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The Sentimentality of Sympathy

Addressing Asian American Neglect through Literary Commentary of *The Sympathizer*

ELIZABETH PETERSON

Self-Directed Research

My commentary analyzes Nguyen's work explaining the unique quirks brought about and ties it to modern tangible topics that we commonly see today. I use two realms of affect theory to build my arguments: first in explaining why readers feel emotion when reading and second in understanding why institutionalized racism exists and its influence on Asians. Nguyen effectively builds and uses the reader's emotions such as sympathy and respect towards Vietnamese culture. Once the reader is invested in the protagonist and the plot, he uses this to highlight why racism and Asian representation in the media are prominent injustices today. I expand Nguyen's critique on racism to show that it is the root for PTSD from the Vietnam War, intergenerational trauma and shapes Asian history. Asian representation is important to address because of its effect on the audience. For example, 'Apocalypse Now' unfairly dehumanizes Vietnamese soldiers and creates anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States. Vietnamese women are objectified as an exotic and submissive oriental body that does nothing but promote racism. Nguyen leaves the reader appalled at the trauma the main character experiences and refocuses the reader's sentiment to want change.

Synopsis

Viet Thanh Nguyen's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Sympathizer*, highlights the damage done to a young man, the Captain, during and after the Vietnam War. The resolution of the Vietnam War created an era of Vietnamese political, economic and social oppression. The Captain, a *nom de guerre*, is a sympathizer for both the Americans and the Vietnamese during the Vietnam War but is being punished by writing a confession for sympathizing with both sides. Being unable to

deny his sympathy, the Captain admits he is "a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds" (Nguyen 1). The Captain's split personality makes it difficult for him to find a single group to belong to. The use of a confession storyline to connect the story at the end is unique and immediately allows the reader to feel sympathy for the intimacy presented. Throughout the confession, the reader learns of the Captain's difficult struggles when he is challenged mentally as a hybrid ethnicity of French-Vietnamese and physically as he is moved away from his home in Saigon, Vietnam to the United States. Nguyen's



I am Elizabeth Peterson and a candidate for Biology, BS and French, BA. I read *The Sympathizer* before coming to UH Mānoa and originally entered a shortened version of this commentary for a contest. After completing my piece, I enjoyed recording my thoughts on the layers that Nguyen builds in his novel. The research that I completed makes me want to continue writing about and exploring race relations.

novel is an intentional reflection of his own refuge to America and demonstrates the structural obstacles that Asians and Asian-Americans experience. This commentary focuses on Nguyen's use of certain literary devices that capture the reader's interest and then directs that interest to exposing Asian race issues today.

Affect Theory in Literature and Race

The Sympathizer is known to evoke emotions of sympathy and makes the reader want to console the Captain for his struggles and address race issues in the real world. In order to understand Nguyen's tactics of earning the reader's sympathy, this must be analyzed through the lens of affect theory. The goal of using affect theory is threefold: explain what the reader feels, why the reader feels this way and notice what the takeaway is from this sentiment when addressing institutionalized racism (Hogan 6).

Affect theory "draws on psychoanalytic models of motivation and affect" to ground where such emotion comes from (Hogan 6). Affect theory has many definitions, but in this context it attempts to determine "what the relationship is between unconscious affect and either of the latter two more conscious experiences" (Figlerowicz 5). Two realms of affect theory are used: one to analyze Nguyen's literary tactics and a second to analyze Nguyen's race critique. The former realm will address what the reader feels and why the reader would feel that way. The latter will address institutionalized racism in America.

Affect theory applied to literature argues that "literature is animated by emotion" and thus the affect, or emotional response, that Nguyen invokes from the reader is paramount to achieving the final sentiment of sympathy (Hogan 1). The way that Nguyen sequences his events and syntax will be analyzed in order to show the meaningful aftereffects of his novel. Nguyen's literary tactics are important in making the reader care about the ideas presented and apply them to life beyond the novel. Examples used are in media and intergenerational trauma.

The second realm of affect theory is important to understanding Nguyen's critique on race in *The Sympathizer*. This commentary is structured on America being a representation of whiteness that resists the acceptance of Vietnamese immigrants. Affect theory comments on why being the foreign out group is so difficult, "if to be human is to be white, then to be not white is to inhabit the negative: it is to be 'not'. The pressure of this 'not' is another way of describing the social and existential realities of racism" (Ahmed 161). By being part of the 'not' group, Nguyen explores the true reality that Vietnamese immigrants faced and continue to face in America's creation of institutionalized racism. Institutionalized racism for this commentary is defined as "the structures, policies, practices, and

norms resulting in differential access to the goods, services, and opportunities of society by 'race'" (Jones 10). Emotion paired with the struggle of assimilation reflects on the problems in America and convinces the reader to want better treatment for Asian-Americans.

