

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

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Abstract

Unlike many studies that focus on distorted Marxist ideologies and diasporic identities in the postcolonial period, this study examines how characters in selected novels experience exploitation in respond to economic challenges, hierarchical military class divisions, and ideological transformations. The aim is to explore experienced by Quan and Luong from *Novel Without a Name* (1995), and the narrator and Man from *The Sympathizer* (2015), within the military system during the Vietnam War and its aftermath, as well as how these characters respond to the forces of oppression behind their exploitation. As salaried workers, soldiers function both as state employees and as vital components of the military apparatus that upholds the ruling class. Thus, they face exploitation from two sources: the state and the military system. These selected characters, as individuals within Vietnamese society, are compelled to participate in the nation's historical process after the outbreak of the Vietnam War. They join the North Vietnamese military out of patriotism, loyalty, and aspirations for success. However, their enlistment does not reflect the full policies of a modern state; rather, it is coerced, driven by wartime needs and revolutionary ideals. By applying the conceptual framework of exploitation from Marxist theory, this study analyzes the characters' interpersonal interactions and psychological struggles within their families, societies, and the military. It finds that the extent of their exploitation is determined by their military rank, assigned duties, and their role in society.

Keywords: Vietnam war, military system, soldiers, Marxism, exploitation

The novel, as a literary genre, possesses a unique power to resonate with human emotions in a deep way, despite being fictional. Essentially, it serves as a mirror of society, skillfully portraying its image through suspense, humor, imagery, and other literary devices, all with a focus on creativity, emotion, and form (Amodu, 2016, p. 129). Literature is an important way in exposing the dark side of society and encouraging readers to critical thinking, with a glimpse into a particular community. Şafak (2019) states that literary criticism and

theories have flourished with unprecedented pace in the twentieth century, offering interpretive lenses through which we can analyze not only literature but also life itself. These theoretical developments were heavily influenced by the social, political, and economic upheavals of the era, particularly the two World Wars. Marxist literary criticism, for instance, focuses on the political aspects, examining how texts reflect or obscure social degradation and economic exploitation (p. 230). Throughout the twentieth century, such theories profoundly influenced the evolution of the novel, challenging established Western hierarchies, power dynamics, and capitalist values (p. 226).

Within this context, the ideological disillusionment and distortions that arose during the Vietnam War caused the Vietnamese people to gradually question the legitimacy and morality of the war. Disorientation was an important feature of the Vietnam War because there were no visible front lines and the enemy was often indistinguishable (Eastman, 2003, p. 5). This war-specific ambiguity shaped how Vietnamese individuals responded to war, loyalty, and societal change, ultimately reshaping ideas of identity and allegiance. Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name* (1995) has been analyzed for its critique of the distorted communist ideology of the Vietnam War and the destructive effects of the communist regime on the Vietnamese people. Mani (2013) emphasizes the disillusionment of soldiers who, after years of war, become victims of corrupted ideals (pp. 177–183). This critique underscores the psychological and ideological inflicted on both soldiers and civilians. My research will further explore how the protagonist in the novel struggles with his identity and consciousness during the revolutionary process.

In the case of Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015), numerous researchers have focused on the protagonist's dual identity as a spy. For instance, Prabhu (2018) analyzes the character's ideological re-education through a Marxist lens, arguing that Nguyen not only dramatizes disillusionment but also embeds dialectical materialism into the novel's structure (pp. 390–394). My study will further focus on the narrator's revolutionary identity and how it transforms within the complex political environment of the United States and the ideological rigid Vietnamese society. Additionally, existing scholarship has enriched memory studies of the novel. Ly (2019) connects the narrator's journey to collective exile memory, while Jabarouti and Mani (2014) discuss the importance of trauma, memory, and the need to confront historical truths.

Thus, this study employs the concept of exploitation from Marxist theory as its conceptual framework, examining how the characters in Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name* (1995) and Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015) reflect the exploitation of Vietnamese soldiers during the Vietnam War and its aftermath. It also analyzes how selected characters respond to various forms of oppression arising from that exploitation.

Historical Background

Novel Without a Name (1995) and *The Sympathizer* (2015) are set during the Vietnam War (1955–1975) and its aftermath. In American history, this conflict is referred to as the Vietnam War, while in Vietnamese history, it is known as the American War. The Vietnam War in American history can broadly be attributed to three main factors. Politically, the war was influenced by the policies and ideologies of three successive U.S. presidents—Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson. Notably, President Johnson's administration took a particularly aggressive stance, leading to over a decade of U.S. support for the South Vietnamese government. Ideologically, the war occurred during the Cold War, a time when the United States feared the spread of communism. As a Soviet ally, the rise of the Communist Party of Vietnam posed a strategic threat to U.S. interests. Economically, the American intervention can be interpreted as a capitalist country pursuing its interests in the global economy. Ultimately, the U.S. overestimated in its military power and failed to understand the nationalist aspirations of the Vietnamese Communists, resulting in a prolonged and unnecessary war (Anderson, 2006, pp. 311–313). However, the primary driving force behind the conflict was the unyielding determination of the Vietnamese people to achieve national liberation and independence—a resolve that fortified North Vietnam throughout the war.

