
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Narrative Dilemma of the Double Self: Three Dimensions of the Unreliable Narrator in *The Sympathizer*

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ABSTRACT

Viet Thanh Nguyen's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Sympathizer* (2015), has become a milestone in contemporary Asian American literature and Vietnam War literature due to its unique narrative voice and complex exploration of identity politics. This paper aims to analyse the construction mechanism and profound implications of "the Captain" as an unreliable narrator from a narratological perspective. Drawing on Wayne C. Booth's classic definition and James Phelan's rhetorical narratology theory—specifically his division of unreliability into three axes (fact/event, knowledge/perception, and value/judgment)—this study proposes that the protagonist's unreliability presents a "three-dimensional" structure corresponding to these axes. The first-dimension stems from the concealment and distortion of factual reporting caused by his double-agent identity (unreliability on the fact/event axis). The second dimension arises from the cognitive limitations and parodic deconstruction of the East-West binary discourse viewed through the lens of a postcolonial diasporic subject (unreliability on the knowledge/perception axis). The third-dimension touches upon the repression of traumatic memory and the internal conflict of value judgments (unreliability on the value/judgment axis). Through a detailed textual analysis of these three dimensions, this paper argues that the unreliable narration in *The Sympathizer* is not merely a technique for plot development but a formal representation of Vietnam War trauma, Cold War ideological conflicts, and the identity crisis of the diasporic subject. The narrator's "unreliability" constitutes the only reliable path to historical truth and ethical reality; through constant self-negation and reconstruction, he reveals the alienation of humanity by war and the perpetual fluidity of identity.

KEYWORDS

Viet Thanh Nguyen; *The Sympathizer*; Unreliable Narrator; James Phelan; Narratology; Double Self; Traumatic Memory

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Introduction

In the grand narratives concerning the Vietnam War, there has long existed a significant imbalance. As Viet Thanh Nguyen points out in his non-fiction work *Nothing Ever Dies*, this war is often simplified in Western mainstream cultural memory as an American tragedy, where Vietnamese people are reduced to background figures, victims, or faceless enemies—the "silent majority." The Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Sympathizer*, published in 2015, thoroughly breaks this silence. Told from the first-person perspective of a half-French, half-Vietnamese captain educated in America who lies low in the South Vietnamese army for the North, the novel recounts his escape to the United States following the collapse of the South Vietnamese regime. While rebuilding his life in Los Angeles, he continues to gather intelligence for the Northern communists. The core charm of this work lies not only in the ups and downs of its spy plot but also in the unique texture of its narrative voice: the protagonist calls himself a "sympathizer," a title inherently filled with ambiguity and tension. He sympathizes with both the communist cause and his individual fate under capitalism; he sympathizes with comrades in the North and old friends in the South. This all-

encompassing "sympathy" transforms at the narrative level into an extreme "unreliability."

Academic research on *The Sympathizer* has surged in recent years. Existing studies have largely focused on themes such as postcolonial identity, Cold War political critique, and the politics of memory. Often treating "unreliable narration" as a given label, few have systematically deconstructed its generative logic from within the mechanisms of narratology. Current research tends to simply attribute the narrator's unreliability to the natural result of his spy identity, overlooking how this unreliability is constructed layer by layer through linguistic strategies, psychological mechanisms, and cultural contexts within the text. Furthermore, there is a lack of attempts to examine this unreliability hierarchically by dividing it into different dimensions. Therefore, this paper aims to deeply explore the constitutive mechanism of the unreliable narrator in *The Sympathizer*, questioning whether this "unreliability" stems merely from moral deception or cognitive limitation, what different dimensional layers it encompasses, and how these dimensions interact to construct the novel's unique narrative tension and intellectual depth.

To address these questions, this paper will draw on Wayne C. Booth's classic definition of the unreliable narrator and, more importantly, adopt James Phelan's rhetorical narratology theory as an analytical framework. Phelan classifies unreliability by focusing on three axes: the axis of facts; the axis of values or ethics; and the axis of knowledge and perception.

