University of Tehran press

Research in Contemporary World Literature

http//jor.ut.ac.ir, Email: pajuhesh@ut.ac.ir p-ISSN : 2588-4131 e-ISSN: 2588 -7092

Alienation in Duong Thu Huong's Novel Without a Name and Viet Thanh Nguyen's The Sympathizer

Liu JingJie [1]✉ 0009-0004-6619-2065

1. Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. E-mail: •liujingjie707@gmail.com

Article Info

Article type:

Research Article

Article history:

Received: 3 June 2025

Received in revised form: 17 July 2025

Accepted: 24 July 2025

Published online: Autumn 2025

Keywords:

Vietnam War, Military System, Soldiers, Marxism, Alienation, Ideology.

ABSTRACT

Challenging the postcolonial studies focus on trauma, memory, and identity, this study instead draws on the concept of alienation in Marxist theory to analyze the ideological transformations of four representative soldiers in Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name* (1995) and Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015). This paper examines the different forms of alienation experienced by selected soldiers within the context of North Vietnamese society and its military system. It aims to analyze how these experiences of alienation influence their decisions and actions, and how the soldiers respond to the oppression that caused the alienation. Using a structural analogy method, the paper applies Marx's four aspects of alienation—the product of labor, the process of labor, others, and self—within the socio-political context during the Vietnam War and its aftermath. This study finds that those loyal, patriotic, and innocent Vietnamese soldiers, driven by a sincere desire to rebuild their state, were exploited by the political ambitions of Viet Cong leaders and shaped by the long-term indoctrination of Vietnamese communist ideology, which led to their gradual alienation from their ideology. By highlighting ideological alienation rather than trauma or memory, this research offers a new critical lens on communist military narratives and expands Marxist literary criticism within postcolonial studies.

Cite this article: Liu, JingJie. "Alienation in Duong Thu Huong's Novel Without a Name and Viet Thanh Nguyen's The Sympathizer ". *Research in Contemporary World Literature*, 2025, 30 (2), 425-454. DOI: http//doi.org/ 10.22059/jor.2025.396653.2659

Publisher: University of Tehran Press.

DOI: http//doi.org/ 10.22059/jor.2025.396653.2659

1. Introduction

Positioned within the broader landscape of post-1945 modern and contemporary literature, this study engages with critical debates on how the war and communist ideology are portrayed in Vietnamese English novels. War literature emerged in the 1950s, amid the Cold War era and the Vietnam War, spanning multiple genres and authored by writers of diverse nationalities. From combat novels to personal narratives and poems, these works reflect both the unique traits of the Vietnam War and universal aspects of conflict. They encompass stories from combatants, support personnel, and those impacted on the home front, including the Vietnamese diaspora (Calloway 1). This study examines two selected novels: *Novel Without a Name* (1995) by Duong Thu Huong, a former North Vietnamese soldier, and *The Sympathizer* (2015) by Viet Thanh Nguyen, a Vietnamese-American refugee. Both texts are analyzed, with a focus on the impact of economic and political upheavals on the selected characters, who are soldiers within the military hierarchy, as depicted by the authors. The analysis centers on four key characters—two from each novel—including protagonists in subordinate military roles and secondary characters who simultaneously serve as their immediate superiors and close friends, reflecting a complex interplay of authority and personal intimacy. The four selected soldiers represent different forms of alienation, each corresponding to one of the four aspects of alienation conceptualized by Marx. In *Novel Without a Name* (1995), Quan and Luong's ideological transformations, to varying degrees, have led to their alienation, leaving them at odds with the changing political landscape. In *The Sympathizer* (2015), due to the protagonist's dual identity, he is alienated from the North Vietnamese community and faces conflicts of cultures and ideologies in different societies. For Man, internal political struggles and

different interpretations of the revolutionary cause reflect Man's betrayal and alienation from the original revolutionary ideals.

While Vietnam War literature has received considerable scholarly attention, how communist military hierarchies shape soldier ideology remains underexplored, particularly through a lens of Marxist theory of alienation. Existing studies tend to portray soldiers either as passive victims or as ideologically committed followers, without fully addressing the contradictions embedded in the communist army's power structures. To better address this gap, this study addresses the following questions:

1. What different forms of alienation do the characters in the two novels experience during the Vietnam War and its aftermath?

2. How do the experiences of these selected soldiers reflect changing identities and ideological oppression within the Viet Cong military hierarchy?

3. In what ways does alienation affect the decisions and actions of these characters?

This study fills a critical gap by closely analyzing the personal experiences and varied forms of alienation experienced by soldiers within the Viet Cong military hierarchy as depicted in the two selected novels. Using a Marxist literary framework, this study examines the alienation of soldiers within the Viet Cong military system. It provides a critical reevaluation of traditional military narratives by uncovering contradictions and internal power dynamics within ostensibly egalitarian structures.

To contextualize this study within the broader academic discourse, it is necessary to review how existing scholarship has approached the two selected novels. Scholarly research has extensively engaged with Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name* (1995) from diverse perspectives.

