

Imperialism, Violence, and Psychological Conditioning in

Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?*

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Abstract

Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967) presents a complex and indirect critique of American imperialism during the Vietnam War. Rather than representing the battlefield explicitly, Mailer constructs an allegorical narrative centered on a hunting expedition in Alaska, using it as a symbolic framework to explore domination, aggression, and ideological power. The novel raises a provocative question embedded in its title, shifting attention from geopolitical justification to the deeper cultural and psychological forces that make war conceivable. This paper examines how imperialism operates not only as a political and economic system but also as a cultural and psychological process. Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Edward Said, Louis Althusser, and Michel Foucault, the study analyses the

ways in which violence is normalized and internalized through social institutions, constructions of masculinity, and technological mediation. The narrative voice of D.J. reflects a fragmented consciousness shaped by these forces, revealing how individuals become complicit in systems of domination. By contextualizing Mailer's work within postcolonial and cultural theory, this article posits that *Why Are We in Vietnam?* reveals the ideological underpinnings of imperialist expansion, ultimately prompting readers to reevaluate the interplay between culture, power, and violence, and suggesting that the roots of war are as deeply ingrained in the human psyche as they are in political strategy.

Keywords: Imperialism; Violence; Psychological Conditioning; Masculinity; Ideology; Narrative Fragmentation

The literary responses to the Vietnam War reveal a deep anxiety within American culture, as writers sought to understand not only the realities of war but also the forces that made such violence possible. Among these writers, Norman Mailer occupies a distinctive position for his willingness to confront uncomfortable truths about power, identity, and national consciousness. His novel *Why Are We in Vietnam?* does not follow the conventional path of war fiction; instead, it turns away from the battlefield and looks inward, toward the cultural and psychological foundations of violence.

Mailer's decision to set the narrative in Alaska, far removed from Vietnam, is not accidental. The hunting expedition that structures the novel functions as a symbolic arena in which domination and aggression are enacted in a controlled environment. This displacement allows Mailer to suggest that the origins of war do not lie solely in political decisions or international conflicts but in the everyday practices and values that shape individual behavior. The novel, therefore, asks a more unsettling question: not simply why America is in Vietnam, but what kind of society produces such a war.

In this sense, the text reflects the tensions of the Cold War era, where ideological conflict and technological advancement intensified the need for power and control. Mailer's work invites readers to recognize that imperialism is not an external phenomenon alone, but one deeply rooted in cultural assumptions and psychological conditioning. The instability of identity and behavior is hinted at early in the novel, where D.J.'s world is described through exaggerated and unsettling characterizations, suggesting a distorted cultural environment: "He's as obscene as a barmaid and just as barmy... The boy needs to be spanked... He's evil" (Mailer 21).

To understand the deeper implications of *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, it is necessary to situate the novel within a broader theoretical context that addresses the relationship between culture, power, and ideology. The concept of imperialism, as articulated by Edward Said, extends beyond territorial domination to include the ways in which cultural narratives construct and sustain systems of control. Said's notion of cultural imperialism is particularly relevant to Mailer's work, as the novel demonstrates how the desire to dominate is embedded within everyday practices and representations. In addition, Louis Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses offers a useful framework for examining how individuals internalize dominant values. According to Althusser, institutions such as family, education, and media play a crucial role in shaping consciousness, ensuring that individuals unconsciously reproduce the ideologies that govern society. In Mailer's novel, this process is evident in the way characters adopt and enact values associated with aggression, competition, and superiority without questioning their origins.

Furthermore, Michel Foucault's understanding of power as diffuse and productive provides insight into the mechanisms of psychological conditioning depicted in the text. Rather than viewing power as something imposed from above, Foucault emphasizes how it operates through everyday practices, shaping behavior and identity. This perspective allows for a more

nuanced reading of the novel, in which violence is not merely an act but a learned and internalized mode of being.

