reimagining history from the margins.

This narrative instability is the ultimate proof of the hyphen's power; it has shattered not just a man, but the very story he tells about himself. While Bhabha's theory provides a valuable starting point for discussing the Captain's duality, this chapter moves beyond its limitations. Bhabha's framework can sometimes obscure the visceral, lived experience of power imbalances and historical trauma by focusing on the discursive and ambivalent. Nguyen's novel powerfully refutes any romanticized notion of hybridity by grounding the protagonist's "incoherence" in the tangible legacies of imperial power, where performance is a mechanism of survival rather than an expression of liberatory agency.

This critical engagement positions *The Sympathizer* not as an affirmation of Bhabha's Third Space, but as a stark literary corrective that foregrounds the pain and alienation inherent in a hybridity forged within extreme asymmetries of power. Symbolically, the hyphen becomes a dynamic space for bridging cultures and separating loyalties. It often signifies a bridge, allowing individuals to navigate diverse norms, languages, and perspectives, fostering a richer, multifaceted understanding of the world. Yet, this same hyphen can underscore a forced division of allegiances, creating constant tension for those caught between conflicting nationalisms or ideologies.

III. 2. The Spy's Dilemma: When Heritage and Allegiance Collide

In Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*, the unnamed protagonist, known simply as the captain, is a walking embodiment of hyphenated identities, constantly

navigating the fraught spaces between conflicting allegiances and selves. One of his most fundamental dualities is his Vietnamese-American heritage. Born to a Vietnamese mother and an anonymous American father, the latter is perpetually caught between two nations that are at war, both literally and ideologically. This mixed-race background immediately marks him as another in both societies: "I might have been just half an Asian, but in America it was all or nothing when it came to race. 'You were either white or you weren't'" (Nguyen 102). He is never fully accepted as purely Vietnamese, nor as fully American. This cultural and nationalistic tension fuels his deep-seated sense of displacement and his unique, often critical, perspective on both cultures. He embodies the complex historical legacy of the Vietnam War, representing the uncomfortable truths and hybrid identities forged in the crucible of conflict and colonialism.

Beyond his ethnic background, the captain is defined by the profound ideological chasm between the Communist and Capitalist systems. As a deeply committed communist spy embedded within the South Vietnamese army, he intellectually adheres to the principles of revolution and equality, believing in the eventual triumph of the proletariat. However, his experiences force him to face the realities and contradictions of both systems: "we Marxists believe that capitalism generates contradictions and will fall apart from them, but only if men take action. But it was not just capitalism that was contradictory" (Nguyen 83). He witnesses the corruption and superficiality of the capitalist South Vietnamese regime, and later, the consumerism and racial prejudices of American society. Yet, even his communist ideals are not pristine; the brutality and rigid dogmatism he encounters within his revolutionary ranks challenge his theoretical convictions.

Furthermore, the captain's role as a Spy-Confidant introduces a crucial performative dimension to his identity. His entire existence is predicated on deception: he is a communist agent who must convincingly play the part of a loyal South Vietnamese officer, befriend his general and other high-ranking officials. This requires an extraordinary level of emotional and intellectual performance, where every interaction is carefully calculated. Yet, in the process, he forms genuine bonds and develops empathy for the very people he is tasked with betraying. The hyphen here signifies the tension between his genuine feelings and his imposed role, leading to profound psychological fragmentation. "They were my enemies, and yet they were also brothers-in-arms. Their beloved city was about to fall, but mine was soon to be liberated. It was the end of their world, but only a shifting of worlds for me" (Nguyen 19), he becomes a master of mimicry, capable of seamlessly switching between personas, but at the cost of losing a stable sense of his authentic self.

Finally, the Captain is perpetually an Insider-Outsider in virtually every context he inhabits, as he stated: "I was in a familiar place, the place of feeling unfamiliar" (Nguyen 216). In South Vietnam, he is an insider under his rank and intellect, yet an

outsider due to his mixed parentage and hidden allegiances. In America, he is initially an insider within the refugee community, assisting the General, but his critical intelligence and radical perspectives make him an outsider to their fervent anti-communist sentiment and desire for assimilation. He says: "You think I'm a traitor! A counterrevolutionary! A bastard who belongs nowhere, not to be trusted by anyone! The rage subsided just as suddenly into despair, and he wept. Would his sacrifices never be honored? Would no one ever understand him? Would he always be alone? Why must he be the man to whom things are done?" (Nguyen 261).