Novel Without a Name (1995) is set during the final stages of the Vietnam War, although it reflects the broader turmoil and ideological struggles that shaped the conflict. Most of the combat took place between North and South Vietnam (Hamid et al., 2016, p. 210), with North Vietnam ultimately securing victory. Two primary historical factors contributed to this outcome. First, North Vietnam, backed by the Soviet Union, was committed to winning the war under the leadership of the North Vietnamese Communist Party. In contrast, the South Vietnamese government in Saigon struggled with inconsistent support from the United States and a lack of political cohesion. Second, the North Vietnamese military strategy was based on the theory and practice of “protracted war” or “revolutionary war,” derived from Mao Tse-tung. This strategy, which had succeeded in China and Indochina, was highly effective in Vietnam, partly because the American military conventional forces were ill-prepared to operate in the complex political and social landscape of the region (Record, 2005, p. 20). The United States hastily intervened in this war without a nuanced understanding of Vietnam’s socio-cultural dynamics, while the North Vietnamese Communist Party adeptly used these very dynamics to rally mass support for the revolution. Frances Fitzgerald’s seminal work, *Fire in the Lake* (1972), provides crucial insight into the sociopolitical structure, emphasizing that Vietnamese villages served not just as residential units, but also as vital centers of social organization, economic activity, and political

mobilization. The National Liberation Front (NLF) skillfully elevated the image of the village into a national symbol of communal unity and resistance (Curry et al., 2014, p. 55). Consequently, the successful implementation of military strategy and grassroots support ensured North Vietnam to win the war. This conclusion is echoed in the novel, where Quan encounters two Americans carrying cameras and remarks: "That's strange. The Americans left two years ago. How could there be any left here?" (Huong, 1995, p. 282).

The occupation of Saigon by the Vietnamese People's Army on April 30, 1975, marked the end of the Vietnam War and the reunification of Vietnam under communist regime. This initiated a period of significant sociopolitical change and the enforcement of socialist policies. During this time, the South Vietnamese population—especially former officials and soldiers—faced deep suspicion from the Communist Party. Their loyalty was questioned, leading to the creation of new political and ideological policies in the South. Many South Vietnamese were sent to re-education camps, and ideological reformation became a national priority (Samardjian, 2023, p. 78). The historical context of *The Sympathizer* (2015) unfolds during the post-war period in Vietnam and tells the story of a former North Vietnamese spy for the South Vietnamese government whose patriotism and loyalty are re-evaluated by the Vietnamese Communists in a re-education camp. The narrative also explores the chaotic retreat of South Vietnamese soldiers and civilians in April 1975. America realized it had a moral obligation and evacuated approximately 130,000 Vietnamese refugees. Over the next few decades, hundreds of thousands more refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were resettled in America (Nguyen, 2021). This experience of exile, displacement, and cultural survival within American society is also a prominent theme in *The Sympathizer* (2015).

Conceptual Framework

This study drawn upon primary texts and foundational works such as David Harvey's *The Limits to Capital* (1982), Friedrich Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1993), Louis Althusser's *On the reproduction of capitalism: Ideology and ideological state apparatuses* (2014) for the research to clarify the concept of exploitation through the lenses of economy, military hierarchy, and ideological. Exploitation, well-explored in Marx's works and receiving more scholarly attention, is measurable in terms of value production. Marxist exploitation is when workers are taken advantage of to make profit, which happens in all class-based societies, but especially under capitalism, where businesses compete to maximize profit (Bakan 2018).

According to Castore (2008), Harvey's *The Limits to Capital* (1982) aimed to be a seminal contribution, essentially a contemporary geographical counterpart to Karl Marx's monumental work, Capital, upon which Harvey's

book heavily relies. The significant difference from Marx's work is that Harvey's book is more academic in tone and structure (p. 61). Harvey (1982) defines capital formation as "converting money and use values and putting them into circulation to make money, to produce surplus value" (p. 21). During wartime, proletarians were unable to have a normal job due to the instability of the market and the breakdown of capital accumulation, resulting in them being forced to become the "reserve army of labor". Harvey also emphasizes that the reserve army plays a crucial role in "depressing wage rates" by acting as "a permanent threat to those already employed" (p. 165). This pool of unemployed or underemployed workers willing to accept lower wages puts pressure on employed workers' wages, making them more vulnerable to exploitation. Thus, the existence of this reserve army becomes a means for capitalists to extract more surplus value from workers. However, to exploit the reserve army, particularly its latent part, capitalists require significant "social and geographical mobility of both labor and capital" (p. 165).