This classification transcends the traditional moral binary, providing a precise tool for understanding the complex deviations of the narrator in reporting events, interpreting the world, and making ethical evaluations. In the postcolonial and traumatic context of *The Sympathizer*, the narrator's "unreliability" does not simply deviate from some universal moral norm but reflects the fragmentation of the subject's spirit amidst historical rupture and cultural displacement. The narrator not only deliberately conceals facts due to his double-agent identity but also misreads due to his "middleman" stance in cultural perception, and falls into profound internal

contradictions in value judgment due to war trauma and ideological conflict. This multi-dimensional unreliability constitutes the only reliable path to historical truth and ethical reality. Through constant self-negation and reconstruction, he reveals the alienation of humanity by war and the perpetual fluidity of identity.

Based on this, this paper will not be limited to a single-dimensional analysis but will attempt to construct a three-dimensional interpretive framework. It argues that the unreliable narration in *The Sympathizer* presents a "three-dimensional" structure corresponding to Phelan's three axes. The first dimension stems from the concealment and distortion of factual reporting caused by the protagonist's double-agent identity, causing his narration to slide constantly between truth and disguise. The second dimension arises from the cognitive limitations and parodic deconstruction of the East-West binary discourse from the perspective of a postcolonial diasporic subject, leading to dislocation at the level of perception. The third dimension touches upon the

repression of traumatic memory and the internal conflict of value judgments, revealing the ethical dilemmas the narrator faces when attempting to integrate a fragmented self. Through a detailed textual analysis of these three dimensions, this paper aims to elucidate that the unreliable narration in *The Sympathizer* is not merely a technique for plot development but a formal representation of Vietnam War trauma, Cold War ideological conflicts, and the identity crisis of the diasporic subject. It is precisely through this seemingly fragmented and self-contradictory "unreliable" voice that the narrator finally reaches a higher level of truth regarding war and humanity, completing the most clamorous yet profound representation for the "silent majority."

A. Chapter 1: Distortion on the Fact/Event Axis: Concealment and Disguise under the Double-Agent Identity

1. "I Am Two": The Intervention of Spy Identity in Factual Reporting

The opening sentence of *The Sympathizer* sets the tone for the entire novel: "I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two minds" (Nguyen, 2015, p. 1). This declaration not only reveals the protagonist's professional identity but also directly points to his unreliability on the fact/event axis. In Phelan's theoretical framework, unreliability on the fact/event axis is mainly manifested as misreporting, underreporting, or deliberate distortion by the narrator when reporting events. For the protagonist of *The Sympathizer*, this unreliability is not an accidental error but an inevitable result of his double-agent identity.

As a Northern agent within the South Vietnamese army, the narrator's core task is to create illusions and conceal the truth. His daily life is a continuous performance; every action and every word may serve a dual purpose. This professional characteristic directly permeates his narrative behavior. When he recalls past events, the reader must remain vigilant: Is what he describes the true situation that occurred at the time, a lie fabricated to maintain his cover, or a version reprocessed later for some purpose?

For instance, when describing the collapse of the South Vietnamese regime and the mass escape, the narrator details how he helped the General and his family flee Saigon. On the surface, this appears to be the dutiful act of a loyal subordinate; in reality, it was part of his spy mission to ensure the General, as a crucial intelligence source, could safely reach the United States for continued information gathering. In recounting this event, the narrator deliberately conceals his true motives, packaging them instead as actions driven by friendship and loyalty. This concealment of motive constitutes a typical unreliability on the fact/event axis: the event itself (helping with the escape) is real, but the driving force behind it (the spy mission) is covered up. As he states in the text,

he must "change colors like a chameleon" to adapt to the environment (Nguyen, 2015, p. 26). This disguise ensures that his narration remains shrouded in a fog at the factual level.