He observes the nuances and hypocrisies of both worlds with a detached, analytical gaze, never fully embracing either. This shifting insider-outsider status grants him a unique, panoramic view of the human condition, but also condemns him to a solitary existence, always on the periphery, always observing, and always critically aware of the hyphen that defines his complex and often paradoxical identity: "no surprise, then, that sometimes I dreamed of trying to pull a mask off my face, only to realize that the mask was my face" (Nguyen 109). Nevertheless, he keeps struggling with himself, unable to fully accept the world's rejection, and consistently endeavors to satisfy others: "I yearned for nothing but approval, even from fools" (Nguyen 85).

IV. Deconstructing Hollywood's Orientalist Narratives

The protagonist's observation that the Oriental could never represent himself; he must always be represented by the Occidental directly invokes Edward Said's Orientalism. Macfie argued that the West constructs the west as "as being essentially rational, developed, humane, superior, virtuous, normal and masculine, while the Orient (the East, the 'other') (a sort of surrogate version of the West or the 'self') is seen as being irrational, backward, despotic, inferior, depraved, aberrant and feminine sexually "(8). Nguyen dramatizes this dynamic by placing his protagonist inside a Hollywood production of a Vietnam War film, a thinly veiled satire of *Apocalypse Now*, where he witnesses Vietnamese characters being rendered mute, expendable, and indistinct, serving only to validate the heroism of American soldiers.

In this way, the hyphen is no longer a bridge linking dual identities. It is, instead, a razor's edge or a perilous site where identity is constantly constructed, deconstructed, and weaponized. It is where the protagonist must continuously perform loyalty, authenticity, and resistance, all while aware that any stable position is both politically dangerous and personally untenable. America consumes his duality as exotic, not too dark, not too light, while communist purists condemn his impurity. His critical "two minds"(Nguyen 182) born of colonial displacement and racial exclusion, grant insight but ensure belonging is impossible. Any stable position is untenable because it denies the foundational violence, colonial, racial, and martial that created the hyphen in the first place

The Sympathizer relentlessly critiques both American and Vietnamese national and cultural narratives, deconstructing simplistic notions of identity and history. The novel powerfully exposes the hypocrisy and contradictions inherent in American Exceptionalism, particularly regarding its perception and involvement in the Vietnam War. The narrative deconstructs the heroic, redemptive narrative that America frequently constructs for itself through the Captain's cynical, but often insightful observations. He highlights the casual racism and orientalism ingrained in Hollywood's portrayal of the war, the self-serving motivations behind American aid, and the profound misunderstanding of Vietnamese culture and aspirations.

The re-education camp he later experiences mirrors, grotesquely, the very re-education American society attempts to impose on its immigrants, forcing a singular, unhyphenated identity upon them while ignoring their complex histories and perspectives. This deconstruction reveals American identity as not monolithic or inherently virtuous, but rather as a product of selective memory, self-interest, and a pervasive inability to truly see or understand the other. At the same time, the novel actively questions simple notions about Vietnamese nationalism and loyalty, refusing to present a unified or romanticized image of the Vietnamese people.

Through the lens of the communist regime and the refugee experience, Nguyen complicates any singular definition of what it means to be Vietnamese. The captain, a staunch communist, grapples with the brutal realities and ideological rigidity of his own side, recognizing the new forms of oppression that emerge even after liberation. The experiences of the South Vietnamese refugees in America further fracture any notion of a homogeneous Vietnamese identity; they are depicted with their internal divisions, class distinctions, and often naive desires for revenge or assimilation. The novel thus resists reducing Vietnamese identity to either a victimized or a purely heroic archetype, instead presenting a nuanced, often messy, and deeply human portrayal of a people shaped by prolonged conflict, ideological divides, and the profound trauma of displacement.

While the hyphen operates as a metaphor for ideological and cultural division, in *The Sympathizer*, this metaphor becomes brutally embodied in the protagonist's body is not merely the site of lived experience, but the literal terrain upon which political, racial, and historical contradictions are enacted. His physical being, like his consciousness, is marked by irreconcilable tensions that refuse resolution. Nguyen exposes how political ideology is inseparable from the narrative and aesthetic apparatus that disseminates it. the novel frames American hegemony as an engine of double-consciousness: "The good news is that you show glimmers of collective revolutionary consciousness. The bad news is that your language betrays you. It is not clear, not succinct, not direct, not simple. It is the language of the elite. You must write for the people! You speak" (Nguyen 245) truthfully, it demands marginalized subjects internalize their own erasure. Through the protagonist's role as both insider

(cultural advisor) and critical outsider, dissects the reductive stereotypes and selective memories that underwrite the American understanding of the Vietnam War.