When analyzing tribes, Engels (1993) notes that "the executive official developed in most cases, if not in all, out of the chief military commander" (p. 50). The power of the military has been valued since the inception of tribal societies, and military leaders have historically had significant influence in national politics. Consequently, an ambitious senior military commander can profoundly impact the development of a country. Engels argues that the emergence of the State becomes "necessary to moderate the conflict and keep it within the bounds of 'order'" (p. 92). The armed forces are crucial institutions for the state to maintain control and suppress dissent. However, in this process, workers (including military and police forces) become both tools and victims of the ruling class's exploitation.

Althusser (2014) asserts that ideology is always embedded in the apparatus and practices of the state (p. 184). These apparatuses are state tools through which the state maintains class domination. As written in the book:

the (Repressive) State Apparatus functions massively and predominantly by repression (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology. [...] the Ideological State Apparatuses function massively and predominantly by ideology, but they also function secondarily by repression, [...] ruling class is active in the Ideological State Apparatuses insofar as it is ultimately the ruling ideology which is realized in the Ideological State Apparatuses, precisely in its contradictions. (pp. 244-245)

Furthermore, to ensure that workers abide by established rules, Althusser (2014) discusses how "the reproduction of labor-power thus reveals as its *sine qua non* not only the reproduction of its 'skills' but also the reproduction of its subjection to the ruling ideology or of the 'practice' of that ideology" (p. 236). The relationship between ideology and the subject is also crucial.

Althusser posits that “as ideology is eternal,” one must suppress the temporal form and recognize that “individuals are always-already subjects” (p. 192). This perspective emphasizes the enduring nature of ideology in constituting individuals as subjects within the ideological framework. According to Ryder’s (2015) review, Althusser contends that the capitalist economic system is based on exploitation, which generates class conflict. Ideology serves to perpetuate this exploitation, despite contradictions rooted in material class divisions. Therefore, this paper aims to explore how three concepts of exploitation from Marxist theory—economic, ideological, and military hierarchical—manifest in the experiences of selected soldiers in two Vietnam War novels. Specifically, it investigates how the Vietnamese state and the Viet Cong military system enabled the exploitation of these soldiers. To accomplish to attain the objectives listed above, the following will be addressed:

1. How are the selected characters economically and ideologically exploited within the Viet Cong military system?
2. How do family responsibilities, military hierarchy, and social structures deepen their exploitation?
3. How does exploitation influence the characters’ decisions and actions throughout the narratives?

Methodology

Based on this conceptual framework mentioned in the previous section, my research aims to extrapolate these concepts to investigate the dynamics within the North Vietnamese Communist revolutionary society, its ruling class, military apparatus, and the experiences of soldiers during the Vietnam War and its aftermath. The research employs a textual analysis methodology, focusing on the experiences and development of four selected characters to examine their decisions and behaviors as they were experiencing different types of exploitation, particularly within the context of the Viet Cong military system. Furthermore, applying the Marxist perspective, my research seeks to interrogate the complexities and contradictions inherent in the North Vietnamese Communist society, revealing the fundamental forces of oppression and power that may have influenced soldiers’ experiences in the Vietnam War and its aftermath.

This study adopts a narratological approach to analyze how these characters’ trajectories reflect varying degrees of ideological internalization, economic hardship, and hierarchical subjugation. The characters were selected for their representational value: two protagonists (Quan and the unnamed narrator) experience growing disillusionment with Viet Cong ideology. In contrast, two secondary characters (Luong and Man) illustrate passive submission to it. The analysis does not isolate specific scenes but instead follows the characters’

narrative arcs to trace ideological transformation and subjection over time. The Marxist concept of exploitation serves as the central analytical tool to interpret the characters' responses to economic challenge, military hierarchy, and ideological transformation.

These selected soldiers, as ordinary citizens within Vietnamese society, were compelled to participate in the nation's historical process after the outbreak of the Vietnam War and the post-war reconstruction process. Their ideology was deeply ingrained with new slogans propagated by the Communist Party of Vietnam, envisioning a blueprint for war and the establishment of a new Vietnamese society belonging to the working class after winning the war. The four selected characters joined the North Vietnamese Communist Army as soldiers out of patriotism, loyalty, and aspirations for success. However, their enlistment often stemmed from coercion or manipulated patriotism rather than formal conscription. As such, these North Vietnamese soldiers cannot be regarded simply as "wage-earning workers" within the military system because they received neither regular compensation nor benefits. Instead, they need to be closely connected with the state, the military system, and the masses. This study examines how these selected characters were economically exploited by both the state and the military, and how the hierarchical structure of the army deepened their oppression. Through this lens, the research contributes to broader discussions of Marxist theory, war literature, and ideological control in revolutionary societies.