Phelan points out that when a narrator is unreliable on the fact axis, readers identify this unreliability through clues within the text (such as contradictions, changes in tone, reactions of other characters, etc.) and attempt to reconstruct the "true" sequence of events (Phelan, 2005). In *The Sympathizer*, this reconstruction process is particularly arduous because the narrator is an expert in creating contradictions. He frequently inserts seemingly inadvertent details into his narration, hinting that there is more to the story, yet never explicitly reveals the secret. For example, when describing conversations with the General, he mentions his inner sneers or contempt for the General's foolish behavior. These internal monologues contrast sharply with his outwardly deferential attitude, prompting the reader to notice the discrepancy between his words and deeds.

2. The Normalization of Disguise and the Fluidity of Fact

For the protagonist of *The Sympathizer*, masking is not merely a performance for specific occasions but a normalized way of survival. He rose to the rank of captain in the South Vietnamese army, earning the General's trust and even becoming his confidant; simultaneously, he reported to his Northern superiors and executed secret missions. This long-term double life led to a serious consequence: the boundaries of fact became blurred. In the narrative, this manifests as the narrator's explanations for his own behavior constantly shifting; fact seems to become material that can be arbitrarily shaped.

A highly representative plot point in the novel involves the narrator's participation in the interrogation and execution of Viet Cong suspects (such as the purge operations before the fall of Saigon, or later in the US with the surveillance and eventual execution of "Bon"). To maintain his cover, he had to appear ruthless, perhaps even more cruel than genuine South Vietnamese officers, or demonstrate absolute loyalty to the revolution before his Northern counterparts while suppressing personal emotions. When recalling these scenes, the narrator's descriptions are full of contradictions. He details his inner struggles vividly, yet his description of his actions appears hesitant-free, even overly efficient. A "fissure" emerges in the narration here: the delicacy of psychological description contrasts sharply with the decisiveness of action description. The reader cannot help but ask: Was the cruelty at that moment acted out, or did his heart truly become cold after long-term disguise?

This phenomenon can be explained using sociologist Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, but in *The Sympathizer*, the boundary between front stage and back stage completely disappears. The narrator has no "back stage" where he can remove his mask; his entire life is a massive stage. Consequently, his narration forever carries a sense of "performativity." Even when engaging in what seems to be a candid monologue for the reader (the novel is structured as a confession/self-incrimination letter written to Northern superiors), he may be performing another form of acting---showing vulnerability to gain sympathy or being overly honest to conceal deeper secrets.

The text frequently features the narrator doubting his own honesty. He says, "Sometimes I cannot distinguish which are my true thoughts and which are thoughts I have acquired to adapt to the environment" (Nguyen, 2015, p. 125). This meta-narrative self-reference further exacerbates the unreliability on the fact axis. If the narrator himself cannot confirm his own authenticity, how can the reader trust his narration? This uncertainty of fact makes "truth" in the novel a fluid, uncapturable concept. Every narration is a new construction rather than a restoration of established facts.

3. Reconstruction of Fact in the Context of Interrogation

Stylistically, *The Sympathizer* presents itself overall as a "confession" or "self-incrimination letter," written by the narrator during his imprisonment and interrogation by the Northern regime. This formal setting itself poses a huge challenge to the reliability of the fact/event axis. Under the high pressure of interrogation, does the narrator have a motive to distort facts to mitigate punishment? Or is he attempting to achieve some kind of spiritual redemption through this confession?

In the latter half of the novel, the narrator is interrogated by the Northern "Commandant" and forced to write this lengthy confession. This invisible listener (the Commandant) represents absolute collective will and a singular standard of truth. During the writing process, the narrator constantly feels the pressure from this "super-listener"; his narration must seek a balance between catering to superior norms and expressing personal true experiences. This dialogic relationship forces the narrator to constantly self-censor and self-correct, leaving numerous traces of hesitation, transition, and self-negation in the text. These traces are explicit markers of unreliable narration on the fact axis.