Lies reads the novel as a powerful anti-war indictment of the Vietnam War's ideological foundation, emphasizing how Huong appropriates Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928) to critique her government (162). Chettri examines the narratives of female participants in the war and challenges official historiography and reading practices by exploring the notion of the "personal" as defined by these texts (63). Tran connects the novel to Nguyen Du's poetry, stressing themes such as filial piety reinterpreted through revolutionary patriotism (2, 4). Farahmandian frames the novel in the context of national identity and postcolonial discourse (8). Some researchers use the two novels as examples in their articles, highlighting that these entirely fictional stories depict not official history, but rather personal memories of the past (Jabarouti and Mani 17). Al-Duhoki's study examines how novelists reframe and reinterpret history through the medium of fiction, exposing the suppressed histories of minorities (1). Others pictured the traumatic experiences of the Vietnamese people, aiming to apply the psychological concept of PTSD to illustrate the factors of trauma depicted by Duong Thu Huong in the characters, like Quan, within the *Novel Without a Name* (1995) (Hamid et al. 210-11). In addition, philosophical words and phrases are used by Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name* (1995). Kim Echlin's *The Disappeared* (2009) to express their beliefs about core qualities and the impacts of war and stress the function and impact of ideology on human life in both novels (Jabarouti et al. 2). Ng and Mani assert that Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name* (1995) and Kim Echlin's *The Disappeared* (2009) both centrally address the theme of the distorted Marxism (138, 148). Postmodern techniques and ghost imagery are also used to portray trauma and critique ideology (Liparulo 72-73; Wisker 217).

Turning to Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015), the novel explores the identity crisis experienced not only by North and South Vietnamese people but also by Vietnamese refugees, capturing the struggles of individuals navigating between different worlds in the aftermath of the Vietnam War (Calloway 13-14). Traina highlights that the novel challenges traditional war narratives through its form, rejecting realism, exposing power dynamics in storytelling, and confronting the expectations placed on ethnic American authors by the publishing industry (11, 16). Peterson focuses on the novel's exploration of race and immigration, analyzing its writing techniques and thematic relevance to contemporary social issues (159, 162). Prabhu interprets the novel through Marxist dialectics, arguing that it challenges conventional notions of development and ideology, drawing on the theories of Marx and Engels (388). The character Man embodies themes of complicity, knowledge, and identity complexities within the narrative (390–391). Stefan argues that Nguyen uses torture as a memory device to critique ongoing American imperialist practices, highlighting how its justification in the novel echoes official discourse on terrorist interrogations (210–11). NDIAYE contends that the novel critiques Hollywood's attempt to rewrite a combat failure as a representational success, highlighting the global influence of American cinema in shaping historical narratives (1, 5). Adhikari emphasizes the role of characterization in *The Sympathizer* (2015), particularly focusing on the complex identity of the nameless protagonist who embodies various roles throughout the narrative (2). Stanley argues that Nguyen's quest for a just memory reflects a stateless refugee memory, where intertextual allusions serve as memory sites enabling resistance against hegemonic nationalist narratives (286–88). Gheytasi analyzes *The Sympathizer* (2015) to critique

unjust memory through its intricate narrative strategy, incorporating diverse voices to challenge singular historical narratives (1, 10).

2. Conceptual Framework

Developed in the nineteenth century by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Marxist theory offers a comprehensive socio-economic and political philosophy that analyzes and critiques capitalist societies while envisioning a socialist alternative. Although the sociological canon is often criticized for its Eurocentrism, Marx's influence extends across diverse fields and cultural contexts (Antonio 115). In the mid- and late 1840s, in response to the early stages of capitalist industrialization and working-class exploitation, Marx began formulating the foundations of his later theoretical work. With Engels' assistance, Marx developed a materialist perspective on history, departing from Hegelian philosophy (120–21). Marx's materialist conception of history posits that humans shape themselves and the world through labor, thereby resisting the alienation imposed by oppressive systems. Consequently, Marxist theory emphasizes looking beyond surface appearances to understand deeper social realities. It also challenges dominant ideological beliefs and argues for recognizing and addressing alienation by envisioning alternative realities. The Vietnam War era (mid-1960s to mid-1970s) provides a typical case, as the concept of alienation played a central role in critical theory and the New Left. During this period, various thinkers revisited Marx's ideas, drawing on his Hegelian roots, with a particular focus on the concept of alienation (158–59). Overall, Marxist theory has been the focus of numerous discussions and criticisms; yet, despite this, its examination of class struggle, oppression, and alienation in capitalism has had a profound impact on various social theories, political movements, and revolutions.

In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1959), Karl Marx provided a thorough critique of capitalism and its detrimental effects on the working class. The central discussion centers on the alienated nature of labor in the capitalist mode of production, where workers experience alienation from the products they create, the act of production itself, their human essence, and their fellow workers. In the section titled "Estranged Labor," Marx examines the relationship between capital, workers, commodities, and labor power, delineating four interrelated aspects of worker alienation. Marx saw the worker's labor and its product becoming an "alien object" opposed to the worker. The more the worker labors, the less they possess, which "the more objects the worker produces, the less he can possess and the more he falls under the sway of his product, capital" (29). Thus, the worker feels isolated from their creative abilities. As Marx states, the products of the worker's labor confront them as "something hostile and alien" (29). In other words, in a society where the labor force is seen as a commodity, different types of alienation result from the exploitative relationship between capitalists and workers. Workers are made to sell their labor for wages and are isolated from the bourgeoisie's means of production. The reason workers experience a deep feeling of alienation in this system is that it causes them to lose their sense of self and reduces them to mere machines for generating wealth.