Textual Analysis

Exploitation in Duong Thu Huong's Novel Without a Name

At the outset of Huong's *Novel Without a Name* (1995), she vividly paints a visceral picture that realistically portray the terrible conditions and horrific experiences faced by soldiers engaged in jungle warfare in Vietnam. For example, apart from combat operations, Quan and his subordinates spent most of their time searching for food due to the extreme scarcity of resources, which forced them to eat orangutans and other wild animals to survive:

Chief, you forget that I've got the sharpest eyes in this company. Remember the time I shot those two bucks on the mountain? [...] Everyone had congratulated one another. I just stared at the tiny hands spinning in circles on the surface of the soup. We had descended from the apes. The horror of it. (pp. 6–7)

This lack of provisions can be seen as a form of economic exploitation inflicted upon the soldiers by the military command or the ruling class of the Viet Cong. The nightmarish imagery of consuming the "tiny hands" of butchered apes evokes the dehumanizing effects of exploitation. It stripped the soldiers of

their basic dignity and human connections, reducing them to a primal state of existence akin to their “descent from the apes.” Their very humanity became a cost extracted by the military system, exploiting their labor for surplus value. Further, the military did not sufficiently supply these guys with the basic food they needed, even though they had been deployed into the dangerous jungles at the risk of their lives. This highlighted the gap in class between the military command, which exploits the soldiers’ labor while depriving them of enough financial aid, and the soldiers, who risk their lives for it. Especially for Quan, due to a lack of supplies and the invisible military hierarchy, he suffered cruel exploitation, resulting in the degrading psychological burden of eating orangutans.

The soldiers’ obedience highlights the pervasive influence of military ideology on their actions and decisions. Quan’s war travels in the novel come from Luong’s assignment. On the surface, it sounds like Luong is doing Quan a big favor, but when explored further, a deeper motivation is revealed:

I want you to go find out what’s happening with Bien. I’ve written a letter to Nguyen Van Hao [...] ‘The war . . . It’s going to be a long time, isn’t it?’ Luong didn’t answer. I pleaded with him: ‘It’s just you and me. Tell me.’ Luong stood without moving or speaking for a few minutes. Then he turned and started walking away. (pp. 32–33)

This dialogue is both a conversation between friends and an order from a superior to a subordinate. Luong’s direct command to Quan reflects the hierarchical structure of the military, where authority is determined by rank. It also demonstrates how the military system fosters loyalty among subordinates. Luong attempts to leverage their friendship to exert control over Quan, highlighting the expectation of obedience and the use of personal relationships to enforce military discipline. Moreover, Quan faces unconscious exploitation from his subordinates, who, despite their affection for him, inadvertently take advantage of his commitment to loyalty and fairness. For example, Luy’s changing manner of addressing Quan illustrates this dynamic:

‘Why don’t you always call me ‘elder brother’? Sometimes you call me ‘Chief,’ other times ‘Commander.’
Luy laughed insolently, ‘When I need to flatter, my tongue naturally reaches for the words ‘Chief’ and ‘Commander.’
‘So that’s it. ‘Chief,’ ‘Commander’—you think those words are enough to get me out of bed, to drag me off hunting somewhere, to make me into your little deputy sharpshooter? You bastard.’
‘Don’t be angry. Anyway, I only trick you when it comes down to little things, don’t I?’ (pp. 15–16).

These interactions highlight the relationship between military commanders and their subordinates, where soldiers like Quan are controlled and burdened

with additional responsibilities under the guise of friendship or loyalty. During this journey, Luong's order prompts Quan to become a mobile soldier, subject to the exploitation brought by geographical and spatial movement. For example, in the unexpected battle involving Huc's troops, Quan intended to visit Bien on his way back to headquarters but ultimately joined the transport team, contributing his labor to the war effort:

All around me the gnashing and screeching of saws, [...] I agreed and went off to join the transport soldiers, offering them a hand with small odd jobs. They were all very brawny men. Everyone worked in shorts, bare-chested, drenched in sweat. (pp. 186–187)

Quan's experiences during the journey may have been predetermined from the start. As mentioned earlier, Luong's motives were not entirely pure, as evident from Quan's subsequent doubts about Luong's task. Huong (1995) portrays Quan's uncertainty: "The war ... It's going to be a long time, isn't it?" (p. 33). On the other hand, Luong's actions suggest that he intended to temporarily sideline Quan as a form of punishment related to the Luy incident and as a means to promote Khue. This is evident from Luy's ending and Khue's handling of the situation:

Back at division headquarters, I learned from Luong that during my absence my friend Luy had gone mad. [...]. They transferred him to the regional military hospital. No one has heard a word about him since. Luong consoled me, then told me to rejoin the company and to prepare myself; we were gearing up for a major battle. (p. 206)