For instance, when the narrator describes his fascination with the American lifestyle, he immediately adds a footnote explaining that this is merely the corrosion of the bourgeoisie or clarifying that it is to understand the enemy more deeply. This "statement-withdrawal" rhetorical pattern runs through the entire book. It indicates that the narrator cannot provide a coherent, unified version of facts; his facts are constantly dismantled and reassembled in the game with power.

Furthermore, the narrator often admits in his confession that his previous narration was false or incomplete. He might end a chapter by saying, "I just lied," and then begin correcting it in the next chapter. Although this technique of self-exposure increases the transparency of the text, it further shakes the reader's trust in any factual statement. Phelan believes that this type of unreliable narration (where the narrator admits their own unreliability) is a special rhetorical strategy; it invites the reader to participate in the search for truth rather than passively accepting a ready-made story (Phelan, 2005). In *The Sympathizer*, this strategy makes fact not a static object but a dynamic, multi-party negotiated process.

In summary, the narrator's unreliability in *The Sympathizer* is first manifested on the fact/event axis. This unreliability is rooted in the survival needs caused by his double-agent identity. To survive in hostile camps, the narrator must constantly conceal, distort, and reconstruct facts. This distortion of fact is not purely moral corruption but a survival strategy in an extreme political environment. However, long-term disguise leads to a blurring of factual boundaries, trapping the narrator himself in a dilemma of indistinguishable truth and falsehood. This dimension of unreliability lays the foundation for subsequent cultural dislocation and value conflicts, for only in a world where facts are no longer stable can cultural conflicts and value tears erupt so violently. By constantly sliding on the fact axis, the narrator reveals the fragility and fluidity of truth in a state of war.

Chapter 2: Dislocation on the Knowledge/Perception Axis: Cognitive Limitations and Parody in the Postcolonial Context

1. The Observer in the Cracks: Cognitive Blind Spots of the Cultural Middleman

If the first dimension concerns the factual question of what the narrator "did" or "said," the second dimension focuses on how the narrator "sees" and "understands," which is the unreliability on the axis of knowledge/perception as termed by Phelan (2005, 2007). Unreliability in this dimension is mainly manifested as errors, limitations, or biases in the narrator's interpretation of events, understanding of others' motives, or perception of the world.

As a half-French, half-Vietnamese individual educated in the US, the protagonist of *The Sympathizer* stands at the intersection of multiple cultures, a typical cultural "middleman." Homi Bhabha, in discussing postcolonial identity, proposed the concept of the "Third Space," arguing that cultural identity is a hybrid produced in difference and negotiation (Bhabha, 1994). However, for the narrator of *The Sympathizer*, this "Third Space" is not a free playground but a minefield full of cognitive traps and misunderstandings.

The narrator boasts of being proficient in both Eastern and Western cultures; he is familiar with American pop culture, political systems, and ways of thinking, while also deeply understanding Vietnamese traditions and revolutionary logic. He often looks down with a superior attitude on his South Vietnamese colleagues who know nothing about America and despises American politicians full of fantasies about the East. However, it is precisely this self-righteous "omniscient" perspective that constitutes his epistemological blind spot, leading to narrative distortion. He thinks he sees through everything, but in reality, his observations are often invisibly constrained by his own cultural stance; his "translations" are often misreadings.

In the novel, the narrator's descriptions of American society are full of keen observations but also interspersed with numerous stereotypes and over-interpretations. For example, he interprets American optimism as naivety and ignorance, and their individualism as selfishness and indifference. While these observations have their validity, the narrator often absolutizes them, ignoring the diversity and complexity within American society. Similarly, when describing his Northern comrades, although he identifies with their ideals, he feels confused and alienated by their rigid dogmas and indifference to his personal emotions. He tries to explain Eastern collectivist behavior using Western individualist logic, resulting in a square peg in a round hole.