The pairing of literature and race in affect theory shows its usefulness. The advantage in using affect theory is that it "fosters a critical attitude toward some unquestioned presuppositions of empirical science and its associated institutional structures that can lead to systematic biases" (Hogan 6) which is analogous to my arguments on race in *The Sympathizer*. However the critical attitude mentioned can only be reached through having emotion which Nguyen builds in the reader. The systemic biases addressed in the novel and in this commentary include prejudice, stereotypes and violence. Affect theory is the grounding theory for all arguments made analyzing the reader's emotion and racism.

Literary Techniques

FIRST PERSON NARRATION

Before Nguyen captures the essence of race issues in *The Sympathizer*, his use of the first person perspective attracts the reader to feel more connected with the Captain and to later feel sympathy. The first person perspective allows the reader to meet the Captain and eventually adopt his viewpoint. The intimacy created in first person narration influences the reader's affect, their emotions, as the reader directly experiences what the Captain lives through. Neuroscience supports such affect, "Taking the first-person perspective centered upon one's own body as opposed to the third-person perspective, which enables us to take the viewpoint of someone else, is constitutive for human self-consciousness" (Vogeley et al. 1). One is more compelled to experience an event rather than watching it because more regions of the brain are activated when taking on an egocentric perspective (Vogeley et al. 1). The key to *The Sympathizer's* appeal is relating with the Captain and eventually wanting to console him at the end for the racism, tragedy and failures he has endured. Through experiencing the Captain's struggles first hand, the reader begins to understand and feel sympathetic to the psychological damage that the Captain has.

By using the first person perspective and building on the reader's interest, the Captain is able to further earn the reader's sympathy by exposing his awkward memories. When the Captain recounts his humiliating first onanism, the reader has a moment of vicarious embarrassment, "hypnotized by my squid's call and my erection's response, I inserted the latter into the former, which was, unfortunately, a perfect fit" (Nguyen 66). It is unsettling on how vivid this personal male sexual experience is without an immediate explanation of why it is included. At first, this prepubescent moment is used for

a comedic effect and even relief. This childhood account is disturbing yet amusing which is appropriate to relieve the tragedy built in the beginning. Only in hindsight this memory shows how broken the Captain is from operating under duress; no one would casually reveal a malapropos moment like the Captain's. He finds subjects to sincerely expose in his confession making the reader feel sympathetic for the Captain in captivity.

PUNCTUATION

While maintaining intimacy between the Captain and the reader, Nguyen foreshadows the danger to come through punctuation and in the Captain's audience. Upon opening this novel, there is no punctuation for dialogue. This suggests the Captain's narrative is not currently taking place but rather recalling the past. Additionally instead of having dialogue to address the audience, Nguyen replaces it with the repetitive use of the name Commandant. This shift in the audience builds suspense as the reader continues to learn about the Captain. The Commandant is often referred to in a sarcastic way such as "my dear Commandant" hinting the Commandant is disliked (Nguyen 61). By triggering the reader's affect to associate the Commandant as the antagonist, this continues to build interest in the Captain's confession. By not immediately understanding the purpose of no dialogue, the confession is a unique way to illustrate the Captain's story and his adaptation to America.

TONE

The characters' struggle in adjusting to a new American life is always carefully handled through a reverent tone in their longing for Old Saigon. Seeing the older generation like the General and Madame trying to not be marginalized juxtaposed with the newer generation assimilating into American culture, both yearn for their motherland, "on the wall above the table, through that scrim, hung the same clock as in the General and Madame's restaurant, also set to Saigon time" (Nguyen 209). Saigon time is used as the home time even though it provides little use being in California. After the General and Madame's position in society is changed after immigrating, this small symbol of Vietnam is treasured. It represents the return to Saigon and unites families despite their differences for adapting to American life. Nguyen shows that many Vietnamese immigrants have the same clock set for the same time which allows for the immigrants to unite under this one symbol. Despite the struggles faced, Nguyen provides hope for overcoming those barriers. Symbols like the clock affect the reader's affect as they experience the characters' adjustment. The reverence in describing the clock interests the reader and allows the reader to have respect for Old Saigon.