When Quan returns to the unit, it is revealed that Luy has already gone mad, naturally ending the punishment associated with the incident. Although Quan is saddened by this development and receives consolation from Luong, Luong immediately orders him to prepare for a major battle, highlighting how Quan's surplus value as a soldier is exploited and how Luong, as a commander, promotes soldiers' devotion. In short, Quan's assignment ultimately forced him to leave the unit under the guise of assisting Bien, revealing deeper punitive and strategic personnel management agendas within the Viet Cong army. Exploitation is dual for Quan: he is manipulated out of his position, and upon his return, his labor and loyalty continue to be exploited. Althusser (2014) argues that "individuals are 'abstract' to concerning the subjects which they always-already are" (p. 192), and this manipulation further strengthens the ideological control of the military. Despite personal losses and emotional fluctuations, he remained steadfast in his obedience to the military's objectives and continued to contribute to them. This reflects the mainstream ideological obedience within the army, manifested in its strict hierarchical structure and the unquestioning expectation of obedience from soldiers. It also reveals the

ideological control within the military, where individual desires are subordinated to collective needs and hierarchical commands.

The influence of Viet Cong ideology extends beyond the military, permeating various aspects of family and society. Quan's father exemplifies this pervasive influence, representing countless Vietnamese families. Driven by his ambition and past glory as a hero of the anti-French resistance, Quan's father forced his sons to enlist in the Vietnam War. This decision was made without considering Quan and his brother's desires or the significant differences between the two conflicts. After Quan's younger brother, Quang, died in the war, Quan reflected on the reasons behind their tragic fate:

My little brother had been intelligent. There would have been a place for him in a society at peace. His fate had been sealed the second my father raised his hand at that Party cell meeting: "I promise to convince my boys to enlist." The whole family thrown into the game of war! So that is how it had happened. From the depths of his ignorance, my father's ambition had overcome him: He too had wanted to reserve his place at the victory banquet ... (p. 124)

Their father's unwavering belief in the duty to defend the nation was deeply rooted in his experiences and the social recognition he received as a war hero. This belief compelled his sons to view military service as an unavoidable obligation. Such manipulation constitutes a form of ideological exploitation, as it subordinates the personal autonomy and safety of Quan and his brother to the authority and expectations within the context of war and family duty. However, the father's failure to recognize the fundamental differences between the two wars led to Quan and his brother being forced into the "latent reserve army," and finally, to Quang's inevitable sacrifice. Learning of his brother's death dealt a severe blow to Quan, who felt deep pain over his father's stubbornness and the oppressive nature of their patriarchal society. In the end, this caused Quan's relationship with his father to fall apart.

Quan's experience on the train also demonstrates the pervasive influence of North Vietnamese ideological and military exploitation. Quan overheard a conversation between two Communist officials on the train and silently focused on the incident. However, the small talk prompted a warning from the train's military officer because he received a report accusing the officials of insulting Karl Marx and slandering the North Vietnamese government. The dialogue between the officials and the military officer:

We have a report that you just insulted Karl Marx, our venerable leader, that you slandered our socialist government. [...]. When it comes to defending Marxist thought, that's our business, not yours. Is that clear? The young man lowered his eyes. [...] They need a religion to guide them and a whip to educate them. (pp. 165–167)

It reveals several key insights: firstly, the Party officials, who possess diplomatic passports and promote Marxist ideology, essentially function as political tools within North Vietnamese society. As Althusser (2014) stated, “the unity of these different regional ideologies—religious, moral, legal, political, aesthetic, and so on—being ensured by their subsumption under the State Ideology” (p. 158). The Marxist ideology propagated by the Viet Cong finds its material existence and influence within the political machinery. Secondly, the “little fat man’s” final remark indicates that, as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), he functions by combining ideology with material force when necessary. Thirdly, the military officer lost the confrontation upon learning the “little fat man’s” identity. This occurred because the official used ideological authority to suppress the officer, demonstrating the enforcement of the ruling class ideology. Finally, the stark contrast between the military officer’s initial deference and his inability to “dare raise his head” as he left the compartment highlights the role of the state’s armed forces in advancing the ruling class’s agenda through the use of violence.

These analyses illustrate how the North Vietnamese people and soldiers, represented by Quan, suffer from ideological exploitation by the Viet Cong and military exploitation within the hierarchical structure of the armed forces. Although Quan appears to be a passive observer in this scene, he is an active participant, assuming both the “they” referred to by the Party officials and the “passengers” seen by the train’s military officer. In a word, the interaction between Party officials and the military officer underscores how ideological authority is used to maintain control, while the armed forces enforce this control through material means. This dual exploitation reflects the mechanisms of power and domination within the Viet Cong’s socio-political system.