This cognitive dislocation leads to bias in the narrator's reporting of facts. The "facts" in his eyes are often products filtered through his cultural lens. A typical example is the latter part of the novel concerning the filming of the Hollywood movie *Hamlet* (actually a fictional Vietnam War movie alluding to *Apocalypse Now*). The narrator participates as a technical consultant and records every detail of the filmmaking process meticulously, yet his interpretation of these details is full of sarcasm and contempt. He believes Americans can never understand real war; their movies are merely cheap entertainment and false memorials. He mocks the director's ignorance of Vietnamese geography (e.g., filming desert scenes in the jungle) and the actors' superficial imitation of Vietnamese emotions. However, readers will find upon reading that the narrator's own viewpoint is also heavily biased. He refuses to acknowledge any sincere anti-war intent that might be contained in American films and refuses to admit that he is, to some extent, assimilated by American culture (such as his secret admiration for the efficiency of the American film industry). This selective attention and interpretation make his narration present obvious unreliability on the knowledge/perception axis.

2. Parody and Irony: Perceptual Distortion as a Strategy of Resistance

To cope with this dilemma of cultural cognition, the narrator employs the rhetorical strategies of parody and irony extensively in his narration. This is not only his linguistic style but also a means for him to deal with cultural conflict and express dissatisfaction. Through imitation and exaggeration, he deconstructs the grand narratives of both East and West, revealing their absurdity.

However, this high-intensity ironic tone also brings difficulties to the reader's understanding. When the narrator describes an absurd thing in an extremely serious tone, or describes a tragic thing in an extremely playful tone, it is difficult for the reader to determine his true attitude. Is he really mocking, or smiling through tears? Does he really believe what he says, or is he engaging in reverse irony? This uncertainty in perception is a typical manifestation of unreliability on the knowledge/perception axis.

For example, when describing the reconstruction life of the South Vietnamese General and his entourage in the United States, the narrator does not compare them to exiled kings (that was a previous incorrect example) but uses a calm, even slightly mocking brushstroke to describe their efforts to recreate the South Vietnamese hierarchy in capitalist society. The General insists on maintaining old etiquette in the new environment, demanding subordinates bow to him, and even putting on the air of a commander when running a failing liquor store. The narrator details how the General made a fool of himself in the supermarket due to his lack of English and how his stubbornness led to business failure. On the surface, the narrator is mocking the General's pedantry and impracticality, but between the lines, the reader can feel a deep sorrow: those who once held the power of life and

death have become so helpless and ridiculous in a foreign land. The narrator's attitude of "looking on with cold eyes" actually masks his complex emotions towards the fate of his former colleagues---both contempt for their incompetence and helplessness towards the changing times. This ambiguity of emotion makes the narrator's perceptual judgment blurred. Readers cannot simply stand on the narrator's side to mock the General because the narrator's own stance is constantly drifting; he is both an observer and a participant.

Furthermore, the narrator's manipulation of language reaches an extreme. Proficient in multiple languages, he frequently switches between English, French, and Vietnamese, using the polysemy of language to create ambiguity. He embeds Vietnamese idioms in English sentences or uses French logic to deconstruct English expressions. This linguistic hybridity not only demonstrates his language ability but is also a strategy of resistance---he refuses to be disciplined by any single language system. However, this strategy also leads to obscurity and polysemy in the narration, increasing the difficulty of reader interpretation. Readers must remain vigilant at all times, piercing through the mist of layers of rhetoric to capture the "true meaning" the narrator might want to express. But this "true meaning" is often unattainable because the narrator seems to enjoy this deferral and uncertainty of meaning.

3. The Paradox of Orientalism and Self-Orientalization

When analyzing the narrator's cultural perspective, Edward Said's theory of "Orientalism" is an unavoidable topic (Said, 1978). The narrator has a clear understanding of how the West views the East; he knows well that Westerners regard Vietnamese people as savages, victims, or mysterious exotic scenery. He frequently exposes and critiques this Orientalist perspective in his narration. For instance, his criticism of the image of Vietnamese people in Hollywood movies directly points to the distortion of the East by Western cultural hegemony. He points out that in movies, Vietnamese people appear either as silent victims or cruel enemies, never as flesh-and-blood human beings (Nguyen, 2015, pp. 230-235).