Although Marx originally developed the concept of alienation in the context of the 19th-century capitalist factory system, this study recontextualizes his framework to examine the ideological oppression and hierarchical military structure of the revolutionary society during the Vietnam War and its aftermath. According to Marx's analysis, alienation occurs when workers are estranged from the products of their labor, the

process of labor, their humanity, and others, or from society, conditions rooted in capitalist exploitation and private ownership. This conceptual framework is applied analogously to a communist military context. Specifically, the Vietnamese Communist ruling class is positioned as the equivalent of the bourgeoisie in capitalist structures. The military hierarchy within the Viet Cong community mirrors the armed forces employed by the bourgeoisie to maintain their dominance. The soldiers, whose labor and sacrifices fueled the war effort, represent the exploited workers within the Marxist analysis of capitalism. Furthermore, the ideology propagated by the Viet Cong leadership and instilled in the soldiers can be viewed as the commodity from which the soldiers became alienated, much like workers' estrangement from the products of their labor under capitalism. These structural parallels provide the analytical framework through which this study examines power and oppression within the military system, with a particular focus on the relationship between the commanding authority (the ruling class) and the soldiers.

The study applies this framework to two Vietnamese English novels—*Novel Without a Name* (1995) and *The Sympathizer* (2015). These four aspects of alienation are mapped onto the lived experiences of four soldier characters within the communist military hierarchy, demonstrating how alienation—typically associated with capitalist production—also manifests within a nominally egalitarian, socialist system through estrangement from the self.

3. Methodology

Applying Marxist theory as a form of literary criticism enables the integration of political and economic perspectives into literary interpretation. Since Marxism functions both as a political philosophy and a method of socioeconomic analysis, it offers a framework for examining

the social power dynamics represented in literature. The material conditions of workers, as portrayed in literary narratives, are fundamentally shaped by hierarchical structures of the ruling class. Accordingly, the study adopts the concept of alienation from Marxist theory to explore the conflicts and experiences of oppressed Vietnamese soldiers within the military system during the war and its aftermath.

This study expands upon the conceptual framework by arguing that dismantling the distorted aspects of ideology requires collective action from the entire working class; individual resistance alone proves insufficient. After all, an individual's ideology is profoundly shaped by the societal ideology in which one is embedded. The four selected characters examined in this study, as Vietnamese soldiers, were initially deeply influenced by communist ideology, rooted in their geographical context. After joining the revolution and serving as soldiers in the North Vietnamese army, the four soldiers undertook diverse roles within the North Vietnamese Army which lead to varied experiences of class hierarchy. In this context, communist ideology within the military ranks exerted a further influence on them. As such, the ideological oppression they endured came from two sources: a different social system and the internal hierarchy of the military. This duality results in divergent responses to alienation across the selected characters.

This study examines four soldier characters—two from each novel, including one protagonist and one secondary character—whose transformations in military rank or role, complex interactions with comrades who also serve as superiors and friends, and deepening self-reflections, reveal dual layers of ideological oppression that exacerbate their sense of alienation. While the external state apparatus and the internal

military hierarchy diverge from capitalist wage labor structures, analogous mechanisms of alienation are nonetheless manifested within both systems. This comparison is approached with theoretical caution, avoiding any simplistic equation of capitalism and communism, and instead highlighting recurring patterns of estrangement across differing political contexts.

Employing close textual analysis, the study focuses on key elements such as dialogue, character interactions, symbolic imagery, and narrative progression to trace how diverse military duties and ideological contradictions manifest through interpersonal experiences and internal conflict. This methodology facilitates an in-depth exploration of personal experiences of alienation, rendering it particularly well suited to the novels' central thematic concerns. Consequently, the analysis elucidates how alienation unfolds not only through material deprivation but also through internalized ideological contradictions, thereby contributing to broader discussions within Marxist theory and war literature.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The Vietnam War can be regarded as an ideological conflict; neither the United States nor the Soviet Union could risk a confrontation, so they engaged in a proxy war in a distant Southeast Asian country that few outside the region fully understood or cared about (Murdoch). Consequently, the ideological alignment of the Viet Cong was a gradual process for Vietnamese soldiers, diverging from their original beliefs. This section will examine how they progressively adopted a new ideology, departing from their initial ideology.

For Quan, more than ten years of brutal combat experience on the Vietnamese battlefield left him not only physically exhausted but also emotionally depleted and ideologically disoriented. The decade-long

journey through war gradually shifted his ideological stance, as the brutal realities he encountered reflected the contradictions within the official narratives he had once uncritically accepted. When Quan nearly starved to death in a forest, he was rescued by a nearby villager, a young girl. During his recovery, the villagers—impoverished themselves—brought him the best food they could offer, driven by the belief that soldiers like Quan were heroes defending their homeland. However, Quan's firsthand experiences in the army exposed harsh realities that sharply contrasted with the idealized perceptions shaped by Viet Cong ideology among the villagers. This compelled him to critically reconsider the actual cost of a war waged in the name of the people, but so often indifferent to their suffering. It is depicted like this in the novel:

When I got back, I found him lying on the ground near the banana tree. I called out to him for a long time, but he did not answer. [...]. They lived well, always satisfied. We offered them unlimited blood. This was a meager tax compared to the tributes the bombs claimed from us. (Huong 65-69)

Marxist ideology, as the North Vietnamese official driving force, significantly influenced the Vietnamese people, inspiring common villagers to voluntarily join the war and provide strong logistical and emotional support for the North Vietnamese soldiers. Witnessing firsthand the impact of war on common villagers and experiencing their selfless assistance after getting lost and collapsing, Quan's ideology transformed. By comparing soldiers to fleas, he illustrated the casualties and sacrifices made in pursuit of victory. Through this comparison, Quan sarcastically expressed his aversion to the war. His perspective on war evolved from a simplistic focus on victory and defeat to a deep concern for the value of

soldiers' lives, leading him to question the legitimacy and necessity of the conflict. This ideological shift reflects a deeper understanding of the Viet Cong ruling class and reveals its increasing awareness of the complexities underlying the war.