The novel's key contribution is its depiction of a deeply fractured self, which this article refers to as a "bastard consciousness." This idea, stemming from the colonial violence surrounding his birth, "My father fucked my mother and left. That's the first betrayal" (Nguyen 285), directly takes on the more hopeful and theoretical views about mixed identity in postcolonial studies. Nguyen challenges the hopeful idea of Homi Bhabha's "third space" by showing the Captain's mixed identity not as a source of empowerment but as a painful burden. For the Captain, his "bastard" status is a deep flaw that keeps him from feeling like he belongs. He views himself as a living reminder of colonial defeat and shame, representing a past that those in authority prefer to ignore. As a result, his hyphenated identity locks him into a story of loss and betrayal. It presents his duality as an open wound of history instead of a freeing space of opportunity.

Nguyen challenges Bhabha's theory by demonstrating that the Captain's duality is not just an abstract idea. It is a painful reality that comes with physical and psychological consequences due to imperialism. The Captain's spying, his Hollywood complicity, and his ultimate torture are not strategic acts of resistance but manifestations of an entrapping illegitimacy. During his torture, his broken body makes the hyphen a physical reality. It is not a healed scar; it is an open wound. This shows that "some fractures never suture" (Nguyen 290). This "bastard consciousness" critiques Bhabha's ideas. It shows hybridity not as a source of freedom but as a trap formed by history. The Captain's origin, which he refers to as the "mating of a dragon and a fairy," is not an empowering myth. Instead, it is a painful one that defines his birth as fractured and alienating.

Furthermore, this "bastard consciousness" complexly engages with and extends W.E.B. Du Bois's double-consciousness. While Du Bois's concept describes the psychological burden of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" within a racist society, the Captain's condition is exacerbated by his literal biological illegitimacy and his position as a tool of geopolitical powers. His role as a cultural consultant changes the hyphen into a battleground instead of a bridge. His duality does not create harmony. Instead, it makes him betray his own culture. His fluency in English and American culture does not grant him agency but deepens his alienation, making him the perfect instrument for his own people's erasure in Hollywood, where he is forced to weaponize his identity. The novel suggests that in our globalized world, shaped by imperialism and Cold War violence, double-consciousness can worsen. It can become a more profound, pathological state. In this state, the self becomes a tool for the very systems that want to destroy it.

The protagonist's identity is thus not additive, a biological fact of colonial violence; he is not Vietnamese and American in a harmonious blend, but

oppositional, suspended between competing forces that cannot be reconciled. His role as a communist mole within the South Vietnamese refugee community in the United States enacts this hyphenated existence on a daily basis, his duality manifests as ontological crisis as he confesses, "I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces" (Nguyen 7), foregrounding not only his duplicity as an agent but the ontological duality that defines his being, his performativity extends beyond political duplicity into the racialized burden of double-consciousness which manifests profoundly through him.

In his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois describes double-consciousness as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity"(38). He is born of a Vietnamese mother and a French priest; this systemic duality or this internal "two-ness" is an American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts. He was born of a Vietnamese mother and a French priest; he is literally "a man of two faces" and "a man of two minds", constantly navigating the ideological divide between communism and capitalism, and the cultural chasm between East and West.

Critics have widely recognized how *The Sympathizer* extends Du Bois's concept beyond racial identity to encompass the complexities of post-colonial existence and the immigrant experience. The narrator's double-consciousness is not merely a personal burden but a reflection of the broader Vietnamese refugee community, which attempts to assimilate into American culture while simultaneously striving to maintain its cultural identity. The novel portrays double consciousness as a source of pain and, paradoxically, a unique perspective, enabling the narrator to see the hypocrisies and absurdities of both sides of the conflict. Yet, this ability also leaves him constantly feeling like an outsider, unable to truly belong anywhere. His conflicting feelings for America (both love and hate) highlight how relevant Du Bois's theory remains for understanding marginalized and diasporic identities.

The hyphen becomes both metaphor, structure, and narrative, embodying the schism of double-consciousness. It shapes not only his subjectivity but the novel's very narrative architecture. Nguyen's use of the confessional frame is structured as a coerced testimony to a revolutionary Commandant, which serves to mirror the protagonist's psychic fragmentation. The unreliable narration, the ironic detachment, and the protagonist's persistent self-interrogation all replicate the instability of the hyphenated self. Identity, in this context, is not a coherent narrative arc but a performance under intersecting surveillances, fractured by ideological demands and historical trauma where the demand for coherence itself replicates the violence of imperial and nationalist purity.

