

War's Long Shadow: Vietnam Memory, and Moral Ruin in “The Sympathizer”, “American Pastoral” and “Dirty Work” Novels.

Shaikh Ebrar Ahmed

Ph. D Scholar,

Maharaja Sriram Chandra Bhanja Deo University, Mayurbhanj, Odisha.

Abstract

This article examines how contemporary American fiction reimagines the cultural, moral, and psychological aftermath of war through three novels: Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015), Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997), and Eyal Press's *Dirty Work* (2021). Although distinct in narrative form and historical focus, all three texts interrogate the long shadow of violence—how war persists beyond battlefields through memory, guilt, systemic complicity, and national mythmaking. Using theories of cultural memory (Assmann), moral injury (Shay), and American exceptionalism (Bacevich), this study argues that these texts expose the intimate and societal forms of “moral ruin” produced by war. *The Sympathizer* reveals the contradictions of revolution and exile; *American Pastoral* explores domestic fallout as a metaphor for national fracture; *Dirty Work* depicts the hidden moral economies that sustain American militarism. Together, the novels challenge hegemonic narratives that sanitize state violence, foregrounding marginalized perspectives and exposing the ethical burden borne by individuals within larger structures of power.

Keywords: Vietnam War, Moral Injury, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Philip Roth, Eyal Press, American exceptionalism, Trauma, Complicity.

Introduction

War rarely ends when the fighting stops. Its aftershocks reverberate across generations, shaping identities, national narratives, and moral consciousness. Contemporary American literature frequently grapples with this “long shadow” of war, questioning the cultural myths and political frameworks that sustain or justify violence. This article examines three works that illuminate different but interconnected dimensions of war’s aftermath: *The Sympathizer*, a post-Vietnam War narrative about divided identity and ideological disillusionment; *American Pastoral*, a late-20th-century reflection on national innocence shattered by domestic insurgency; and *Dirty Work*, a nonfictional exposé of the hidden labor including military drone operations that enables American violence at a distance.

Despite their differences in genre and temporal focus, these texts collectively reveal the mechanisms through which societies remember, misremember, or suppress the moral consequences of war. They highlight how personal narratives become entangled with national mythology and how ethical accountability is displaced, obscured, or denied.

Literature Review

War, Memory, and Cultural Trauma

Scholars such as Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann argue that cultural memory is shaped not only by recorded history but also by systems of collective forgetting. The Vietnam War, in particular, occupies an ambiguous space in U.S. memory—simultaneously overrepresented in media yet under-examined in terms of its moral implications. Cathy Caruth’s understanding of trauma as a “delayed, unassimilated event” helps explain the persistence of Vietnam as a cultural wound.

Moral Injury and American Exceptionalism.

Jonathan Shay’s concept of moral injury—harm caused not merely by physical violence but by the betrayal of one’s ethical foundations has been applied to war narratives but rarely examined across fiction and nonfiction together. Meanwhile, studies by Andrew Bacevich and Viet Thanh Nguyen highlight how American exceptionalism frames war as a vehicle for national virtue, often erasing voices of those who suffer its consequences.

Fiction as Ethical Inquiry

Literary depictions of war extend beyond historical retelling; they interrogate moral responsibility. Critics of Roth emphasize his focus on the collapse of American myths, while Nguyen’s critics highlight his deconstruction of U.S.-centric Vietnam narratives. Press’s *Dirty Work*, though nonfiction, employs narrative strategies akin to fiction to reveal hidden systems of complicity.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses three complementary frameworks:

Cultural Memory Theory (Assmann) – to analyze how each text negotiates official and counter-memories of war.

Moral Injury (Shay) – to examine how characters internalize ethical conflict and psychological fragmentation.

Critique of American Exceptionalism (Bacevich, Nguyen) – to interrogate how ideological narratives justify violence and obscure responsibility.

Analysis of the Three Texts

The Sympathizer and the Fractured Self

Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* foregrounds a narrator who is literally "a man of two minds," embodying the divided political consciousness produced by the Vietnam War. Through confession, satire, and metafiction, the novel dismantles American and Vietnamese nationalist myths.

Memory: The narrator's re-education camp writings become a struggle over narrative authority.

Moral Ruin: Complicity is universal—spies, soldiers, and intellectuals alike are implicated.

Critique: The novel rejects U.S. portrayals of Vietnam as a mere stage for American trauma, reclaiming agency for Vietnamese memory.

American Pastoral and Domestic Fallout

Roth's novel moves the site of war homeward—into the American family. The Vietnam era appears through the radicalization of Merry Levov, whose domestic terrorism mirrors the era's geopolitical violence.

Memory: The Swede's nostalgic vision of America contrasts with the "broken narrative" of national innocence.

Moral Ruin: The Swede becomes a victim not of war directly, but of the ideological fractures war exposes.

Critique: Roth dismantles the pastoral myth—showing that America's perceived moral purity is built on fabrication.

Dirty Work and Structural Complicity

Press's nonfiction text extends the critique to the present, mapping how America displaces the morally tainted work of violence—drone warfare, slaughterhouse labor, private prisons—onto marginalized populations.

Memory: These stories are purposely excluded from national narratives of military heroism.

Moral Ruin: The harm is systemic: workers internalize guilt for violence produced by state institutions.

Critique: Press demonstrates how “clean” war is an illusion maintained by socioeconomic hierarchies.

Comparative Discussion

Across the three texts, several shared themes emerge:

War as an Ongoing Condition

War’s effects manifest long after conflict ends—through memory, family fracture, or institutional systems of violence.

Moral Ruin as Both Personal and Structural

In The Sympathizer, ruin is ideological and intimate

In American Pastoral, ruin is familial and symbolic.

In Dirty Work, ruin is systemic and economically produced.

The Collapse of American Myth

All three works expose the fragility—and danger—of American exceptionalism. War is framed not as an external necessity but as a product of national ideology.

The Ethics of Remembering

Nguyen urges counter-memory, Roth critiques nostalgic memory, and Press reveals suppressed memory. Together, they highlight the stakes of who gets to remember war—and how.

Conclusion

The Sympathizer, American Pastoral, and Dirty Work each illuminate different facets of war’s enduring moral and psychological consequences. Read together, they form a powerful critique of the narratives that sanitize violence and obscure accountability. These texts remind us that war’s true devastation lies not only in death but in the moral injuries—individual and collective—that persist for decades. By foregrounding suppressed memories and exposing the mechanisms of complicity, they challenge readers to confront the ethical dimensions of national identity and the cost of maintaining political myths.

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