During Quan's military operations, a specific incident had a profound impact on his ideology. As his unit advanced toward Three Oaks Valley, they fell into an ambush and endured a severe night battle, only to realize, tragically, that they had been fighting their own forces. The Party's daily later reported this friendly fire incident as a so-called "revolutionary victory", which Quan discovered to be a blatant falsehood. This experience was both disillusioning and unsettling for him, exposing the discrepancy between official narratives and brutal realities. Following this incident, Quan ceased to engage with the news on bulletin boards, particularly after he found himself subconsciously lying when questioned by Dao Tien:

Division Z.702-the darkest of all my memories. [...] I remember ripping the Party newspaper into shreds and throwing them into a stream. I never told anyone, of course. It was then that I realized that lies are common currency among men, and that the most virtuous are those who have no scruples about resorting to them. (Huong 83-84)

Witnessing the distortion of truth had a significant impact on Quan. This reaction indicates that the blatant deceit by the authorities had a profound and unsettling impact on him, exposing the regime's reliance on propaganda to maintain control. This likely undermined his faith in the revolutionary cause, as he was forced to confront the shameless manipulation of facts. The media, intended to propagate the truth, had instead become a tool for disseminating fabricated false victories, revealing its role as an instrument of ideological control rather than a

source of information, contributing to a profound shift in Quan's ideological perspective.

After witnessing the changes in his friend Bien, Quan reflected carefully. When Quan tried to persuade Bien to return to the village for a peaceful life, Bien refused despite his deteriorating mental state and the hopelessness of his situation. At that moment, Quan realized the profound influence of the Viet Cong's ideology on them, which subtly controlled and coerced soldiers to continue fighting by instilling fear through rumors and social expectations. For Bien, and by extension for Quan, returning before the war's end without honor meant facing harsh accusations of disloyalty and cowardice, as revealed in the novel's description:

Despite my impossible temperament, I had been a captain for three years now. Bien was still a sergeant. […] Bien would rather hide in some godforsaken hole, in this immense battlefield until V-day—until he could march with the rest of us under the triumphal arch. (Huong 108-109)

Quan's reflection on Bien's decision serves as a mirror for his ideological struggles. The changes in Bien were a stark reminder of the war's impact on their psyches, revealing the internalization of propaganda and the pressure of state-imposed ideals. This moment of reflection marked a significant turning point for Quan, deepening his understanding of the war's actual costs and leading to a shift in his ideological perspective on the war's moral legitimacy and human consequences.

On a train journey, Quan inadvertently overheard a conversation between two Party officials. They discussed their diminishing enthusiasm for the Marxist revolution and made candid remarks about Marx's personal life, including a scandal involving his maid. This conversation was deeply unsettling for Quan, who was quietly listening. The officials' unguarded

discussion in a public setting revealed a side of the Party that was privately disillusioned yet publicly complicit, exposing the hypocrisy embedded within the revolutionary elite and the ideological decay beneath the surface of official rhetoric. This dialogue is described in the text as follows:

Words are like everything else in life: They're born, they live, they age, they die. So, when you and I left the city of Quang Tri to join the Party, what was born and what died? […]. It was only when he died that his wife Jenny forgave him and adopted the bastard kid. (Huong 161-164)

Quan's reaction to this unexpected encounter is vividly described in the extract: "I sat without moving. A chill ran up my spine. My mind spun." (Huong 165). This moment of eavesdropping left Quan fearful and pained. It highlighted that the more he learned about the underlying truths of the Marxist revolutionary ideology promoted by the Viet Cong, the deeper his disillusionment with the Party became. The frankness of the officials' conversation not only exposed the internal conflicts and hypocrisies within the Party but also played a significant role in reshaping Quan's beliefs and attitudes towards the Marxist ideology he once fervently supported. It revealed how private dissent among Party elites contradicted the rigid orthodoxy imposed on ordinary soldiers, underscoring the gap between the Party's public facade and the private doubts harbored by its members, and accelerating his ideological estrangement from the revolution's professed ideals.

At the final of the novel, Quan's encounter with the lynx and the subsequent malaria outbreak revealed his growing ideological transformation. Although the lynx did not attack them, Thai was terrified and recounted a legend about the lynx. At this moment, steeped in superstition and fear, the narrative contrasted sharply with the rationalist

ideology of the revolution, highlighting the gap between myth, fear, and political belief. It is described in the novel as follows:

I thought lynxes avoided us. They're only aggressive when they protect their young [...] My uncle is a simple, honest man. He has never told a lie in his life. I have to believe him ... (Huong 228)

Quan, having been indoctrinated with the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the Viet Cong, initially dismissed such superstitions. However, when his entire platoon was struck by malaria shortly after, he began to question his staunch beliefs. As the narrator reflects, "I knew Thai was thinking about the lynx because I was thinking about it, as I would a curse. The next morning, the medic informed me that an entire platoon had been stricken with malaria" (Huong 232). Quan's initial reaction to the lynx encounter reflected his skepticism towards superstitions, consistent with the Marxist-Leninist emphasis on materialism, which, through "dialectical materialism, rejects any break between consciousness and matter" (Dutt 36). However, the sudden outbreak of malaria among his men led him to reconsider his decision. He even found himself thinking about the lynx as a curse, like Thai's fears. This shift indicates a significant challenge to his faith in revolutionary rationalism. The dissonance between ideological doctrine and lived reality underscores the psychological strain soldiers endured and reveals the limits of a rigid materialist worldview under extreme conditions. This transformation highlights the profound impact of war on personal beliefs and the fragility of ideological convictions in the face of relentless adversity. As Quan starts to waver in his materialist views, it becomes clear that his grip on Party orthodoxy is weakening, driven by the harsh and unpredictable realities of wartime experiences.