During the Vietnam War, soldiers like Quan were subjected to multiple layers of oppression from the ruling class of North Vietnam, the hierarchical military system, familial expectations, and societal authority. These forms of oppression led to significant exploitation in economic, military, and ideological terms. While soldiers like Luong might appear to be the exploiters, the reality is that those who initially aligned themselves with mainstream ideology, like Luong, were the first to be exploited. This can be seen through the comparison of two excerpts involving Quan and Luong:

We had joined the army the same day. Ten years later, Luong was a staff officer. He was three grades higher than me in the army hierarchy. [...] the authority he had wielded over the rest of us. Now, obsessed by something, he rubbed his chin nervously. (pp. 27–29)

Dao Tien cut me off, irritated: ‘You never took the courses or followed the education campaigns, did you?’ ‘Of course I did. How would I know how to detect the enemy or test the soil? Or how to handle artillery? [...] you’ve totally missed the point!’ (pp. 76–77)

From the first excerpt, it can be traced that Luong's trajectory over a decade, which exemplifies how the dominant ideology of the Viet Cong military successfully indoctrinated him from the start, with the most notable characteristic being compliance. Despite facing humiliation and hardship as a young recruit, Luong exhibited self-control and pragmatism, prioritizing conformity over rebellion. This compliant attitude facilitated his steady rise through the ranks, earning the respect of his superiors and ultimately securing a staff position. Luong embodies the military's valued traits of "self-effacement" and professionalism, placing institutional hierarchy and ideology above personal grievances. In contrast, Quan's dialogue with Dao Tien suggests that he and his unit largely neglected the "ideological study" and "political lectures" aimed at reinforcing the ruling ideology. Instead, they engaged in more pragmatic pursuits such as combat training, hunting, and card games—activities that could stave off "boredom" but also impeded their "ideological progress" within the military apparatus. Quan appeared to have drifted away from the ideological dimensions, focusing more on the tactical realities of warfare. Thus, the contrast between them highlights Luong's successful ideological inculcation and compliance, while Quan represents the resistance or indifference that the military sought to eliminate through various indoctrination efforts.

In a word, the above studies contribute to a major discovery: Luong takes the initiative to accept mainstream Viet Cong ideology led to his early exploitation in the military system. Luong's career path shows effective indoctrination and growth by obedience. Luong and other obedient soldiers are used by the system to support further exploitation. To Quan, his experience reveals the various forms of exploitation.

Exploitation in Viet Thanh Nguyen's The Sympathizer

Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015) begins with the protagonist's confession to a mysterious "Commander". He describes his heritage and position within the South Vietnamese regime. As a Vietnamese mixed race, he faces various forms of discrimination. This ranges from insults by baby-faced guards to disdain from nostalgic French colonizers. However, the narrator is delighted by the General's appreciation of his talents. As the narrator stated, he takes pride in his intelligence because he successfully aided the general in evacuating to the United States:

Perhaps, for variety, he could call me mongrel or half-breed, as some have in the past? How about métis, which is what the French called me when not calling me Eurasian? [...]. he informed me who the guards at the airport would be for our departure, and where I might find their lieutenant. (pp. 26–28)

The narrator describes his cost-effective contribution to the General's evacuation. The General's trust in his subordinates enhanced the narrator's ability to accomplish tasks. The close relationship between the General and the narrator highlights the exploitative nature of the military hierarchy, pragmatically yet exploitatively utilizing the narrator's skills and loyalty. On the other hand, the war-torn socioeconomic landscape of Vietnam is rife with economic exploitation, where survival often depends on one's ability to pay or bribe for safety. The high prices for visas, passports, and evacuation seats reflect the scarcity manipulated by those in power. The narrator had to navigate this corrupt system by paying substantial bribes, illustrating how desperate situations are exploited for profit. This bribery system exemplifies how the "reserved army", composed of desperate evacuees, is economically exploited by those controlling the escape routes.

With the fall of Saigon, the collapse of the South Vietnamese regime, and the General's escape, the narrator originally hoped to end his espionage role and stay in Vietnam to rebuild his home with Man. However, Man, in his superior role, assigned the narrator a new task:

I had told him of the General's evacuation plan as soon as I learned of it, and that past Wednesday in the basilica, I was informed of my new task. [...]. he said, My friend, I'm a subversive, not a seer. The timetable for your return will depend on what your general plans. (pp. 35–39)

The narrator's old friend Man, who had been his ideological guide since high school, instilled in him revolutionary fervor and party ideology. This indoctrination was a form of exploitation, shaping the narrator's identity and purpose to serve revolutionary goals. Even when the narrator expressed doubts, Man encouraged him to continue the struggle, showing how Man leveraged personal relationships to secure the narrator's loyalty to the cause. When the narrator wavered, Man suggested he took on the mission for the sake of their other friend Bon—a clear illustration of the military's systematic cultivation of loyalty in subordinates through emotional manipulation. Man leveraged their friendship, manipulating the narrator's sense of loyalty and responsibility to their friends, further binding him to the revolutionary cause.

