

Ocean Vuong's Journey in Language and Trauma:
A Study of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and *Time Is A Mother*

M.A. Dissertation

Submitted to the

Department of English, School of Languages, Doon University

in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

for the Award of Degree of

Master of Arts

English

by

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the dissertation entitled **Ocean Vuong's Journey in Language and Trauma; A Study of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and *Time is A Mother*** being submitted to the Department of English, School of Languages, Doon University, Dehradun for the award of the degree of Masters of Arts, English is my original research work.

The Dissertation embodies the results of investigation, observation, and analysis carried out by me. I have neither plagiarized any part of the dissertation nor have submitted same work for the award of any other degree/diploma anywhere.

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SLE 1272

Date: July 30th, 2022

Certificate

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled '**Ocean Vuong's Journey in Language and Trauma: A Study of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and *Time Is A Mother***' was prepared by **Ms. Anjali Aggarwal** under my supervision and guidance in the Department of English, School of Language, Doon University, Dehradun. To the best of my knowledge, the work is a result of original investigation and study done by her. It is further certified that she has completed the dissertation within stipulated time allotted to her.

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Dedication

I dedicate this humble work to:

My dearest parents.

I will forever be indebted to you.

Acknowledgment

This dissertation is the first academic research work I have undertaken. It has been a period of intense dedication, research and investigation. It has allowed me to discover my true potential. However, this would not have been possible without certain people, hence I want to offer my heartfelt gratitude to them.

I owe my deepest gratitude to my co-supervisor, Ms. Raina Singh who has inspired me in all ways possible. I've known her outside the academic boundaries and she is equally hardworking and inspiring in her personal life too. She has offered her time, patience and guidance in much larger ways. Her guidance has allowed me to bind my thoughts together and compile them in this research work. I would like to extend special gratitude to my professor- Dr. Richa Joshi Pandey for her constant support and guidance for these two whole years. I owe my fluent understanding of Literary Theory to her.

The helpful suggestions and support of my classmates and beloved friends made this period of research easier and joyful. I would like to thank – Aparna, Aditi, Aanchal and Sindhu.

Last but never the least, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my parents for being a rock solid support- my father Mr. Durga Aggarwal for his perseverance so I have everything I require in order to progress and move forward and my mother Mrs. Poonam Aggarwal, who provided me with all the love, care and everything she does for us. A heartfelt thanks.

Abstract

Ocean Vuong is an Asian American poet and a writer. His current works- *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* (2016), *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) and *Time Is A Mother* (2022), revolve around an accumulated nucleus of themes like homophobia, immigration, drug addiction, grief and trauma and use of language. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is an autofiction novel that primarily explores language and Little Dog's relationship with his mother. Vuong's latest poetry collection *Time Is A Mother* explore aftershocks of the death of Ocean's mother and his determination to overcome that grief and find the spirit of life again.

This dissertation aims at a poststructuralist and a postcolonial reading of these works, primarily through the theories of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and Frantz Fanon. The work aims at questioning the signifier-signified relationship in language and what really lends meaning to its elements. The work also aims are bringing forth the psychological consequences of colonialism and apply this cause-effect relationship to other paradigms as well.

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Chapter I

Introduction

A Vietnamese war immigrant, the first person in the family who learned to read and once drug addict, Ocean Vuong (Vinh Quoc Vuong at birth) is a Vietnamese-American poet and novelist. Born in Saigon, in 1988, Ocean is a practitioner of Zen Buddhism, the practice of which he owes to his numerous childhood traumas of facing racial discrimination, homophobia, substance abuse, identity crisis and domestic violence. Having an immigrant background, Vuong's works reflect his psyche and his complicated relationship with his mother, Rose, that for a matter of fact is a testament of tenderness in the face of violence.

Coming from a military maternal background, Ocean is a poet born of war. During the Vietnamese War and Fall of Saigon in 1975, his maternal soldier grandfather was in the United States and his grandmother who was fear struck for the life of her three children, including Rose, dispersed them into different orphanages. This ensured that her children would not be evacuated or exploited by dissidents from Vietnam. Being separated from her family for all of her adulthood, Rose had Ocean at the age of 18, on a farm outside of Saigon. Later, however, when Ocean was two she was forced to immigrate to the United States because Rose was found working illegally in Saigon, under the country's law. They settled in Hartford, Connecticut. Ocean was raised by 'mothers' - his mother, his grandmother and his aunt because his father vanished from his life after the divorce. Ocean had a complicated relationship with his mother - a mother who was suffering from the PTSD of the war and the trauma of leaving her country behind. She found herself oscillating between two homes - one that was her home and the other was forced on her to be her home. Rose didn't know English properly and the little that she did was to fill the void with a foreign language that her

mother tongue was now not able to -the void of understanding and being understood . Extremely opposite to this fact ,Ocean earned a bachelor’s degree in English literature from Brooklyn College and later an MFA in poetry from New York University . Ocean’s works translucently show his life through a masterly use of language ,form and metaphors .*Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016) was Ocean’s debut collection of poetry that explores similarities between life and death ,trauma and rebirth ,pleasure and pain.

On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous (2019) and *Time is A Mother* (2022), are Ocean’s other two most celebrated and critically acclaimed works, the former being a novel and the latter being a poetry collection. The two works are in concert with another because Rose forms a major centre in both the works. Two different kinds of traumas and grieves are explored in the two books but both of them hark back to Rose.