In a nutshell, Quan's war journey reflects a profound alienation from the ideological process he once internalized and actively supported. His disillusionment with ideological education, realization of systemic deception, shift from belief to cynicism, emotional damage, disconnection from friends, and acts of struggle all illustrate this alienation. As the process of labor (fighting in the war and promoting ideology) becomes increasingly disconnected from his values and experiences, Quan finds himself estranged from the liberation and collective purpose he once pursued.

To Luong, as analyzed in the previous section, ten years of growing up under the mainstream ideology of the Viet Cong military had completely changed him. As Quan relayed news about Bien, the Luong family, and village events, Luong listened in silence, emotionally detached and ideologically estranged from the world he once belonged to:

He listened in silence as I told him about Bien and relayed the news of his own family, the events in the village. All of this touched me. But our childhood was dead. […] He had chosen another destiny, one that had begun with the betrayal of his roots. I said goodbye, picked up my knapsack, and left to rejoin my company. (Huong 206-207)

Quan's interaction with Luong, a childhood friend who had risen to the rank of colonel and deputy commander of the division, highlights the profound impact of the Viet Cong's ideology on personal relationships and individual transformation. This silence symbolized the ideological reprogramming that had developed between them, indicating how the pressures and indoctrination of the military environment had eroded his capacity for empathy and human connection, rendering him almost mechanistic—a functionary of the system rather than an autonomous self. Luong's transformation suggests that he has abandoned his original beliefs

and intentions, subordinating personal memory and identity to the demands of institutional loyalty.

In a context of severe battlefield losses—with only nineteen survivors remaining—Quan received another directive from Luong, now a high-ranking officer. As he recalls, "When the liaison agent came, we were drinking tea. He handed me orders from divisional headquarters. We were to lead four prisoners to the base and hand them over to the security forces. The order was firm: Do not lose them; do not let them escape, fall sick, or die under any circumstances. Luong himself had signed the order in the name of the commander-in-chief" (Huong 238). The issuance of firm, unyielding orders by Luong, a former friend turned high-ranking officer, reveals his complete assimilation into the bureaucratic machinery of war. He prioritizes the execution of orders over any personal considerations or moral dilemmas, embodying the logic of militarized obedience over ethical reflection. This shift demonstrates how military ideology and institutional structure systematically alienate individuals not only from personal relationships but also from earlier ideological convictions, as they are compelled to conform to rigid directives and impersonal mandates.

One night, an elegantly dressed officer from the regiment visited Quan. Luong, having learned of Quan's bout with malaria, had sent this emissary in his stead, as he was unable to visit personally. Quan describes it like this:" He had brought a letter from Luong, a box of Chinese apples, and half a package of tobacco. Luong had learned that I had been stricken with malaria. Unable to come himself, he had sent this messenger. His envoy was eleven years my senior and higher in rank than I was. He was a smooth talker" (Huong 248-249). The visit from a higher-ranking officer, rather than Luong himself, highlights how the military hierarchy and the

exigencies of war create barriers to maintaining former personal relationships within an authoritative system. As Quan and Luong rose through the military ranks, their shared past was increasingly eclipsed by professional obligations and institutional roles.

Luong's final visit to Quan was to deliver the tragic news of their friend Bien's death. During his stay, Luong had been busy preparing and teaching ideological-education courses, attending performances, and drinking tea, fully embodying the role of a high-ranking military officer:

Luong was waiting for me. He had been there for a week already, preparing his ideological-education course. The hair at his temples had become even whiter. The first night we saw quite a fantastic play. [...] But war is war. The historic mission that has fallen to our people... (Huong 259-262)

Quan felt a mix of doubt and helplessness about the impending large-scale military action, which stood in stark contrast to Luong's complete ideological commitment. Luong had undergone a complete ideological transformation, becoming a tool for executing the Viet Cong leadership's agenda and losing personal autonomy. Luong's engagement in ideological education and his acceptance of the "historic mission" illustrate his ideological transformation. He has embraced the Viet Cong's goals and methods, becoming an embodiment of the party's ideology. This transformation shows how ideological indoctrination can reframe an individual's worldview and actions, aligning them completely with the party's objectives.

Briefly, the concept of alienation from the product of labor is most effectively demonstrated by Luong's transformation from a revolutionary soldier to a high-ranking official charged with implementing and instructing party doctrine. His labor now serves the interests of the party

leadership, creating outcomes that contradict his original revolutionary ideals. His alienation from relationships, his propagation of party ideology, and his transformation from a comrade to an authoritative figure are all clear indications of his alienation. For this, Luong's story shows an important shift from his original goals and highlights the alienation that comes from getting one's labor appropriated by a dominating ideological system.