In *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, Norman Mailer presents imperialism not simply as a political strategy but as a deeply ingrained cultural habit. The novel suggests that the impulse toward domination is cultivated within ordinary social practices, long before it is expressed through military action. By shifting the setting away from the Vietnam War to the wilderness of Alaska, Mailer exposes the underlying mentality that sustains imperial expansion, revealing how violence is normalized in seemingly unrelated contexts.

The hunting expedition functions as a symbolic rehearsal for imperial conquest. The act of hunting is not driven by necessity but by a desire to assert control over nature, transforming the landscape into a space of domination. This representation aligns with the arguments of Edward Said, who emphasizes that imperialism operates through the construction of the “other” as something to be controlled and possessed. The obsessive pursuit of the wounded animal reflects a deeper logic of domination, as the group commits entirely to the chase: “We were going to spend our first day walking and jogging to chase a wounded caribou” (Mailer 95). In Mailer’s narrative, animals become stand-ins for this “other,” and the hunters’ actions reflect a broader ideology of superiority. This culture of dominance is reinforced through interpersonal rivalry, where identity is shaped through competition, as D.J. recalls that “he demonstrated to me I could not run around him” (Mailer 46).

At the same time, the novel demonstrates how these values are internalized by individuals. D.J., the narrator, does not question the logic of domination; instead, he absorbs it as a natural part of his identity. This process reflects Louis Althusser’s notion that ideology functions by shaping individuals’ perceptions of reality, making systems of power appear normal and inevitable. Through this lens, imperialism emerges not as an external imposition but as a cultural condition that individuals actively reproduce.

Moreover, Mailer's depiction of the wilderness itself is significant in understanding this conditioning. Alaska is not portrayed as an untouched or neutral space; rather, it becomes a site where human authority is imposed upon nature. The environment is measured, evaluated, and ultimately reduced to an object of conquest. This reduction mirrors the logic of imperial expansion, in which foreign lands are stripped of their autonomy and redefined according to the desires of the colonizer. In this sense, the novel reveals how the natural world is drawn into the same structures of domination that govern human relationships.

Equally important is the role of social influence in reinforcing these attitudes. The interactions among the hunters create a collective framework in which aggression and control are not only accepted but encouraged. Individual hesitation is overridden by group expectations, suggesting that imperial ideology is sustained not just by institutions but also by interpersonal dynamics. The pressure to conform to dominant norms ensures that the values of domination continue to circulate and intensify. As a result, imperialism is shown to be a shared cultural practice, embedded in both individual consciousness and collective behavior.

A central dimension of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* lies in its exploration of masculinity as a key mechanism through which violence is normalized and sustained. Norman Mailer portrays masculinity not as an inherent quality but as a socially constructed identity, shaped by expectations of dominance, control, and emotional restraint. Within the novel, the hunting expedition becomes a site where these expectations are enacted and reinforced, transforming violence into a measure of male competence.

The characters' attitudes toward hunting reveal how aggression is framed as both natural and desirable. Success in the hunt signifies strength and authority, while hesitation or empathy is treated as weakness. This binary framework conditions individuals to associate masculinity with the capacity to dominate, thereby preparing them for participation in larger systems of violence. In this sense, the transition from hunting animals to engaging in warfare

appears less like a rupture and more like a continuation of learned behavior. From the perspective of Michel Foucault, this process can be understood as a form of disciplinary power that shapes both body and mind. The characters are not explicitly forced into violent roles; rather, they internalize these expectations through repeated social practices. Violence becomes a habitual response, embedded within their understanding of identity.

Mailer also draws attention to the emotional consequences of this conditioning. The suppression of vulnerability and empathy limits the characters' ability to reflect critically on their actions. As a result, violence is not only performed but also justified, reinforcing a worldview in which domination appears both necessary and inevitable. Masculinity is further tied to aggression through the emphasis on weaponry and control, as Rusty asserts, "I wish I had my Ruger right now... A rifle's too slow for tight-ass quarters" (Mailer 135).