Language plays a critical and crucial role in channelising grief in all of Vuong’s work. Talking about *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, Birgit Neumann writes in his essay, “...how the text’s critical engagement with the notion of the mother tongue is used to negotiate subjectivity and community in diasporic contexts.” The novel is in the form of a letter by the protagonist to his illiterate mother- illiterate in both her mother tongue as well as the foreign language structure which she is forced into. The protagonist, Little Dog produces many acts of translations between Vietnamese and English which reflect his attempt of formulating a whole new language that helps him channelise his grief.

Time Is A Mother is Ocean’s poetry collection that he wrote after the death of his mother. It demonstrates how language is independent of the signified and signifier relationship but is a function of one’s personal experiences, subject interpellation and perception. As Henry Chandonnet writes, “For Vuong, the writing itself becomes a

way to perpetuate life, to confer a kind of immortality. By alluding to his mother in the present tense, she is not really gone. His words are corpses, yet read by others on the page they (and his mother) come to life.”

The Vietnam War (1954-75)

In 1877 the French colonised Vietnam making it a French colony which laid the main grounds for the Vietnam War. French colonialism lasted for almost six decades in Vietnam and by the late 19th century (1880s), Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia- collectively referred to as Indochina (Indochine Francais), became France’s crucial colonial possession. As stated by the postcolonial Edward Said that the White man, in order to justify his colonial actions- Imperialism, starts to tell himself that the colonised are uncivilised and it is the ‘white man’s burden’ to civilise them. A French version of this ‘white man’s burden’, known as ‘mission civilisatrice’ was developed by the French colonisers. However, during the Second World War the French started to lose control over Vietnam after the Japanese occupation of Vietnam which led to a conflict between Japan and France over Vietnam. This further inspired the formation of the League for the independence under Ho Chi Minh, which was called Viet Minh.

Vietnam was declared free from France by Ho Chi Minh on September 2, 1945, which the French rejected and Viet Minh took to guerilla warfare to fight for Vietnam’s independence. The French lost to Viet Minh after fighting for four months, the Battle of Dien Bien Phu marking Vietnam’s Independence but leaving a big question mark of who would rule Vietnam now. This drew superpowers of the world to Vietnam leading to the signing of The Geneva Accords in 1954 that marked a split in Vietnam. Vietnam was now divided into two parts- North Vietnam ruled by the communist government of Ho Chi Minh and South Vietnam ruled by Bao Dai.

The Vietnam War was a strategically pitted conflict by the United States in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia which started on 1st November, 1955 and ended with the fall of Saigon on 30th April, 1975. Vietnam was divided into two parts- the communist government of North Vietnam and the democratic government of South Vietnam. The war was officially fought between North Vietnam and South Vietnam fueled by John F. Kennedy's deployment of twenty three U.S. soldiers in South Vietnam in order to contain the spread of communism throughout Southeast Asia. At its heart the war was a manifestation of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union and their respective allies. The conflict arose from North Vietnam's desire of unifying the whole nation under a single communist regime, modeled after those of the Soviet Union and China. On the other hand, South Vietnam wanted to maintain its close allies with the West.

The most immediate effect of the war was on the civilian population, "killing over two million Vietnamese civilians, over one million North Vietnamese troops and two lakh South Vietnamese troops." The diasporic effect of the war was no less. It resulted in the emigration of nearly two million refugees from Vietnam from the late 1970s to the early '90s.

Literature Review

This section of this dissertation reviews other literary works that have contributed to my understanding of Vietnamese culture and the experience of an immigrant as well the importance of language in channelising grief and trauma.

Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* illustrates Rose's trauma of leaving behind her motherland and her struggle to find a new identity in a foreign land.

Another Vietnamese American writer, Viet Thanh Nguyen's works explore the same

paradigms. *The Refugees (2017)* is Nguyen's collection of eight short stories that explore immigration, identity, family and love. These stories were written by Nguyen over a period of two decades where his characters struggle to exist between their nation of birth and their new adopted homeland. One of the most impactful stories out of the eight was "*The Other Man*", where Liem, a soft natured Vietnamese immigrant moves to America and what follows is a series of events that transforms his sense of self completely. Liem gets involved in a homosexual relationship with his sponsor-Parrish's partner named Marcus. One day when Liem receives a letter from his father, who writes to him from Vietnam, stating the political atmosphere back there. Liem finds it difficult to connect to their world anymore even though he dearly loves his family. There is a sense of removal from the third world and he finds out how extensively America has changed him into "*The Other Man*".

Forming a relatively close association with Vuong's *On Earth*, Hosseini's literary masterpiece explores the life of this Afghani boy who is relocated to America after the Soviet military's intervention in his motherland. Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* is a novel by the Afghan American writer that tells the tale of young Amir. This exuberates with themes of homosexuality, dislocation, grief and coming of age- a Bildungsroman. Baba and Amir are two major characters in the novel through whom the immigration experience proliferates. The two are forced to flee their homelands under the cover of the night, unsure of their next path. The added anxiety of emigrant's conception by the natives left behind adds a complex layer to the narrative in the book.

Ocean's inspiration to record his grief in a collection of poems of relatively the same nature as Barthes' entries- stripped off of everything else but grief, came after reading his *Mourning Diary*. Roland Barthes' *Mourning Diary* is a published collection of his daily journal entries that he used to write every day for a whole year

after his mother's demise. Referred to as 'The Private Art', the book is a fragmented tapestry of Barthes' last writings which gives insights into his grieving process. One of his entries reads, "I'm not mourning, I'm suffering." Barthes exposes the non-essentials of a prose by employing an "anti-Proustian" strategy. Thomas Larson writes, "The prosaic is designed, in part, to flatten feeling, which Barthes- the contrarian- resuscitates by eliminating everything but his agony over his mother's death."