In *The Sympathizer* (2015), the narrator, Bon, and Man initially share a strong bond rooted in their environment and friendship. However, as the fall of Saigon approaches, their ideological fractures begin to unravel their relationship. The narrator and Man align more closely with Communist ideals, diverging from Bon's staunch anti-communist stance:

Past this haphazard expanse of hovels, deep in District Four, Bon and Man waited at a beer garden [...]. We'll be blood brothers even if we lose this war, even if we lose our country. He looked at me and his eyes were damp. For us there is no end. (Nguyen 18-20)

This ideological divide not only exposes a rift in beliefs but also corrodes trust and loyalty. The narrator and Man's persuasion for Bon to leave, while they plan to stay, betrays an ideological estrangement that deepens the breach of trust. Man's decision to stay reflects a self-deception and a separation from his true self. The narrator's alignment with Communist ideology ties him more firmly within the society of the time.

The narrator is an exiled, culturally dislocated Vietnamese struggling to find purpose and identity in America after the fall of Saigon. His correspondence with Man exacerbates his sense of alienation from his former life and community:

I went to the kitchen and ate a salami sandwich while I reread the letter from my aunt that had arrived yesterday. [...]. The rebuilding of the country was progressing slowly but surely, and his superiors were pleased with my reporting. Why would they not be? Nothing was happening among the exiles except tearing of hair and gnashing of teeth. (Nguyen 89)

The narrator's experiences and emotional state in exile starkly contrast with Man's active involvement in rebuilding new Vietnam. The extract indicates the narrator's increasing estrangement from his Vietnamese identity and culture: he eats a typical American salami sandwich, distancing himself from his homeland's cuisine. His most significant text is an English book on Asian communism, further separating him from his native roots. Most notably, the narrator is progressively estranged from his former friend Man, who is now dedicated to his new role and the construction of the communist North. In contrast, the narrator remains isolated among the defeated exiles, striving for the revolutionary cause. Their different work and career paths have created a sense of alienation between them.

The narrator's identity is met with suspicion by the General. To prove his loyalty, the narrator is forced to kill the "crapulent major", an act that forces him into a harrowing moral crisis, compelling him to murder an innocent person. Bon gives a speech in order to comfort the narrator, which causes the narrator to reflect,

After a minute of watching this, I said, what if he is not a spy? We'll be killing the wrong man. Then it would be murder. Bon sipped his beer. [...] I knew I had to prove to the General that I could correct my ostensible mistake, and that I could be a man of action. (Nguyen 127-129)

The narrator's reflections on his speech to Bon reveal his profound sense of alienation within the context of war and violence. He realizes that,

despite being together for years, he does not truly understand his close friend Bon's inner world. Bon's impassioned discourse on purpose, paternal identity, and killing shocks the narrator, highlighting a deep ideological rift. Bon derives meaning from violence, a stance that starkly contrasts with the narrator's moral ambivalence and emotional disillusionment, further deepening their divide.

The narrator surprisingly receives a wedding invitation from an acquaintance after the major's death. He accepts eagerly, hoping to escape the psychological stress of his recent actions for a moment. At the wedding, however, he discovers that guest seating is dictated by power, revealing his sense of alienation in several domains, including his former social status, the privileged capitalist class, and his complete lack of acceptance by his compatriots.

The bride's father was a legendary marine colonel whose battalion fought off an NVA regiment during the Battle of Hue with no American assistance, [...]. All the veterans toasted the hero with voluble bursts of bravado that helped to obscure their own uncomfortable lack of heroism. (Nguyen 146-147)

The narrator is invited due to his past role as the General's assistant in Saigon. However, his distant seating—far from the central stage—symbolizes the erosion of his former influence and the fragility of his social standing. The wedding is held at a Chinese restaurant in Westminster, symbolizing a new cultural and geographical setting that starkly contrasts with the familiar society of Saigon. The fusion of settings and guests reflects the fragmentation of national identity in the context of exile. Additionally, the seating arrangement clearly reflects the guests' social status, with the narrator placed among former junior officers and

mid-level bank executives. This symbolic marginalization reveals his estrangement not only from the Vietnamese American elite but also from the structures of power and recognition he once navigated with ease. Lastly, although other Vietnamese attendees and former officers surround the narrator, there are stark class differences among them, depending on their positions and wealth before becoming refugees. The narrator's contrast of his current marginalization and his prior authority exemplify his alienation from the very power structures that once shaped his identity. This transition highlights his alienation from his previous status and the power structures that once defined his identity.

During the initial stages of his involvement in the production of a Hollywood movie, the narrator's argument with the director culminates in a heightened sense of cultural and political alienation, particularly regarding the depiction of Vietnamese characters in the film "Hamlet."

He was amused by my wordlessness. To see me without words is like seeing one of those Egyptian felines without hair [...] all the Vietnamese of any side would come out poorly, herded into the roles of the poor, the innocent, the evil, or the corrupt. Our fate was not to be merely mute; we were to be struck dumb. (Nguyen 174- 175)

The director's indifference to authentic Vietnamese perspectives rendered the narrator's meticulous script notes meaningless, effectively excluding him from any substantive role in the cultural production process. He realizes that Hollywood operates solely to exploit audiences for profit through the commodification of media. This recognition deepens his sense of estrangement from a capitalist system that crudely commercializes history and culture in pursuit of capital. Thus, the narrator's alienation stems from the suppression of genuine Vietnamese self-expression by

dominant capitalist cultural institutions and the distortion of historical truth to serve ideological and economic agendas.