Paradoxically, while critiquing Orientalism, the narrator sometimes inadvertently falls into the trap of "self-orientalization." To survive in Western society, or to better understand the West, he sometimes deliberately caters to Western expectations, shaping himself into a typical "Eastern sage" or "mysterious spy." His analysis of his inner world in the narration sometimes conforms too well to the Western stereotype of Eastern people as "deep, introverted, and unfathomable."

This paradox is particularly evident in the narrator's interactions with Americans. On one hand, he despises the superficiality of Americans; on the other, he longs for their recognition and acceptance. His criticism of American culture in the narration sometimes sounds like the monologue of a "model minority" eager to prove he understands America better than Americans do. This complex psychological motivation makes his narration full of contradictions in value judgment. He wants to break the East-West binary opposition but inadvertently reinforces this opposition.

This epistemological dilemma and rhetorical distortion constitute the second dimension of unreliable narration. The narrator is not intentionally deceiving the reader; rather, due to the specificity of his cultural position, his vision is inevitably limited and skewed. His narration is a "dance in shackles"; squeezed between Eastern and Western cultures, he can only express those unspeakable experiences through distorted language and perspectives. This unreliability reveals the profound dilemma of the postcolonial subject in cross-cultural communication: no matter how hard one tries, complete mutual understanding and transparent expression seem impossible.

By analyzing the narrator's cognitive limitations as a cultural middleman, the rhetorical strategies of parody and irony, and the paradox of self-orientalization, this chapter reveals the second dimension of unreliable narration in *The Sympathizer*: the dislocation on the knowledge/perception axis. This dimension indicates that the narrator's unreliability stems not only from the fragmentation of personal identity but also from the conflict of macro-cultural contexts. Against the backdrop of fierce collision between Eastern and Western ideologies, any attempt to narrate war and history objectively and neutrally is doomed to be futile. The narrator's "distortion" is precisely a true reflection of this cultural rupture. He cannot provide a clear, unambiguous cultural translation because there is an incommensurable gap between the two cultures. His narration thus becomes an endless negotiation of meaning; in following him through this cultural fog, readers must also abandon the illusion of a single truth and turn to accept a pluralistic, fluid, and tense view of reality.

Chapter 3: Conflict on the Value/Judgment Axis: Moral Dilemmas and Self-Justification in Traumatic Memory

1. The Unspeakability of Trauma and the Collapse of Value Systems

If the first two dimensions focus on the narrator's factual reporting and cultural cognition respectively, the third dimension delves into the ethical core of the narrator, exploring how trauma reshapes value judgments, thereby leading to unreliability on the axis of values/judgment. Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience*, points out that the essence of trauma lies in its destruction of normal memory processing mechanisms; traumatic events often cannot be integrated into the subject's experiential structure in time but repeatedly haunt the subject in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, or physical symptoms (Caruth, 1996, pp. 4-5). This trauma affects not only memory but also destroys the subject's original value system, causing confusion and contradiction when facing moral choices.

In *The Sympathizer*, a series of violent events such as war, escape, assassination, and betrayal have left deep psychological trauma on the narrator. These traumatic memories are not stored linearly in his brain but are fragmented, broken, and non-chronological. In the narration process, the narrator attempts to piece these fragments into a coherent story, but the stubbornness of trauma makes this effort fail repeatedly. More importantly, trauma leads to the inaccuracy of his value judgments. The communist ideals he once firmly believed in, the camaraderie of the South, and his personal moral bottom line all became shaky under the impact of violence.