Research Methodology

This dissertation seeks to explore the play of language- a web of signifiers and signified in the comprehension of trauma and identity in Vuong's two most celebrated works- *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and *Time is A Mother*. The novel *On Earth* brings to light various issues of homophobia, dislocated identity, domestic violence, PTSD of war and a child's love for his mother even after she inflicts a domestic war on her own child. The novel portrays the undocumented personal effects followed by the aftermath of a global crisis. Little Dog, Rose, Lan and Trevor are major faces of traumas of different sorts and how their identity crisis translates into violence.

Vuong's poetry collection *Time is a Mother* is an extension of this same love which gives the poet the determination of overcoming the grief of his deceased mother. The research work contains interpretation of several striking symbols and how they are independent of the signified and transports meanings to the signifier through the poet's memory and interpretation of those symbols. The work has not been researched upon as of yet and this dissertation attempts at filling this research gap. This poetry collection forms relatively close concert with *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and this dissertation aims at exploring this relationship. For a matter of fact, the poems can

be regarded as an extension of the novel's plot. Moreover, the mentioned novel has not been studied with the application of Fanon's postcolonial theory of violence as an extension of psychological inferiority complex.

The current work would be analysed primarily through the lens of Poststructuralist theorists like Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes and Postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon. This dissertation mentions works of other theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha as secondary references. In referring to the form and style of presentation, the current work consults *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, ninth edition*.

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Chapter II

Ocean Vuong's journey in Language and Trauma:

A Study of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and *Time Is a Mother*

“Because we were not in our country, we could not use our own languages, and so when we spoke our voices came out bruised” (Bulawayo 142).

Diaspora and the identity crisis that comes with it, is an extensively explored canon of literary works and texts. *Strangers to Ourselves* (1988), *An Empty Room* (1982), *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Infinite Country* (2021) are some of the works that effectively portray the aftermath of the diaspora. Diaspora is a subcategory of postcolonialism in the sense that it involves one's movement from their native land to foreign land. The native starts to feel a sense of isolation and homelessness in their new adopted home. There is a lack of recognition of one's own identity and the native often faces discrimination in the face of new culture, habits, traits and crucially, new language that the native is expected to assimilate. They have to “turn their back on everything that they bought from their home country, including their language” (Rovira 70). This often leads to formation of a new hybridised identity of the native and new forms of expression in a space considered in between cultures or boundaries, as theorised by Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity. This phenomenon can be traced forward in the work of Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) and his postcolonial theories where he explores the psychological effects of colonialism and how the colonised project those effects through violence.

In the latter half of the 20th century, with the upsurge of traumatic events like numerous conflicts, World Wars and Vietnam War, the world simultaneously witnessed a new advent in the cultural and literary thought. This new born theory that defied all the pre-existing notions of language as instilled by structuralists was first introduced in Jacques Derrida's paper, *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*. This theory was called

Poststructuralism and it removed the emphasis from the derivation of meaning through the signifier-signified relationship. Rather it looked at the free play of language and it's meaning to be in a constant state of flux. The meaning of a language or a literary work was no longer derived in relation to its author. The meaning, thereafter, was derived from the reader's subjective comprehension, its relation with other literary texts and certain cultural norms. This canon of literary thought further led to the proliferation of theorists like Roland Barthes and Michael Foucault.

This dissertation uses the above two theories as primary theories as a means to analyse Vuong's works.

Vuong's Liberation from Language

“Our mother tongue, then, is no mother at all- but an orphan, Our Vietnamese a time capsule, a mark of where your education ended, ashed. Ma, to speak in our mother tongue is to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war. That night, I promised myself I'd never be wordless when you needed me to speak for you. So began my career as our family's interpreter. From then on, I would fill in our blanks, our silences, stutters, whenever I could. I code switched. I took off our language and wore my English, like a mask, so that others would see my face, and therefore yours”
(On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous 21).

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous is a Bildungsroman, a coming of age narrative as well as a Künstlerroman, a coming of age narrative of an artist- which makes it form close concert with Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* where, through Stephen (alter ego and autofiction of James), Joyce has recounted his life and experiences. All of Vuong's current works follow the same pattern. In the *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, Ocean mentions, “An American soldier fucked a Vietnamese farm girl. Thus my mother exists. Thus I exist. Thus

no bombs = no family= no me” (70). Like Vuong, Little Dog, the protagonist of this novel, was a direct product of the Vietnam War, similar to his mother Rose. The book is written in an epistolary form like Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl*. It is a compilation of letters from Little Dog to his illiterate mother who perhaps would never read them. The only reason Vuong is writing this letter is perhaps to “break free” from language barriers (similar to poststructuralists) (On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous 3). On his arrival at the States, Little Dog was just two years old and his psycholinguistic skills were still developing. His linguistic development underwent a hybridisation process because he was exposed to two different languages- Vietnamese that was used by his grandmother, Lan and English in the States. Thus, the proper English that is required in the United States is never fully assimilated in Dog’s linguistic psyche.