After more than a year of repentance in this reeducation camp, the narrator's ideology transforms. Influenced by Western thought, he was unable to embrace communism fully, but when faced with extreme pressure and ideological reform, he demonstrated both resistance and a certain degree of compromise. Throughout this process, his thoughts oscillated between Western liberalism and Marxism,

I licked my lips, and while the scratching of my desiccated tongue on my brittle lips was loud in my ears, the commandant did not notice. We could have just shot all these prisoners, he said. [...]. As good a student as you are, you may yet become the dialectical materialist that the revolution needs you to be. (Nguyen 411-417)

The dialogue between the narrator and the Commander exposes not only ideological divergence but also epistemological tension between the narrator and the Marxist-Leninist ideology represented by the Commander. The Commander repeatedly pointed out, for more than a year, that the language and thoughts of the narrator still carried elitist tones, which contradicted the principles of simple words. This tension highlights the narrator's cultural alienation within a regime that demands conformity not only in thought but in expression.

In essence, the protagonist's experiences imply Marx's concept of "alienation from others or society" across multiple experiences (Marx 32). As a Vietnamese civilian, he faces discrimination and insults due to his mixed-race identity, leading to estrangement from traditional-minded Vietnamese soldiers and people. As a refugee in America, he loses the power and status he once had and struggles to fully integrate into American

life and the upper class of society, resulting in detachment. As a North Vietnamese spy, he is influenced by communist ideology, leading to estrangement from South Vietnamese soldiers and American-Vietnamese refugees. As a soldier serving in North Vietnam, his reflections on capitalist ideology create distance from the newly established communist regime in the Vietnam re-education camp. Simultaneously, his disagreements with friends Bon and Man further exacerbate his sense of isolation. Thus, the narrator constructs his unique ideological stance by following his sense of direction as he is alienated from the ideologies of others in society, with which he comes into contact.

Having been raised in the highly ideological environment of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Man demonstrated extraordinary wisdom and insight from a young age. He not only absorbed the revolutionary canon but also displayed an early aptitude for synthesizing Maoist doctrine with literary and artistic discourse. Through the narrator's recollections, this ideological trajectory is vividly traced:

When Man first discussed such issues with me in our study group, I was awed by his brilliance, as well as Mao's. I was a lycée student who had never read Mao, never thought that art and literature had any relationship to politics. [...]. It was surely ugly to all except its own mother, and nearly blind. (Nguyen 226-228)

As the narrator states, Man's ability was profoundly shaped by his ideological environment, and positioned him as a natural propagator of revolutionary thought. Additionally, Man played a crucial role in shaping the narrator's political consciousness, guiding him toward a life of ideological commitment and surveillance. Over time, Man's ideological stance became increasingly firm and extreme, to the point of being willing to sacrifice himself and others for the revolutionary purity. He evolved

from an idealistic and passionate youth into a radical willing to employ any means necessary for the revolution.

After the fall of Saigon, Man chose to stay in Vietnam to help build the new nation, separating from his friends. When the narrator finds that the commissar is Man, their confrontation in the Vietnamese re-education camp gradually reveals Man's burns and his survival story with the help of the authorities:

I have no idea what you're talking about, I said. Why are you torturing me? Do you think I want to do this to you? I am doing my best to make sure worse things don't happen to you. [...]. When my medication wears off, I still burn. Excruciating is the right word, but it cannot convey the feeling it describes. (Nguyen 429-436)

Man described to the narrator his experiences after the war, detailing how he was severely burned by napalm. Though his wife and the authorities aided in his recovery, the lingering disfigurement left him unable to face a mirror, alienated even within the intimacy of his own family. His psychological scars run deeper than the physical: he is now a man imprisoned in both ideology and body, suppressing authentic emotion and identity for the sake of political necessity. Man's forced denial of his pain and humanity, under the pressure of ideological obedience, reflects a deeper form of alienation—separating him not only from his comrades and family, but ultimately from his own inner self.

As the narrator's friend, Man's role in the reeducation camp as a harsh and severe commissar forced him to act as an interrogator and abuser, creating a significant conflict between his official identity and his true self, leading to a sense of alienation in his self-identity. Despite internal resistance, Man had to comply with the ideological demands of the

revolutionary regime under the pressure of reality, becoming a puppet of the authorities to protect himself and his family. His true self was gradually eroded by the imperatives of power and ideological conformity, generating an intensifying inner estrangement.

In short, the revolutionary blueprint that once inspired Man ultimately consumed him. Initially, Man was passionate about revolutionary ideals, deeply influenced by Marxist and Maoist thought. However, as the new state of Vietnam was being established, Man found himself engaging in actions that directly contradicted the moral foundation of those ideals. The roles and tasks imposed on him by the state forced Man to suppress his humanity and subordinate his identity to ideological utility. These experiences of Man reflect Marx's different dimensions of "self-alienation or estrangement from one's essential nature and humanity" (Marx 32).

5. Conclusion

This study examines how the concept of alienation from Marxist theory interprets the different experiences of selected soldiers serving the North Vietnamese Communist Party during the Vietnam War and its aftermath. It explores how the oppressions faced by these soldiers are connected to society, the ruling class, and the military system, while also examining their behaviors and decisions in different instances. Furthermore, the research investigates the changes and endings of friendships between selected characters in two novels: Quan and Luong in Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name* (1995) and the narrator and Man in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015).