IMAGERY

Nguyen continues to characterize Old Saigon when it comes to the subjects of music and food; these two subjects provide comfort to the new immigrants. The realistic description of aesthetically pleasing items allows the reader to enter a simulation, triggering one's emotions and therefore capturing interest (Hogan 3). Music is a reoccurring scene that affects the characters' emotions. The songs chosen by a talented Vietnamese singer stab with a double edged sword: her songs bring everyone back to the good old times while also reminding them they cannot forget the bad of what has happened, "Was there any other way to sing about a city of sadness, the portable city carried by all of us in exile? After love, was sadness not the most common noun in our lyrical repertoire?" (Nguyen 182). It is also important to note this singer is part of the younger generation, and this song serves as a point of connection for the two generations. The songs represent what has characterized Saigon as emotional, as well as the poignance in the Vietnamese's hearts as they remember what has been lost.

Additionally, the gustatory palate in Nguyen's description of imagery allows the reader to show respect and honor to Vietnamese cuisine. When Madame opens up a Vietnamese restaurant in Chinatown, she is trying to bring home to California and to other immigrants. The Captain describes the nostalgic taste of phở, a Vietnamese noodle soup: "beef broth and star anise I can only describe as the bouquet of love and tenderness, all the more striking because Madame had never cooked before coming to this country" (Nguyen 108). Scents like these unite the displaced immigrants and the reader to feel more connected with authentic Vietnamese culture. The vivid descriptions used bring the reader in as if one was actually consuming Madame's dish. Small things such as songs and dishes connect the reader and the immigrants back to finding things to represent Saigon before the war. Nguyen's literary tactics allow the reader to sympathize and understand the loss of Vietnamese culture in America. The emotion lets the reader reflect on how the War has affected Vietnamese immigrants and apply that respect to people in real life. By having a strong interest, the reader is able to address Nguyen's critiques on race and the struggles of Asian-Americans in the U.S.

Race

Vietnamese immigrants were displaced after coming to America which exacerbated problems at home and the additional stress of being the 'not' group (Ahmed 161). In order to understand the problem behind adjusting to America, Nguyen addresses his critique on race in two ways: first in intergenerational trauma and second in Asian representation in Hollywood.

INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

Survivors mourn the loss of their homeland while battling post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which suggests the beginnings of intergenerational trauma. Intergenerational trauma is the theory that post traumatic symptoms can be passed down from parents to children (Davidson and Mellor 2000). In the context of *The Sympathizer*, post traumatic symptoms may stem from immigrating, surviving the war and losing loved ones. Although this concept is still being studied and not always supported, it does suggest that when a family is unable to deal with emotional responses effectively, PTSD symptoms will appear from the inability to cope (Davidson and Mellor 2000). From the evidence that does exist, the characters do experience PTSD and intergenerational trauma. Nguyen cites a personal example of witnessing immigrants being unable to cope and seeing the trauma being passed down: “There was a lot of domestic violence, a lot of domestic abuse...of course, they took it out on their families—their wives and their children. And these children, a lot of them joined gangs” (Gross 2016). Intergenerational trauma and the PTSD the characters experience are important to evaluate since they become the first to seek refuge from the Vietnam War. Paralleling Nguyen’s personal experiences with the Vietnamese gangs and robbers in *The Sympathizer*, this skims the surface of the problems Vietnamese immigrants and Vietnamese-Americans faced and continue to face. As this violence is passed down, it shows that trauma and immigration are deep rooted issues ingrained in history.

Affect theory supports that history is more than just recorded work and actually can be passed down genetically into offspring which is analogous to intergenerational trauma:

If the conditions in which we live are inherited from the past, they are ‘passed down’ not only in blood or in genes, but also through the work or labour of generations. If history is made ‘out of’ what is passed down, then history is made out of what is given not only in the sense of that which is ‘always-ready’ there before our arrival, but in the active sense of the gift: as a gift, history is what we receive upon arrival. (Ahmed 154)

In order to deal with intergenerational trauma, Nguyen illustrates the divide between the newer and older generations having different coping mechanisms when coming to America. Ahmed suggests the history the immigrants receive upon arrival shapes their experience. In *The Sympathizer*, the younger generation embraces the change. Madame’s children are often scolded by the older generation for speaking English inside the home or dressing like an American. This is affect theory at work: the work of the older generation is the gift try-

ing to be maintained within the younger generation. The dichotomy comes as the two generations share the same trauma but cope differently creating the infamous generational divide. By showing how complex it is to overcome trauma in different generations, this makes the reader feel more compelled to sympathize with these characters.