Dog’s first encounter with the impact of lack of proper language was when he was 9, on a school bus when a white boy demanded him to speak English and his only reply then was silence. Vuong confirms in several interviews that like his protagonist, he didn’t learn to read or speak fluently in English. When Little Dog goes back home after the school bus incident, his mother hits him and blames him for what happened. She then consoles him by telling him that, “You have to find a way, Little Dog... because I don’t have the English to help you” (On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous 18). Rose finds herself helpless because she does not have the appropriate tool to navigate the new society she is now a part of and is unable to defend her son. Thus she perceives language as a shield, asking Little Dog to use it to protect himself. When Little Dog is mature, she realises this language constraint and wants to “break free” from the structures and implications of language and attempts at formulating a new fluid language that exists in between the two (On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous 3). In an attempt to formulate a language that exists in between, Little Dog performs an act of, in Derridean terms, deconstruction. He blurs the slash between Vietnamese/ American and deconstructs the whole binary.

“Struggling with the unavailability of his mother tongue, Vuong’s central writer-protagonist performs multiple acts of translation between the unequal languages of Vietnamese and English and reconfigures both in terms of their foreignness” (Neumann). There’s an incident where Little Dog tries to teach Rose, how to read and it reverses their hierarchies, that of mother and son. “The time I tried to teach you to read.... that act (a son teaching his mother) reversed our hierarchies, and with it our identities, which in this country, were already tenuous and tethered” (*On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* 4). This is purely an act of deconstruction because it exposes that the mother/child binary is not undisputable after all. Generally, the mother is expected to be the one who preaches and the child is supposed to be the one who learns. However in this instance, it is apparent that the child, too, is capable of teaching the mother in the area where she is uneducated. There is an exchange of teaching and learning capabilities which shows that the two elements of the binary are not opposed extremely, rather there is a presence of one’s traces in the other.

The use of language as a cloak is in stark contrast to the attitude of second generation immigrants, referred to as the Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation, who is no longer inclined towards hiding their differences. This novel is a clear example of this. Not only is Vuong telling his story but he is unapologetically proud of it. The title *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* refers to the beauty of poor black, brown and yellow bodies, who, he says are “inspiring bodies...not just victims of a geopolitical plight” (Filgate). As Little Dog ruminates at the end of his letter, “[to] be gorgeous, you must first be seen,” although he cautions, “but to be seen allows you to be hunted” (*On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* 151). Therefore, even though hideous and gorgeous are binary oppositions in terms of description, the outcome of this change will be different, since alive and hunted are not antonyms. Little Dog has been raised in fear of being seen, instructed to use his voice only as a defense, but he decides to challenge everything he has been taught when he comes of age. Notwithstanding the possibility of being hunted, he becomes a writer and uses the English Language, his second

language, to reclaim his identity as a hybrid Vietnamese American subject, as well as to tell the story of his family, who never had the same opportunity;

“It is no accident, Ma, that the comma resembles a fetus- that curve of continuation. We were all once inside our mothers, saying, with our entire curved and silent selves, more, more, more. I want to insist that our being alive is beautiful enough to be worthy of replication. And so what? So what if all I ever made of my life was more of it?...” (On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous 89). Little Dog is an autofiction of Ocean. In the novel, Ocean reveals his journey of language and his final destination can be seen in his poetry collection *Time Is A Mother*. Vuong’s mother died of breast cancer in 2019 and this collection is a search for life among the aftershocks of his mother death. The poems simultaneously portray his trauma of losing his mother, ushered by flashback of images from his memory as well as his determination to heal from it. The act of “break[ing] free” that Little Dog talks about in *On Earth*, is finally achieved in Vuong’s poetry collection (On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous 3). The poems do not follow a particular structure; more so, they are like fragments of Vuong’s memory, loss and his grief. “Once in a while, a book is poetry in its purest form, meaning it doesn’t need the stanza, or the verse, a simple break of the line will do” (Delgado). The poems are in form of articles, disconnected lines with enjambments and a redefined elegy. Vuong creates a poem out of a list of items purchased by his mother. In “*Amazon History of a Former Nail Salon Worker*” a kinetic movement is created from pain relief (Advil) towards a headscarf to cover up baldness from the chemotherapy and eventually to an urn in order to contain the cremation ashes. This poem is “inspired by William Carlos Williams’s credo ‘no ideas but in things’” (Allardice).

“Mar.

Advil (ibuprofen), 4 pack...

May.

... Salonpas Heat-Activated muscle patch, 40 count....

Oct.

... Icy Hot Maximum Strength pain relief pads...

Dec.

Advil (ibuprofen) Maximum Strength, 4 pack...

Feb.

Healthline Compact Trigger Release Folding Walker...

Mar.

Chemo-Glam cotton head scarf, sunrise pink....

Apr.

Chemo-Glam cotton scarf, flower garden print

'Warrior Mom' Breast Cancer awareness T-shirt, pink and white...

Jul.

Eternity Aluminum Urn, Dove and Rose engraved, small

Perfect Memories picture frame, 8 x 11 in, black...

Oct.