Additionally, as a marginalized mixed-race civilian, the narrator, in Man's view, would lack normal rights and status if he stayed in Vietnam. Thus, the narrator was forced to accept dishonorable tasks, becoming an exploited "surplus value," with his skills and heritage once again utilized by the Viet Cong ruling class. Furthermore, Man's description of the revolutionary structure—study groups, hierarchical committees, and parties—illustrates the strict military hierarchy within the Viet Cong. Lower-level soldiers like the narrator and Man were merely tools in the class agenda, with no authority to question the decisions of the upper echelons.

After being exiled from Vietnam to the United States, the narrator faces a complex trajectory due to his dual identity as a refugee and a spy, along with his economic vulnerability. Initially, he relies on the charity of his former professor to settle down and build a new life while fulfilling the task assigned by the Vietnamese Communist Party: monitoring the general's activities.

My job was to serve as the first line of defense against students who sought audiences with the secretary or the Department Chair [...]. These things, perfectly suitable for a student, amounted to death by a thousand paper cuts for me. (pp. 79–81)

This dual role in America exemplifies the ideological exploitation by the revolutionary cause, as the narrator's ambitions and freedom are subordinated to his duties. The responsibility of spying on the General ensures that he remains bound to the Viet Cong's revolutionary agenda, preventing him from fully integrating into American society or pursuing a new personal life. Furthermore, despite his extensive military experience, the narrator is only able to secure a low-paying, menial job from his professor, which is greatly mismatched to his skills. The intensity and environment of the job are challenging,

I had written to my former professor, Avery Wright Hammer, seeking his help in leaving the camp. [...]. Every time I dropped by for the next several months, as I wrote to my aunt, I found him still mired in a profound funk. He was unemployed and no longer a general, although his former officers all hailed him as such. (pp. 77–78)

As mentioned in the text, the narrator earns only minimum wage and cannot receive fair compensation. His university job as a clerk involves mundane tasks like answering phones, typing, filing, and assisting the secretary. Additionally, due to his unique background, he is forced to endure interviews and public scrutiny, with his “surplus value” being exploited, adding another layer of pressure. Consequently, the narrator faces economic exploitation due to insufficient pay and overwork, as well as psychological stress from managing his complex identity in a new environment.

The narrator experiences severe ideological manipulation and exploitation while participating in an American film. Initially, he saw himself as a technical advisor contributing to an artistic project. However, over time, he realized he was involved in infiltrating and promoting Vietnamese culture. Struggling between the film's artistic value and its propagandistic intentions, he sought advice from his friend and superior, Man, only to receive deeper ideological indoctrination:

The longer I worked on the Movie, the more I was convinced that I was not only a technical consultant on an artistic project, but an infiltrator into a work of propaganda. [...]. What mattered was that the audience member, having paid for the ticket, was willing to let American ideas and values seep into the vulnerable tissue of his brain and the absorbent soil of his heart. (pp. 225–226)

Professionally, the narrator was used as a tool to lend authenticity to the film, while ideologically, he was manipulated to further causes aligned with his revolutionary ideals. Man, quoting Mao's view, explained how art and literature could be powerful tools for both ruling and resisting. And he leveraged the narrator's loyalty and sense of mission towards the revolutionary cause, indoctrinating him to believe that participating in the film was an "important mission" against American cultural colonialism. Thus, the narrator's thoughts and labor were ideologically constrained, reflecting a dual form of ideological exploitation by the Viet Cong. On the other hand, the United States utilized Hollywood films to spread American values and ideologies worldwide. As a form of cultural soft power, these films became tools for the U.S. government to penetrate and influence other cultures. As a participant, the narrator was directly subjected to American ideological influence.

Despite being in the United States, the narrator remains loyal to the Vietnamese Communist Party, risking his life to transmit intelligence and engaging in secret espionage activities. To gain the General's trust and better conceal his true identity, the narrator also contributes his efforts to the General's activities without compensation.

For the last few weeks, I had been photographing the General's files, all of which I had access to as his aide-de-camp. [...]. I complained to auntie once, but she cursed me at such length and with such inventiveness I had to check both my watch and my dictionary. (pp. 297–298)

Although geographically located in the United States, the narrator continues to serve the Vietnamese Communist Party by sending intelligence back to Vietnam. This situation suggests the exploitation and control over soldiers' spatial mobility, depriving them of the freedom to make autonomous choices. The geographical distance makes his espionage activities more dangerous and isolating, as he must navigate different cultural and political environments while maintaining his covert operations. Besides, the narrator performs extensive unpaid work for "the General, the Fraternity, and the Movement" (p. 297). As the General's assistant, he is also required to handle clerical tasks that far exceed the typical responsibilities of an aide, reflecting the economic exploitation he suffers from the General.