Another significant dimension of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is its engagement with technology and media as forces that shape perception and reinforce ideological control. Norman Mailer presents a world in which experience is increasingly mediated, creating a distance between individuals and the realities of violence. This distance plays a crucial role in sustaining imperialism, as it allows individuals to participate in systems of domination without fully confronting their consequences.

The narrative voice of D.J. reflects this condition through its fragmented and often disjointed structure. The language of the novel frequently shifts in tone and rhythm, incorporating elements that resemble mechanical or mediated speech. This stylistic choice suggests that the narrator's consciousness is not entirely autonomous but shaped by external influences, particularly those associated with modern media and technology. The result is a sense of psychological fragmentation, where clarity and coherence are difficult to maintain. The stripping away of material security exposes a deeper psychological transformation, where

survival and dominance override comfort: “No sleeping bags. No food. No compass... they going to live off the land” (Mailer 164).

In the context of the Cold War, technological advancement becomes closely tied to the projection of power. The ability to control information and representation allows dominant ideologies to circulate widely, reinforcing existing hierarchies. From an Althusserian perspective, media functions as an ideological apparatus that subtly conditions individuals to accept these structures as natural. Mailer’s portrayal of this mediated reality anticipates the growing role of technology in shaping public consciousness. By emphasizing fragmentation and disorientation, the novel reveals how psychological conditioning operates not only through direct experience but also through the ways in which reality itself is constructed and perceived.

The experimental narrative style of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* plays a crucial role in reinforcing its thematic concerns. Norman Mailer does not present a stable or linear narrative; instead, he constructs a fragmented and shifting voice that mirrors the psychological instability of the modern subject. This stylistic complexity is not merely aesthetic but deeply connected to the novel’s exploration of imperialism and ideological conditioning. This psychological instability becomes explicit in moments where perception itself begins to break down, as “they each are living half out of their minds. For the lights were talking to them” (Mailer 187).

D.J.’s narration is marked by abrupt transitions, shifts in tone, and a blending of different linguistic registers. At times, the narrative appears chaotic, resisting coherence and clarity. This fragmentation reflects a consciousness shaped by conflicting influences, including cultural expectations, technological mediation, and internalized violence. The reader is forced to navigate this instability, much like the characters themselves must navigate a world structured by competing ideologies. From a theoretical perspective, this fragmentation can be understood through Michel Foucault’s notion that power operates through the production of knowledge and discourse. The instability of language in the novel suggests that meaning itself

is not fixed but shaped by the forces that govern society. In this sense, the narrative becomes a site where power is both exercised and contested. Mailer's refusal to provide a clear or unified perspective also challenges conventional expectations of the war novel. By disrupting narrative continuity, he prevents the reader from adopting a passive position. Instead, the text demands active engagement, encouraging a critical awareness of how stories, like ideologies, are constructed and maintained.

Why Are We in Vietnam? ultimately offers a profound critique of the cultural and psychological foundations of American imperialism. Through its symbolic narrative and experimental form, Norman Mailer shifts attention away from the visible realities of the Vietnam War and toward the underlying structures that make such conflicts possible. The novel suggests that war is not an isolated event, but the outcome of deeply embedded cultural values and ideological practices. By engaging with the theoretical insights of Edward Said, Louis Althusser, and Michel Foucault, this study has demonstrated that imperialism operates through processes of representation, internalization, and psychological conditioning. The normalization of violence, particularly through constructions of masculinity and technological mediation, reveals how individuals become participants in systems of domination without necessarily recognizing their role.

Mailer's novel remains significant because it refuses to provide easy answers. Instead, it compels readers to confront uncomfortable questions about the relationship between culture, power, and violence. The title itself continues to resonate, not as a request for a simple explanation but as an invitation to reflect critically on the conditions that produce war. In this sense, the novel challenges both its contemporary audience and modern readers to reconsider the ethical and psychological dimensions of imperialism.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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