Your Story Customized Memorial Plaque, 10 x 8 x 4 in" (Amazon History of a

Former Nail Salon Worker lines 1-71)

This is one of the most impactful poems in the collection and it consists of nothing except an Amazon orders list. The list is impactful in the sense of its context that shows how strong Rose was. Other than the above mentioned objects, the order list consists of manicure

equipment, thus showing that she continued working her job at the salon irrespective of her medical conditions- “Warrior Mom” (Amazon History of a Former Nail Salon Worker line 61). They also reflect Vuong’s belief that her cancer was in part as result of her exposition to the harmful chemicals at her job in the nail salon. This harks us back to the question raised by Michel Foucault- what exactly is that written by that counts as work? Here, the determinant is the context and once it is removed, the Amazon user remains much more elusive. The signifiers - “advil...cotton scarf...Memories picture frame” do not point out towards their general signified rather they signify a mother and son’s journey through a particular phase of their life. These fragments of the list are disjointed with inherently no connection and meaning. They have different meanings and connotations but a particular meaning is created in this poem when these inherently disjointed signifiers come together. The journey from cancer diagnosis to death is the signified rather than outright stated in words to keep the door of imagination open. These signifiers denote different things in vacuum but together with context they form a higher impact. Vuong states in an interview, “It take a lot of confidence that you have to just earn as a writer, to let the objects speak for themselves” (Allardice).

The idea of a signified journey appears in *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* with the use of the symbol of monarch butterflies, a quite recurring symbol in the novel. They are symbolic of passage of knowledge down to generations, memory and migration. Much like the monarch butterflies, Little Dog and his family were forced to migrate in order to survive. Prone to death just by a single night of frost, the butterflies on their way of immigration to the south lay their eggs without the intention of returning ever. The future butterflies automatically know the route because of the knowledge passed on to them by their ancestors. Similarly, Little Dog relies on the stories and lessons told to him by Lan and Rose. Little Dog cherishes stories passed on to him and they guide his decisions in incomprehensible ways. They help him to survive. The whole migration journey of the butterflies is a signified journey for Little Dog that means so much more to him than a mere natural phenomenon.

Ocean and Roland Barthes

Little Dog frequently refers to the works of Roland Barthes, a 20th-century French literary critic and theorist. Barthes is best known for his contribution to structuralism, an area of study that assumes human culture can only be understood by its relationship to a broader social structure, such as language. In Little Dog's letter to his mother, he adopts Barthes's view of structuralism and explores language in both writing and storytelling. He considers individual words and the structure of sentences, as well as the power of personal narratives. Just as Barthes argues culture can only be understood by its broader social structures, Vuong argues that to truly understand another, one must also understand the stories that give structure to life (Rosewall 8).

Little Dog, similar to Barthes, looks at language as something steeped deep down in cultural contexts. When Rose was 5, she saw her school go up in flames due to an explosion and thus she never went back to school,

“but I know Ma you can't
read napalm fallen on your
schoolhouse at six & that
was it they say a word

is only what it signifies...” (Dear Rose 7-12)

Rose is illiterate in both the languages and there exists a communication gap between her and her almost English speaking son. When Little Dog is young, there is a “hummingbird whirring over the creamy orchid” when Rose points out to it and exclaims joyously- “Đẹp quá!... It's beautiful!” Dog says in English, “the only language I[he] had for it” (On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous 20). They calmly pass a smile to each other with none of them able to comprehend the other. Rose grew up in Vietnam, while majority of Little Dog's life is

spent in the United States, and their linguistic gaps are reflected in their language. According to Little Dog, in Vietnam people would hardly say- I love you and when they did, it's pronounced in English. Little Dog recalls, "Care and love, for us [Vietnamese], are pronounced clearest through service: plucking white hairs, pressing yourself on your son to absorb a plane's turbulence and, therefore, his fear" (On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous 22). In order to express it in words; they must adhere to an entirely new language. In Hartford, Connecticut, where he grew up, locals greeted each other with-what's good, instead of a simple hello or how are you? Life is frequently delicate for Hartford's proletariat population, and the point of the greeting, he says, is "to move, right down, to joy" and "push away what was ineluctable to reach the exceptional" (On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous 137). This fully unique greeting can only be understood within the cultural context of Hartford.

"I reread Roland Barthes's *Mourning Diary* yesterday, the book he wrote each day for a year after his mother's death. *I have known the body of my mother, sick and then dying*. And that's where I stopped. Where I decided to write to you. You who are still alive" (On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous 5). *Mourning Diary* is a compilation of Barthes' journal entries that he wrote daily for a year after his mother died. This work rips apart all the non-essentials of language and what remains is the grief. A grief penetrative enough, that it is independent of the structures and forms of language. Ocean was inspired to address a letter to his alive mother but still she cannot read them (like Barthes' mother) but only because she is illiterate. It's interesting to note that Vuong borrows the subtitle of his poem "*Dear Rose*", from Barthes' *Mourning Diary*- "*I have known the body of my mother, sick and dying.*" Forming a contrast with the beginning of his novel, "Let me begin again" (On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous 3), he begins this poem with, "Let me begin again now that you're gone Ma" (Dear Rose line 1).