His divided identity becomes a condition for radical critique, allowing him to expose the hypocrisies, contradictions, and simplifications perpetuated by both American and Vietnamese nationalisms. This ambivalent potential of hyphenated

existence resonates with Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, where she theorizes the mestiza consciousness "as the product of living in the interstitial space between cultures, languages, and histories" (8). For Anzaldúa, the borderland is painful but also creative: it fosters a way of knowing that is fluid, hybrid, and attuned to contradiction. Similarly, the protagonist's "two minds" are not a weakness but a kind of epistemological double vision representing a capacity to see from within and beyond systems of power.

This resistant vision is most vividly articulated in his reflections on historical memory: "We were the inconvenient ones, the ones who remembered that the war was not just an American tragedy but a Vietnamese one, and that the two tragedies were intertwined, inseparable." Here, Nguyen positions the hyphen as a site of historical reconfiguration, a site that refuses nationalist closure and insists on entangled, polyphonic memory. The hyphen becomes a vantage point from which to challenge Cold War binaries, expose American imperialism, and reassert Vietnamese subjectivity against both erasure and simplification.

This profound existential instability evokes Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of bad faith, wherein "It is certain that we cannot escape anguish, for we are anguish." (288). The protagonist, however, does not retreat into illusion out of choice; he is compelled into performance by the historical and ideological forces that define him. His duality is not a mask to be removed, but the condition of his being. He is not hiding behind a façade; he is the façade.

V. Reimagining Diaspora: Fragmented Communities and Identity in Process

While focused on the protagonist's fractured psyche, *The Sympathizer* simultaneously launches a potent critique against homogenizing narratives of Vietnamese identity, especially within the diaspora. Nguyen meticulously constructs a diasporic community that is politically, ideologically, and psychologically fragmented, rejecting both Western stereotypes and internal pressures toward monolithic unity. In doing so, the novel resists the reduction of Vietnamese people to a singular narrative of victimhood, heroism, or political affiliation.

The narrator's reflection, "My cell divided, and divided, and divided again, until I was a million cells and more, until I was multitudes and multitudes" (Nguyen 278). This articulation of fragmentation counters dominant narratives that often depict refugees as either apolitical victims or loyal allies of U.S. interests. Instead, Nguyen portrays the community as a contested space. This space is filled with anticommunist exiles, pragmatic survivors, and traumatized veterans. It also includes ideological opportunists and disillusioned intellectuals. Each of these individuals is uniquely shaped by their own history and struggle.

Through this stance, the novel fundamentally reimagines the concept of diaspora. It rejects the conventional notion of diaspora as a space of coherent cultural

preservation or a nostalgic return to an unchanging homeland. Instead, it presents diaspora as a condition of permanent negotiation, marked by instability, contradiction, and multiplicity. Cultural identity is not a unified inheritance. It is assembled from memories, losses, adaptations, and contested loyalties. The diasporic subject, rather than serving as a custodian of pure cultural essence, becomes a figure in constant transition, continuously navigating among competing histories, languages, and loyalties.

The analysis of identity in the diaspora can be significantly deepened by moving beyond a static view of the "hyphen" and engaging with Stuart Hall's seminal work on cultural identity. Hall posits that identity is not a fixed essence but a continual process of production, which is "never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (222). This dynamic framework is far more effective for analyzing the Captain's evolving self than the more rigid hyphen metaphor.

Hall's concept shows the Captain's identity as always in process. It is perpetually formed through his performances, confessions, and interactions. It is not a fixed state of being torn between two poles. His confession, for instance, is not merely a report on a pre-formed identity but is itself an active, fraught process of identity formation under duress. Integrating Hall's theory allows for a more nuanced understanding of the refugee community's identity as well, framing it not as a homogenous group preserving a static culture, but as a collective engaged in a continuous, contested, and often painful process of redefining itself against the pressures of assimilation, memory, and loss.

Conclusion :

In *The Sympathizer*, the hyphen moves beyond its grammatical role and serves as a powerful symbol of a divided identity, reflecting what the novel calls a "bastard consciousness." This state of inherent illegitimacy results from colonial violence. It does not connect cultures. Instead, it creates a constant zone of conflict. This leads to the protagonist's deep alienation and stops him from ever finding true belonging.

This underlying condition shapes both the story and its critical impact. The Captain's forced confession, filled with its unstable and contradictory voice, reflects his fragmented mind. His distinctive, hyphen-shaped viewpoint allows him to reveal the contradictions in both American Orientalism and communist ideology, positioning him as a living counter-story to simplistic histories. The novel ultimately offers a bold perspective on identity as a space of conflicts, rather than a single entity. It asserts that for people shaped by historical violence, there is no final reconciliation. There is only a tiring journey through division. Truth is found in honestly recognizing this broken state.

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