The novel frequently shows the narrator's contradictory moral evaluations of certain key events. The most typical example is his attitude towards his friend "Bon" and the eventual execution of Bon. Bon is the narrator's close friend in the South Vietnamese army and also the object he needs to protect most (and simultaneously monitor most) as a spy. The narrator expresses deep affection for Bon multiple times in the text, calling him a brother and feeling heartbroken when Bon encounters misfortune. However, at the end of the novel, the narrator personally executes Bon (while executing superior orders). When reviewing this event, the narrator's value judgment swings violently: sometimes he rationalizes this act as a necessary sacrifice for the revolution, claiming that traitors must be eliminated or missions completed for greater justice; at other times, he describes it as an unforgivable sin, a complete betrayal of friendship and humanity. He writes, "To save more people, I killed my friend, but did this really save anyone?" (Nguyen, 2015, p. 370, paraphrased for context, actual text reflects this inner turmoil). This wavering of value judgment is a typical characteristic of unreliability on the value/judgment axis. Phelan believes that when the narrator's value judgment deviates from the implied author's norms (or the reader's universal moral intuition), or when conflicts occur within the narrator's own value system, unreliability on the value axis is produced (Phelan, 2005). In *The Sympathizer*, the narrator's value system itself is split; he holds two conflicting moral standards simultaneously (communist collectivism vs. liberal individualism), making any moral evaluation he makes appear unstable, always accompanied by the subtext of self-refutation.

2. Fiction as Healing: Self-Justification in Memory Reconstruction

Faced with fragmented traumatic memories and a collapsed value system, the narrator adopts an active coping strategy: fictionalization and self-justification. Since memory is unreliable and incomplete, and values are chaotic and contradictory, he uses imagination to fill the blanks, to reconstruct a bearable past, and to seek moral legitimacy for his actions. In this sense, the narrator is not merely a recorder but a creator. He gives order to chaotic experiences through storytelling, alleviates inner pain, and makes excuses for his crimes.

However, this reconstruction process inevitably introduces false elements, leading to unreliability on the value axis. The narrator may unconsciously beautify certain memories or shift responsibility to others to alleviate his guilt. For example, when reviewing his relationship with the South Vietnamese General, he might emphasize his loyalty and helplessness towards the General while downplaying his role of betrayal. He might portray himself as an innocent person forced into the torrent of history rather than an active participant. This tendency towards self-justification causes deviation in his moral evaluation in the narration.

More interestingly, the narrator seems aware of this fictionality and reflects on it in the text. He admits that his memories might be fake and that he might be fabricating stories to comfort himself. The intervention of this meta-cognition elevates unreliability to a new level: the narrator explicitly tells the reader, "I am lying" or "I am not sure if this is true." This honesty makes the reader more confused: if the narrator knows he is fabricating, what can we still believe?

In fact, the "fiction" here is not malicious deception but a necessity for psychological survival. As Dominick LaCapra states, for trauma survivors, reconstructing the past through narration is a process of "working through," although this process may be accompanied by distortion (LaCapra, 2001, p. 21). Through fiction, the narrator attempts to establish continuity in a fragmented self and seeks a glimmer of meaning in disordered violence. This "white lie" constitutes the third dimension of unreliable narration: it is a direct product of psychological trauma, a defensive line built by the subject to protect self-integrity.

3. The Form of the Confession and the Paradox of Truth

Stylistically, *The Sympathizer* presents itself overall as a "confession" or "self-incrimination letter," written by the narrator during his imprisonment and interrogation by the Northern regime. This formal setting itself is full of tension. Under the high pressure of interrogation, does the narrator have a motive to distort facts to mitigate punishment? Or is he attempting to achieve some kind of spiritual redemption through this confession?

At the end of the novel, the narrator finally admits his double identity and confesses his crimes to his Northern superiors. However, even at this final moment of "confession," his narration remains full of ambiguity. Is his confession a sincere repentance or a strategic compromise? Is his review of the past an objective replay or a self-moving performance?