This poem is again a letter that he writes to Rose who is now dead. The poem is enjambed and in the form of free verse. Like Barthes, Ocean too has ripped off everything from the

language except an uninterrupted flow of words. This reflects how a flood of flashbacks washes his memory when he's attempting to write to his dead mother. He simply cannot find a pause. He recalls all the traumas faced by Rose and how she battled through them all. The strength of this poem arrives from its highly enjambed lines and acceptance of its own ambivalence. Ocean admits that he aims to bring forth significance in the contorted trail of ants,

“I wanted significance but think
 it was just the load he was bearing
 that unhinged him: another ant
 curled & cold lifted on
 his shoulders they looked like a set
 of quotations missing speech it's said
 they can carry over 5,000 times their mass
 but it's often bread crumbs
 not brothers that get carried
 home but going too far...” (Dear Rose line 31-40)

Vuong dissolves the notion that he mentions in the beginning of the poem that; “a word is only what it signifies that's how I know...” (Dear Rose lines 10-12), he writes,

“...Mom this
 is your name I say pointing
 to Hông on the birth certificate thin
 as dust Hông I say which means

rose I place your finger on a flower so

familiar it feels synthetic red

plastic petals dewed with glue I leave

it out of my poems I turn from

its face-” (Dear Rose lines 42-50)

A word is not all it signifies, it is rather all that the reader perceives it as. Vuong's mother's name was Hông, which translates to Rose in English language. Rose, in this poem is not a Shakespearian symbol of beauty but a metaphor for displacement- from Vietnam to the States. “Instead, ‘like something ruptured/ by a bullet’ the rose is a wound or, later, the open mouth of infant Ocean” (Lerner). A rose would smell sweet, but Hông, who became Rose (translated after coming to the United States) as a consequence of colonialism, “bear the scent of its corpses” (Dear Rose line 63). The idea of names and its larger significant meaning is carried by Ocean's name himself.

Ocean was named Vinh Quoc at birth. Rose named him Ocean after an incident that took place while she was working at the salon. While performing a lady's manicure, Rose expressed her wish to visit the beach. The lady pointed out Rose's accent, that her pronunciation of beach actually sounded more like bitch. She suggested that Rose could instead say that she wants to go to the ocean. When Rose learns what an ocean is- a large water body that links countries, she decided to rename Vinh as Ocean with the metaphorical idea that her son could fill the void between Vietnam and America. In this act of renaming him, Rose metaphorically, already set him free from the structured significance of language.

Psychological Trauma and its Projection as Violence

Frantz Fanon, one of the prominent postcolonial theorists, was the first one to analyse the psychological effects of colonialism on both the coloniser and the colonised. Diaspora being a subcategory of the postcolonial canon, his theory can thus be applied to the psyches of emigrant natives who are forced to adopt a new land as their homes. In the fifth chapter “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” of his seminal essay *Black Skin, White Masks*; Fanon delves deep into the psychological accounts of the colonised. He argued that, for the repressed and suffering native, colonialism destroys the very soul (Nayar 157). The coloniser’s constant portrayal of the native as inferior annihilates their identity. In a counter attempt to deal with this psychological inferiority, the native tries to adopt all the Western values, language, and practices of the coloniser.

“It was your birthday. We were splurging. “Do I look like a real American?” you said, pressing a white dress to your length. It was slightly too formal for you to have any occasion to wear, yet casual enough to hold a *possibility* of use. A chance. I nodded, grinning.” (On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous 7). Little Dog’s Ma, Rose is a victim of both- dislocation from her motherland as well as the PTSD of the Vietnam War and both of these traumas are quite visibly projected in her behaviour. After immigrating to the United States, Rose, “a ghost girl” who was a direct product of the Vietnam War came across a considerable amount of racial discrimination back in her own homeland because her father was an American soldier and her complexion was considerably lighter than the other natives (On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous 40). Lan, Rose’s mother, was ostracised and called a traitor back at their home in Go Cong for making sexual relations with the enemy. “And I want to tell him. I want to say that his daughter who is not his daughter was a half-white child in Go-Cong...How she ran out of hair, they slapped buffalo shit on her face and shoulders to make her *brown again*, as if to be born lighter was a wrong that could be reversed” (On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous 40). Later, upon her arrival in the United States, the word ‘brown’ that manifested a particular

trauma for her back in her native land, held a quite opposite consequence for her here. In the U.S. she was comparatively darker to the Western people. Rose was a manicurist at a salon and often brought home mannequin hands in order to practice on them. The colour of Rose's hands was darker than those of the mannequin's that only came in "pink and beige", the default colour in America (On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous 39). While the Vietnamese tried to scrape off the white colour off her skin, the American discrimination forced her to paint herself in the same. This led to a double identity crisis for Rose. Thus, through a poststructuralist lens, the two signifiers- white and brown do not refer to concrete signified respectively. Rather the signified are in a fluid state that changes with the change in cultural contexts and racial stereotypes.

Fanon further formulated the psychological effects of the inadequacy and inferiority in the colonised psyche which results in violence, which according to the natives, is a form of self-assertion. This violence even erupts against one's own natives, when the natives realize that he cannot become truly white (Mambrol).

"The first time you hit me, I must have been four. A hand, a flash, a reckoning. My mouth a blaze of touch..... The time with a gallon of milk. The jug bursting on my shoulder bone, then a steady white rain on the kitchen tiles..... The time with the kitchen knife- the one you picked up, then put down, shaking saying, quietly, "Get out. Get out." And I ran out the door, down the black summer streets" (On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous 6).

