

# Reality behind the Vietnam Refugees in Viet Thanh Nguyen's the Sympathizer

Kavya Chandran\*

*Department of English, Malankara Catholic College, Kaliyakkavilai, India*

**Abstract:** This article deals with the reasons behind the Indo-china war and the emergence of Vietnamese refugees. Nguyen was a Vietnamese American writer who writes in the themes of political manifestation, communism, colonialism, migration, racial discrimination, memories, and nostalgia. He discusses about how the French colonization ended in the separation of the Vietnam, the political influence in the emergence of Vietnam War and the refugee life in America. Here in this article I tried to point out that the refugees like any other creatures, cannot survive without freedom, stability and the acceptance from the foreign land.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Communism, Migration, Political manifesto, war.

## 1. Introduction

Everyone's life focuses only to the freedom and rights, alternatively we can tell that it is a booster behind our life. The life of Vietnam Refugees became very difficult in America because as a foreigner they lack freedom and rights. To the survival the struggles arise against them and so they started to assimilate with the main stream. This is the way new culture and tradition merge with the refugee lives. At the time there is a conflict happens in between the new and old lifestyle, to overcome most of the people forced to throw their own lifestyle and adopt new one. Thus they lost their own identity and became a hybrid of Vietnam and America. But the life may not be prosper in America because they could not accept refugees and subjected them to experience the racial discrimination and humiliation by the Americans.

## 2. Discussion

Nguyen's novel *The Sympathizer* discusses about the political turbulence behind the Indo-China war and the Vietnamese Diaspora in America through the unnamed protagonist. The protagonist introduces himself as "a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces (01)". The novel starts with the confession of the protagonist and the recall of the fall of Saigon, the largest city in Vietnam. Nguyen describes the aftereffect of Vietnam War through the eyes of protagonist, Bon Man and General. The nameless protagonist is a former captain of the South Vietnamese and the spy of the North Vietnamese. Bon, one of the blood brother of the protagonist, hated the communist Party and its teachings. And politically he was a Conservative "a genuine patriot and a republican who had

volunteered to fight (19)" by the war he lost his wife and child. Man was another blood brother taught Bon and Protagonist to the tenets of Party ideology. General, a political leader who supported the French and the American democracies over the communism. They are all the victims of the Indo-China War.

Vietnam, a nation in South East Asia on the eastern edge of the Indo-chinese Peninsula. Since the 19th century it was under the control of French colonial ruling, the Indo china is the most important colonial possession and their economic and political system favored to French invasion. And the French named imperialistic act as "civilisatrice" and the aim of their mission seems outwardly to be the development of the uncivilized people like introducing modern political ideas, social reforms, industrial methods and new technologies. But real vision of French colonialism is only the profit and economical exploitation and not the transformation of an undeveloped region. Vietnamese tried their best to prevent the French invaders into their land but they had failed in front of their sophisticated weapons which ended in the capture of territories by France.

French imposed the western styles on the territories for the economic exploitation and also without any real authority they changed the legal structure of Vietnam government. To hide their iniquities the French claimed that if the European failed to invade in Vietnam still the Vietnam will be uncivilized, uneducated and backward. Under the French colonial rule Vietnam lost the authority and identity and it is reflected in the neighboring countries and French ordered using the name of the nation 'Vietnam' is an illegal act. Profits and not politics became a motto of the French colonialism that increased production, exports, land ownership, labors for low wages detained the French interest towards Vietnam. Capitalist system of French opposed ordinary people in every aspects and the politicians and government kept silent to the mourning sounds of the helpless people. To oppose a strong force like France was not an easy task for the Vietnamese and the occupiers were always cautious to destroy the budding groups which might raise a voice against them.

In 1902 Paul Doumer states that Indo-china began to serve France in Asia on the day that it was no longer a poverty-stricken colony, reduced to begging for alms from the motherland. Its strong organization, its financial and economic

\*Corresponding author: [kavyamanya371@gmail.com](mailto:kavyamanya371@gmail.com)

structures and its great power are being used for the benefit of French prestige. The Vietnamese moved to the liberation of their country from 1905 to 1914 instantly the French officials denied the liberation in Indo-China and they declared that the colony was making unwanted disturbances and clashes between the French forces and the Vietnamese. The movement for National Liberation has raised strongly among the Vietnamese and in the prominent intellectuals, they argued for the political rights from the French colonial rule but their movement were defeated by the French thus their activities lead to the revival among the revolutionaries and so they formed the Vietnamese Nationalist Party in 1927 referred as the VNQDD, it spread the idea of terrorist attack and the banishment of French military power by the indigenous troop. Bon and the General were one of the people's supported the Nationalist Party because they cannot accept the ideological ways of communism.