The narrator's experience in the re-education camp in Vietnam exemplifies the state's dual utilization of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) primarily

for ideological indoctrination and the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) mainly for suppression. Following his arrest for defying Man's orders and returning to Vietnam, the narrator undergoes a year of self-reflection and ideological repentance before facing a final test characterized by extreme physical and psychological torment, violent threats, and even deprivation of basic physiological needs:

Before I could say a word, or make any sound at all, the guards seized me, gagged me, and blindfolded me. [...]. I thrashed against my constraints and tried to scream, but my body would hardly move and no sound emerged except a snuffle. (pp. 422–423)

The re-education camp serves as a microcosm demonstrating Vietnam's multifaceted control mechanisms after the war. While the narrator undergoes extensive ideological re-education—a hallmark of ISA operations—the violent tests he endures highlight the state's reliance on coercion and intimidation to ensure obedience, representing the core function of the RSA. Despite the prolonged ideological indoctrination, the narrator's experience notably combines the main elements of both apparatuses to forcibly alter his consciousness and compel submission. In a word, the narrator's ordeal underscores the ruthless methods employed by the Vietnamese Communist regime to impose high-pressure governance and ideological reformation on its people, disregarding fundamental human rights and decency.

In the final scene, Man, to facilitate the escape of his two friends, bribes officials to ensure the guards turn a blind eye. He reveals to the narrator the intricate relationship between ideology, power, and economic interests within the communist regime,

I've sent money to the right officials, [...] I used the remainder for your escape. Isn't it remarkable that in a communist country money can still buy you anything you want? (p. 485)

In purportedly communist countries, money still holds sway over everything, including bribing police officers, prison administrators, and others. Man's exchange of money for his friends' escape reflects a transactional approach to power, making him a participant in this vast system of economic exploitation. In addition, camp administrators are required to deliver "tributes" to their superiors, which Man pays the "tithe" to his superior. Subordinates are obliged to hand over benefits to their superiors according to their ranks, which reflects the complete chain of interest transmission and the strict hierarchical exploitation system within the military. The military hierarchical system determines the flow of resources and privileges, allowing superiors to control subordinates and benefit from them. Man's experience highlights the intricate interplay between ideology, power, and economics within the Viet Cong communist

regime, demonstrating the pervasive influence of money even in ostensibly ideological systems.

In short, both the narrator and Man experience economic, military hierarchical, and ideological exploitation. Compared to Man, who faces exploitation in post-war Vietnam under communist rule, the narrator suffers exploitation from the Vietnamese authorities and, due to his complex identity, also suffers from the fallen South Vietnamese regime, the General, and American society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study applies Marxist literary theory to investigate systemic exploitation within the Viet Cong's military apparatus, revealing how ostensibly revolutionary armies can reproduce structures of class oppression. It contributes to broader scholarly debates by showing that military institutions, even within nominally communist regimes, often function not as instruments of liberation but as mechanisms of class stratification and ideological control. To develop this argument, the study focuses on four selected characters and explores how adolescent soldiers in a turbulent Vietnamese society were subjected to multiple forms of oppression. The revolutionary context profoundly shaped their identities and values during this formative period. Consequently, under unstable social conditions, these young soldiers were easily manipulated by ambitious leaders and compelled to act in ways that conflicted with their original beliefs.

Based on Marxist concepts of exploitation in terms of economic, military hierarchy, and ideology, the paper explores the experiences of four selected soldiers in different settings and analyzes their responses. As both a tool and an institution of the ruling class, the military system functioned as a microcosm of Vietnamese society, compelling soldiers to suppress their agency when confronted with various forms of exploitation. Among these, economic exploitation, the most fundamental form faced by workers, persisted even in the Viet Cong's ostensibly communist society. During the war, soldiers received no wages and were forced to contribute surplus labor to sustain the military campaign. After the war, although nominally salaried, they were required to surrender a significant portion of their earnings in the form of bribes to their superiors. The fair system has not even been changed in the new Vietnam under Viet Cong rule after the war.

This study offers a critical framework for examining the intersection of militarization, historical narrative, and ideology in the context of Southeast Asia. Drawing on insights from Vietnamese English literature, Cold War studies, and Marxist criticism, it provides a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of soldiers during wartime and the internal contradictions of revolutionary military systems. In doing so, the research contributes to the ongoing discussion of how militarized institutions shape subjectivity and reinforce power hierarchies, thereby extending the study's implications to interdisciplinary fields such as postcolonial and war studies.

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