Little Dog recounts in the book numerous incidents of domestic violence by his mother. At the point of life, when Little Dog is writing these incidents in the form of letters to his mother, he is mature enough to understand that the violence was the projection of the PTSD of the war. But back then, when he was four, he "didn't know that the war was still inside" her (On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous 4). Through Fanon's psychopathological theory of

postcolonialism, this violence can be viewed as a projection of frustration and the inferiority complex that was a result of her emigration from her home. Her violence gets projected on her son who is clueless about the war inside his mother. Her displaced identity, homelessness in a home and flashbacks from her memory overpower her maternal instincts and give rise to frequent violent episodes. Rose is not a terrible mother; she is merely a victim of displacement and once her violent episode ends she goes back to being a 'mother'. There is an incident when she throws a Lego set on little dog's head and as soon as realises what she has done she takes him to McDonald's for a treat as a compensation for her behaviour. Little does she know that the way war was imprinted in her memory, the same way these violent outbursts were getting imprinted in her child's mind. There exists an intergenerational tension between immigrant parents and their children and this tension is created by "the way one generation pulls- emotionally, psychologically, and even physically- on the other" (Schiffman 30). In novels, like Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep* (1934) or Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1992), this tension mentioned above is the main basis of the plots. The tension serves as a stimulator to the adolescent's thoughts for him to ponder over his identity.

"That time when I was five or six and, playing a prank, leapt out at you from behind the hallway door, shouting, "Boom!" You screamed, face raked and twisted, then burst into sobs, clutched your chest as you leaned against the door, gasping. I stood bewildered, my toy army helmet tilted on my head. I was an American boy parroting what I saw on TV. I didn't know that the war was still inside you, that there was a war to begin with, that once it enters you it never leaves—but merely echoes, a sound forming the face of your own son. Boom" (On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous 3-4).

Rose was five back in Vietnam when she saw her school go up into flames because of an explosion. Her childhood memory consisted of sounds of explosions and gunshots. The sounds signifier is embedded so deeply in her memory that even her own son's harmless prank triggers that post traumatic memory and she starts sobbing. Here the 'author' of this act,

young Little Dog, intended it in a playful harmless manner but Rose's lived realities led to the comprehension of the act in an extremely different manner. The sound "Boom" had a repercussion of its own in the context of her history, biography and psychology.

Fanon's psychopathological theory can be interpreted in the way that the violence is a reaction that stems from one's identity crisis- an inability to recognise themselves because they are forced to put on a stereotyped mask over their real essence. In order to conform to the norms that are considered default, one starts to lose touch with their own realities and the frustration that builds up inside them eventually gets projected as violence. Now this violence can either be physical, mental or emotional- on someone else's body or perhaps, on one's own. Trevor clearly justifies this mechanism. Trevor is Little Dog's lover and a Little Dog defines him- "impossibly American" who is "raised in the fabric and muscle of American masculinity" (*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* 130). It's after his encounter with Little Dog that it is revealed that both of them are homosexual. It doesn't take long for their platonic friendship to turn into sexual. After their first sexual intercourse, Trevor turns his back to Little Dog and "skillfully cries in the dark... the way boys do" (*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* 74). Trevor is ashamed of his different sexual orientation because he thinks it makes him soft. Trevor is always made to believe that he is "all-American beef but no veal"- that he's a white American masculine figure who is tough and patriarchal (*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* 102). He is an embodiment of stereotypes of American masculinity and an example of the effects that this narrowed view of gender has on the queer community. One afternoon Trevor asked Little Dog to top him during the intercourse and halfway through he stopped and cried,

"I can't. I just—I mean . . ." He spoke into the wall. "I dunno. I don't wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch. I can't, man. I'm sorry, it's not for me—" He paused, wiped his nose. "It's for you. Right?"

I pulled the covers to my chin.

I had thought sex was to breach new ground, despite terror, that as long as the world did not see us, its rules did not apply. But I was wrong.

The rules, they were already inside us.” (On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous 78).

The exposition of heteronormative masculinity had displaced Trevor’s identity. He oscillated between conforming to the masculine stereotypes and conforming to his real sexuality. It frustrated him. This psychological frustration made him violent on his own body but the only difference was that this violence wasn’t just physical hitting. The violence here was substance abuse. Trevor was a drug addict. He has been since he was a teenager and was prescribed OxyContin for a broken ankle. The notion of masculine of toughness was so deeply engraved in his brain that Trevor would consider the consumption of drugs as something masculine. When Little Dog refuses to consume fentanyl with him he exclaims, “Looks like you dropped your tampon...” (On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous 117). His drug addiction eventually leads to his death. Trevor dies of overdose of fentanyl and heroin.

Later in the novel, even Little Dog reveals that he has bipolar disorder and is struggling with drug addiction. Though Little Dog remains humble throughout the story, one cannot ignore the fact that parallelly, with Rose and Trevor, he too was fighting with his emigrant as well as queer identity. Ocean recounts his addiction in the poem “*Rise and Shine*” from his poetry collection,

“Scraped the last \$8.48

from the glass jar.

Your day’s worth of tips

at the nail salon. Enough

for one hit. Enough

to be good

till noon but

these hands already

blurring" (lines 1-9).

Ocean used to get so high from drugs that couldn't even tie his shoelaces properly. But he is aware of the repercussions of this kind of abuse. He knows the aftermath that follows and the pain it causes to the people associated with the addict. Ocean himself underwent a great amount of pain and suffering as he recounts in the poem "*Dear T*",

"pressed into white fields or

tax forms or discharge papers or

you won't stop coughing up blood maybe (...)

a little longer I say but your voice

is already pieces (...)

as soon as the hand moved

across the page away

from the car crash *but we deserve more than this..*" (lines 41-44, 51-52, 64-67)

For Ocean, "addiction is 'one of the most human things. It is the body and the mind deciding to find a way out. We have this desire to be OK, to feel better and that amplifies the horror all around us'" (Allardice). Ocean did find a way out of his addiction as his alter ego, Little Dog recounts in the novel, "I refuse to die" (On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous 46). Ocean spent his time in rehab because he witnessed enough deaths in his lifetime to not to meet the same end. His poem "*Reasons for Staying*" states all the reasons he had to battle the

addiction, "...Because I made a promise. /That the McDonald's arch, glimpsed from the 2 am
rehab window off Chestnut, was enough. /Because I stopped apologising into visibility,
/Because this body is my last address..." (lines 16-18, 22-23)

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Chapter III

Conclusion

“There’s something about Vuong’s writing that demands all of your lungs.” writes Kadish Morris while talking about *Time Is A Mother* in an interview with Ocean Vuong for The Guardian. There is something about Ocean’s writing that makes one read in an uninterrupted because it is the kind of writing that demands to be devoured with all the might.