Based on Marx's concept of the four aspects of alienation, this study traces the alienation process experienced by four soldiers, mapping their journeys during the war and its aftermath. It also explores how personal emotions and experiences affect the degree of ideological alienation and

how these forces contribute to the evolution of camaraderie and the eventual dissolution of the bonds between these paired characters. It is precisely because of their differing experiences that the four characters undergo varied forms of ideological alienation. The research indicates that the most prominent alienation of the four soldiers corresponds to the four aspects of alienation proposed by Marx. Consequently, the soldiers' ideological alienation throughout the Vietnam War and its aftermath reveals the deep psychological toll exerted by the Viet Cong's oppressive political ideology.

Works Cited

Adhikari, Gopal. *Negation of Archetypal Hero in Viet Thanh Nguyen's The Sympathizer*. Tribhuvan University, 2022.

Al-Duhoki, Suhair Fuaad. "The Intelligent Methods of Novel *The Disappeared* Intersexuality." *Materials Today: Proceedings*, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.matpr.2021.05.037

Antonio, Robert J. "Karl Marx." *The Wiley- Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists*, vol. 1, 2011, pp. 115–64. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444396621.ch5

Calloway, Catherine. "The Vietnam War in American Literature." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.228

Chettri, Kritika. "How Women Remember: Two Accounts of the Vietnam War by Dang Thuy Tram and Duong Thu Huong." *Negotiations*, vol. 3, 2020, pp. 63–74.

Dutt, Clemens Palme. *Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism: Manual*. Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1963.

Farahmandian, Hamid. "Compare and Contrast of the Role of Different Themes Towards Nation Building in the Selected Novels." *ANGLISTICUM: Journal of the Association-Institute for English Language and American Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2013, pp. 8–14.

Gheytasi, Sajjad. "Voices in Conflict: Exploring Memory and Multiplicity in *The Sympathizer*." *Anuari de Filologia. Literatures Contemporànies*, vol. 13, 2023, pp. 1–19.

Hamid, Ahmad Azfar Bin Abdul, et al. "Traumatised Society: A Study of Traumatic Experience through the Eyes of Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name*." *Journal of Education and Social Sciences*, vol. 5, no. 2, Oct. 2016, pp. 210–217.

Huong, Duong Thu. *Novel Without a Name*. Translated by Phay Huy Duong and Nina McPherson, Penguin Books, 1996.

Jabarouti, Roya, et al. "Fiction and Philosophy in *Novel Without a Name* and *The Disappeared*." *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2013, pp. 1–6.

Jabarouti, Roya, and Manimangai Mani. "Writing Against History, in the *Novel Without a Name* and *The Disappeared*." *An International Refereed e-Journal of Literary Explorations*, vol. 2, no. II, 2014, pp. 17–26.

Lies, Ursula. "War and Ideology: Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and the Vietnamese *Novel Without a Name* by Duong Thu Huong." *Chewing Over the West*, Brill, 2009, pp. 161–81.

Liparulo, Steven P. "'Incense and Ashes': The Postmodern Work of Refutation in Three Vietnam War Novels." *War Literature and the Arts*, vol. 15, no. 1/2, 2003, pp. 71–94.

Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Translated by Martin Milligan, Progress Publishers, 1959.

Murdoch, Jim. "*Novel Without a Name*." *The Truth about Lies*, 8 Feb. 2010, https://jim-murdoch.blogspot.com/2010/02/novel-without-name.html

NDIAYE, Abdoulaye. "A Hollywoodian Mis-Representations of the Vietnam War in *The Sympathizer* (2015) by Viet Thanh Nguyen: In Light of *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987)." *Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, vol. 9, no. II, 2020.

Ng, Wen Lee, and Manimangai Mani. "Distortion of Marxism in Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name* and Kim Echlin's *The Disappeared*." *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, vol. 41, 2014, pp. 138–49. https://doi.org/10.18052/www.scipress.com/ILSHS.41.138

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *The Sympathizer: A Novel*. Grove/Atlantic, 2015.

Peterson, Elizabeth. "The Sentimentality of Sympathy: Addressing Asian American Neglect through Literary Commentary of *The Sympathizer*." *Horizons*, vol. 5, 2020, pp. 158–62.

Prabhu, Anjali. "*The Sympathizer*: A Dialectical Reading." *PMLA*, vol. 133, no. 2, 2018, pp. 388–95.

Stanley, Sandra Kumamoto. "Citizens of the Imagination: Refugee Memory in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2020, pp. 281–300. https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2020.0010

Stefan, Hayley C. "Tortured Images in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* & the War on Terror." *College Literature*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2021, pp. 209–32. https://doi.org/10.1353/lit.2021.0008

Traina, Giacomo. "The Voice That Carries Everything: History and Confession in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*." *Sapienza University of Rome and University of Silesia in Katowice*, 2023.

Tran, Vi. "Women's Heart of Sorrow: Versions of the *Truyen Kieu* in the Works of Duong Thu Huong and Le Ly Hayslip." *Eastern Illinois University*, 2002, https://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/1525

Wisker, Gina. "Traumas of Place, Travel, Hauntology: *Novel Without a Name* (Duong, 1995), *Daughters of the House* (Roberts, 1992), *The Winter Ghosts* (Mosse, 2010)." *Contemporary Women's Ghost Stories: Spectres, Revenants, Ghostly Returns*, Springer International Publishing, 2022, pp. 217–40. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-89054-4_8