Ho Chi Minh founded the Communist party in Vietnam, through their party they utilized the poverty stricken areas of central Vietnam by staging broad peasant uprising and gave new way for start their livelihood. In 1936 French gave some political freedom to the colony hence the Indochinese Communist party and other small group exploited this opportunity for their activities. The protagonist tells about Ho Chi Minh that "at last when he was alive, the most committed man ever, the one who had asserted that Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom"(36). Because he knew that without freedom and independence a person cannot survive in their own land too.

From 1955 to 1975 the young people were struggled more in North and South Vietnam between the Sino-Soviet alliance and countries that relied upon the leadership of the United States. The Vietnamese society has to face the tussle of various aspects of military and socio-political realities became a barrier for their vision about younger generation. The Vietnamese feared fascination of American culture may destroy the Vietnamese tradition because the youth adopted by the negative aspects of foreign culture. The Protagonist and his friends were adopted the drinking and smoking habits because of the American influence.

During the cold war, the war between the America and the Soviet Union, the anti-communist movement of South Vietnam and the principle ally of U.S ended to the Indo-China war. The Vietnam War began in 1955 and ended in 1975. It was fought between North and South Vietnam, but allies came into the mix from its beginning. Communism was beginning to grow in North Vietnam and South Vietnam along with its allies (the United States & France) did not want communism to take over completely. The United States presidents feared that if Vietnam succumbed to the Communist regime than many other countries would follow suit. North Vietnam wanted the entire country to stand united under a Communist party, but the South Vietnamese wanted to be more like the west with democracy and freedom (Spector, 2016). The war become more horrible, the Vietnamese lost their family in front of their eyes the protagonist marking the consequence of deadliest war as:

The glimmer of a rising sun brought a measure of comfort, but the soothing bluish light showed the tarmac to be in awful

state, chipped and pitted by rocket and artillery explosions. In the middle of it all was the smoldering slag heap of the C-130, exuding the pungent stink of burning fuel. Between us and the embers of the plane were little dark heaps that gradually took shape, becoming suitcases and valises abandoned in the mad rush, some of them burst open and spilling their entrails hither and thither(63).

After the fall of Saigon the Vietnamese were migrated to different countries, America become one of the countries where Vietnamese become the fastest growing group. During the Indo-China war, Vietnam was blasted by the chemical bombs and it destroyed acres of farmland thus they lost not only their homeland but also their livelihood too. While they make arrangements to escape from there but the situation goes in more horrible. Cartagena Declaration on Refugees that persons who have fled their country because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order. Patricia Nguyen's *Salt/ Sea: Vietnamese Refugee Passages, Memory, and Statelessness at sea* reveals that so many Vietnamese refugees underwent the same circumstances.

Refugee doors closed at Malaysia. We only had enough food for one more day on the voyage with no land in sight. For days, we were at sea. The waves rocked the boat so much it made me sick. I remember being surrounded by water but we couldn't drink any of it, I was so thirsty. Thai pirates came to steal with machetes in their hands. They took one of the women off my ship and luckily didn't kill any of us (Ta, pers. Comm., 2012.).

The *Sympathizer* starts with by the war and evacuation of highly ranked people from Vietnam. Most of the ordinary people left Vietnam by boat, it promoted the world to call them as 'boat people' in the late 1970s and early 1980s and millions of people has perished at the sea trying to escape from war-torn. During this period military forces of North Vietnam entered into the suburbs of Saigon and the people were displaced from boarders already overrun by the communist armies. Ten thousands of Vietnamese were evacuated from themselves by boat and with the help of navy and especially the boat people escaped through the leaky, overcrowded boats but the highly ranked officers, political leaders, business people left Vietnam through the Airways and it shows that the money weighs the price of life in the midst of the war.