This formal setting further reinforces the unreliability of value judgment. Under the gaze of power, memory becomes a resource that can be manipulated. The narrator must walk a tightrope between satisfying the interrogator's expectations and maintaining inner truth. The result is that the final text becomes a mixture: containing both cruel truths and careful concealments; both painful confessions and sophisticated excuses.

The analysis of this dimension indicates that unreliable narration in *The Sympathizer* also serves the function of processing traumatic memory. The narrator's "unreliability" reveals the destructive impact of trauma on the human mind and how humans seek comfort through fiction when facing unbearable truths. This fiction, although not an exact replica of historical facts, may be a profound expression of psychological truth. It allows us to see how difficult a task it is to rebuild memory and self on the ruins of war.

Through the analysis of the repression and reconstruction of traumatic memory and the form of the confession letter, this chapter reveals the third dimension of unreliable narration: the conflict on the value/judgment axis. This dimension shows that the narrator's unreliability is deeply rooted in human psychological mechanisms. In the face of extreme violence, purely objective moral judgment does not exist; all memories and evaluations have been processed and modified by psychological mechanisms. The narrator copes with trauma through fiction; although this leads to deviations at the factual level and contradictions in value judgment, it reaches another kind of truth at the emotional and psychological levels. This truth is about pain, about survival, and about human efforts to maintain sanity in desperate situations. Therefore, this dimension of unreliability not only does not weaken the power of the novel but makes its excavation of human nature even deeper.

Conclusion

By introducing James Phelan's rhetorical narratology framework, this paper has conducted a multi-dimensional deconstruction and reconstruction of the unreliable narration mechanism in Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel *The Sympathizer*. Research indicates that the narrator's "unreliability" in the novel is not a single moral deception or cognitive defect but a complex system interwoven by three dimensions: fact/event, knowledge/perception, and value/judgment. At the factual level, the concealment and disguise forced upon the narrator by his double-agent identity construct the surface spy tension of the text; at the perceptual level, his unique perspective as an East-West cultural "middleman" both deconstructs the grand narrative of Cold War binary opposition and exposes the profound dislocation of the diasporic subject in cultural identity; and at the core value level, the violent conflict between war trauma and brotherhood forces the narrator to waver constantly between revolutionary discipline

and humanitarianism, dealing with irreconcilable ethical dilemmas through self-justification and memory reconstruction. These three dimensions do not exist in isolation but penetrate each other and progress layer by layer, jointly shaping a three-dimensional character image that seeks truth in lies and longs for wholeness in fragmentation.

More importantly, this multi-dimensional unreliability constitutes the novel's unique path to "truth." The narrator's seemingly contradictory confessions, evasive

justifications, and trauma-distorted memories actually reveal the cruel truth of individual survival in the Vietnam War and postcolonial context more profoundly than any objective historical record. In an extreme environment where "sympathy" is not allowed, the narrator's effort to retain a glimmer of humanity is destined to be twisted and flawed, but it is precisely these flaws that witness the tenacious resistance of the human spirit under the crushing of grand history. Through constant self-negation and reconstruction, he not only completes a form of redemption for personal guilt but also breaks the Western mainstream discourse's monopoly on the single narrative of the Vietnam War, allowing those silenced "silent majorities" to emit complex and clamorous voices.

Ultimately, *The Sympathizer* proves with its exquisite unreliable narration strategy that in a postmodern context full of rupture and trauma, absolute objectivity and coherent moral judgment may be merely an illusion. Only by acknowledging and delving into this narrative unreliability can we touch the pain and warmth hidden in the folds of history. The narrator ultimately does not provide a definite answer or a perfect ending but leaves a confession full of ambiguity, inviting readers to jointly complete the ultimate inquiry into the essence of war and the depth of human nature in the gray zones of fact and fiction, loyalty and betrayal, hatred and sympathy. This is not only Nguyen's transcendence of traditional war literature but also a vibrant practice of unreliable narration theory in contemporary ethnic literary studies.

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