ASIAN REPRESENTATION

Asia was displaced after the war through American cinematography. Nguyen has previously commented on Asian American representation in Hollywood and continues his critique in *The Sympathizer*. When the Captain is a film advisor, Nguyen states this “clearly [alludes] to ‘Apocalypse Now’” (Gross 2016). Antagonizing the Vietnamese and painting the American troops as heroes creates a portrayal that reads as false, affecting the viewers back home. By othering the Vietnamese, this only furthers racist actions:

The easiest way to generalize Eastern people was to build fictional characters of an extreme. Movies and the mass media thus help to form Western audience’s worldview by shaping Eastern women’s identities, and define their roles as extremes—on screen and off. These extreme stereotypes have lasted even until nowadays, long after the formal or informal contacts between East and West increased dramatically. (Wang 86)

Films like ‘Apocalypse Now’, published in 1979, still affect how Americans view the Vietnam War. The fictional film in *The Sympathizer* portrays two issues: race and the fetishization of race.

The Captain’s experience as an advisor influences the reader to see the connection to Hollywood today. Even now in the media, representation is a popular discussion. In fact, Asian Americans represent 5.7% of movie characters in Hollywood (Smith et al. 2). Nguyen shows that inappropriate Asian representation is a problem. The Captain has good intentions to make the film historically accurate, but instead he produces failed Asian representation. First, Filipinos are misused as Vietnamese locals, and they only have lines screaming. When Filipinos are cast instead of Vietnamese, this foreshadows problems that will build from this racist decision. Miscasting characters is not an outdated technique. This is still seen in Hollywood today. For example, Scarlett Johansson was cast in the Japanese film “Ghost in the Shell” creating backlash for not using the correct race (Yasharoff 2019). Second, by taking away their dialogue, the film dehumanizes the Filipinos and the Vietnamese they represent. As a viewer, one is able to associate the Filipinos as an enemy. Now the reader is more aware and can apply this knowledge to their everyday life.

Asian fetishization is also critiqued when, in the Captain's film, the starring actress is portrayed to be brutally raped, "Long shots from the cave's darkened corners depicted a human octopus writhing at the cave's center, the naked Mai struggling under the backs and limbs of her half-naked rapists." (Nguyen 220). There is no substantial justification for such violence, besides it being abusively appealing and therefore a money making technique. However, this scene and many others in the book point out the exploitation of Asian race. The raping of an Asian woman for the sake of film plays into the sexual fetish for the exotic Oriental (Wang 89). She plays a character that is submissive and foreign which may appeal to some of the audience and take her fictional traits as true for all Asian women (Wang 86). She has been dehumanized to an object which only furthers Asian discrimination.

The film is a tactic to reinstate whiteness in America with its false portrayal of Asian actors: the "structural position of being the guest, or the stranget... keeps us in certain places, even when you move up" (Ahmed 164). As these Asian actors appear to be getting fame, they are still considered the stranger on set and unsuccessfully do not gain any higher position in society. The Captain has failed to exclude the racist scenes from the film which furthers the damage he makes from this violent portrayal of Asians. His seemingly short time in the Philippines makes the reader sympathize with the Captain. After seeing how important the Captain's film life was, it is frustrating yet predictable to see that of course, the Captain was not included in the credits of the film by the racist director. Scratching the surface of Asian misrepresentation in art exposes the journey Hollywood needs to take in order to have better media representation in the future.

Conclusion

Viet Than Nguyen's novel, *The Sympathizer*, captures the reader's interest and focuses that sentiment into sympathy for issues of race. Affect theory grounds the sentimental sympathy that the reader feels and explains the origin of institutionalized racism. The Captain's imprisonment and confession after the war highlights important themes seen in our daily lives: immigrants, institutionalized racism and Asians in the media. By bringing these issues to the reader's attention and changing their affect, Nguyen rewrites the thinking of the reader. The Captain is a broken war survivor that makes one angry, hurt and laugh throughout his sincere and intimate confession. Only then through further understanding and being affected can one sympathize with the struggles that Asian Americans go through.

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