Ocean’s writings have always revolved around parent-child relationships, drug addiction, his immigration to the United States, homophobia and the independent relations of signifier and the signified. Heavily enjambed fragments, epistolary format, metaphors and visual language have been crucial elements in his writings. His works are modernist in the sense of their fragmentation and independent from the strict structures of language. Ocean and Rose are two widely used words in prose and poetry but Ocean’s literary career seem to have lend the two whole new meanings of their own.

The novel *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* and his latest poetry collection *Time Is A Mother* have been in concert to each other even before the novel got published. Three months before *On Earth*’s publication in 2019, Vuong called up his manager and told him that they need to cancel the book tour because his mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Even though this collection explored aftershocks of his mother’s death, Vuong wrote most of the poems before her death. Looking at this creative process it turns out the he has been grieving all his life. Vuong has encountered multifaceted grief varying from that of displacement to drug addiction to different treatment due to his different sexual orientation to losing his lover and finally that of losing his mother. His works stem from this accumulated nucleus of trauma.

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous traces Ocean's relationship with language in context of his hybridised linguistic capabilities and its effects that last a lifetime. His protagonist Little Dog is a manifestation of Ocean's lived realities. The novel contains signifiers that hark to a much larger and deeper signified. The meanings are not constant and are in a constant state of flux. They change when the cultural context and personal context of the characters shift. This pertains to Jacques Derrida's theory of poststructuralism known as deconstruction. Oppositional binaries are not extremely opposition; however, there are traces of one in other. This deconstructs all the pre-existing notions inculcated by structuralists like Ferdinand de Saussure which claim that the relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary. However, according to poststructuralism words cannot exist in vacuum and need at least some context to make sense. This is exactly what Ocean does. He takes out these signifiers from the vacuum and put them in a context.

Rose, Ocean's mother forms the core of his writings. He has been a victim of the Vietnamese War and colonialism followed by diaspora. Shifting her whole life as well as her identity between nations and its aftermath gives an insight into the lives and traumas of immigrants who are forced to leave their homes behind. Her relationship with her son has always been complicated but it was strong enough for Ocean to be able to comprehend the reasons for her action. Employing Frantz Fanon's postcolonial theory, this dissertation showed, a person whose psyche is accumulated with trauma and frustration of not being able to recognise one's own life, projects its insecurities in the form of violence. This violence can emerge in different forms- in the novel's case, physical hitting, ignorance and substance abuse. Ocean's attachment with his mother was strong enough for him to compose a whole poetry collection, *Time Is a Mother*, to process and channelise his grief after her death.

The title *Time Is A Mother* holds two possible connotations. First, time for Vuong is his mother because from his childhood up till his mother's death, his whole life revolved around his mother. Second is the literal meaning that time teaches one to cope up with the situation. Time heals the deepest wounds. Both these connotations accurately summarise this poetry collection. Poem like "*Dear Rose*" and "*Amazon History of a Former Nail Salon Worker*" employ an anti-Proustian strategy and scrape off all the non-essentials of language except grief. The objects/signifiers speak for themselves in the backdrop of a particular context and are not in an arbitrary relation with the signified. Vuong's battle with drug addiction and his mother's death form two poles for this spectrum of work between which other themes proliferate.

Being an Asian- American writer Vuong is subjected to be put in a checkbox. This means that he is pointed out at as a marginal writer, writing for and about the community he belongs to but Ocean refuses to conform to such strictures, he mentions in a speech,

"You don't sit down writing as an Asian-American or a queer person or what have you. Because if you do that, you start to forego a lot of other parts of yourself. You turn your work into a checkbox.... The more I work the more I realise that I get more skeptical of what we mean when we say a marginalised writer. Because the question then goes- marginalised to whom? The subject that I write about, the people I write about have always been in the centre for me..." (The 92nd Street Y, New York).

By conforming to the marginalised profile, it would mean that Ocean only identifies as an immigrant and a member of the LGBT+ community, erasing all the other spectrum of things he talks about in his works. It would neglect his bipolar disorder, battle with

drug addiction and dyslexic heredity, all of which are core elements of his literary works as well as personal profile.

Therefore this dissertation shows a poststructuralist as well as a postcolonial analysis of his work, perhaps Ocean is a poststructuralist himself. This work illustrates how grief and trauma can be a catalyst to one's creative process. "As he tells his students at NYU, where he is a visiting professor: 'If you want to study literature, study war. For as long as there are soldiers, there are poets'" (Allardice). It also highlights the psychological effects of colonisation, or in simple words, the frustration of the inability to recognise one's own self. It is projected in the form of violence, on others or on their own bodies. Therefore, the objective mentioned in the introduction is achieved through this research work.

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