In the foreign land Vietnamese focused on their adjustment problems, the kinds of employment they are finding, their mental health status and needs, the importance of ethnic community, and where they tend to congregate (Haines, Rutherford, & Thomas, 1981). For refugees implications of job training programs are important to Vietnamese immigrants out of poverty, so career decision-making processes always related to the roles of family, peer, and community because relations plays an role in their acculturation level. Protagonist beginning stage in the United State clearly portrays the part of relations, from Vietnam he had a good relationship with Claude, a central intelligent agent from America. Claude trained him in interrogation tactics and worked with him at the National Interrogation Center in Saigon.

The camp life is stood an essential study in the case of refugees while they enter in a new land suffers by psychological distress, for their health care, mental illness, unsecured life of family especially for woman. The protagonist tells the condition of refugee camps "...most of the refugees lived under the tents hastily erected by the marines, in camp Pendelton... (73). Here Bon was mentally affected by the death of his wife and child, the haunting memories always unbalance their mental stability. The newly arrived refugees find complexity in health care, they find delay in seeking health intervention and progression of diseases. They have many chronic diseases, affecting both physical and mental conditions, because of the consequence of war and trauma experience, displacement, torture, rape, imprisonment, fear, hunger, and other experiences.

To access health care in America was a challenging task for them because of the cost of medical expenditure, it seemed to be burden for them which lead to the communal disease. Mainly there are four barriers to pull back Vietnamese refugees from accessing the health care and the barriers are of Vietnamese refugees the categories are language, legal issues, cultural obstacles and socioeconomic problems. The protagonist described how the Americans valued him with his appearance without knowing his proficiency in American language and it demonstrations that the Americans doesn't wants to equalize the refugees with them and also they made all the efforts to maintain the minority group or the refugees as their slaves by neglecting even their basic needs.

In this work Nguyen clearly describes how the French colonialism separated the Vietnam into two part and how the political manifestation of North Vietnam and south Vietnam utilized by the other countries for their authority over the countries. The war has happened as the result of selfish interest in political authority of North and South which has exploited by many countries to stabilize their power and not for the public welfare of Vietnamese or the reformation of Vietnam. Nguyen quotes that who wanted the inevitability of war:

She was a poor person, I was her poor child, and no one ask poor people if they want war. Nor had anyone asked these poor people if they wanted to die of thirst and exposure on the coastal sea, or if they wanted to be robbed and raped by their own soldiers. If those thousands still lived, they would not have

believed how they had died, just us we could not believe that the Americans—our friends, our benefactors, our protectors—had spurned our request to send more money (4).

### 3. Conclusion

Not only by the war, but life of the refugees was almost critical while in the migration, starvation, natural calamities, pirates are the great tribulation raised against them. Refugee resettlement in a new country was not an effortless task, they took the tireless effort to reconstruct their life, and there are so many hardships raised in front of the occupation, language, culture, and identity. Here the protagonist and his friends subjected to drink the bitterness of war and life of refugee, and he shares heartbreaking memories of war and homeland, their migration towards another country for expecting a better life. But they never got the freedom in the foreign land and they should embrace the wondering life. At last they exposing their hope of 'freedom' because they know that nothing is precious than the freedom.

Here I conclude that the refugee life is life-threatening in foreign land, they were forced to serve, adopt, obey and felt uncertainty in life. In this land Vietnamese refugee lack themselves and struggles for many things including to find identity. But in America they waited for the revolution because "We lie in wait for the right moment and the just cause, which, at this moment, is simply wanting to live"(495). Wars may bring back power but never returns the people's life and the world has not yet realized that war won't provide any benefits and the authorities confuse the people by making them to think whether war actually brings gain or loss.

### References

- [1] Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *The Sympathizer*, Hachette Essentials series, 2015.
- [2] Finnan, C.R. Occupational assimilation of refugees, *International Migration Review*, pp. 292-309, 1981.
- [3] Grossheim, Martin. The Lao Dong Party, Culture and the Campaign against "Modern Revisionism": The Democratic Republic of Vietnam Before the Second Indochina War. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol.8, pp.80-129, 2013.
- [4] Nguyen, Patricia. Salt/Water: Vietnamese Refugee Passages, Memory, and Statelessness at Sea, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol.45, no.1/2, pp.94-111, 2017.