
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Remnants of Pain and Threads of Resilience: Trauma and Memory in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the profound and multifaceted representation of trauma in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, employing trauma theory to unravel the intricate layers of pain, memory, and healing embedded within the narrative. Centred on the experiences of Little Dog, a queer Vietnamese-American immigrant, the novel is a poignant meditation on the interplay among personal, intergenerational, and historical trauma. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, the paper examines how the Vietnam War's devastating legacy manifests across generations, shaping the lives of Little Dog and his family. This research delves into the mother-son relationship as a site where the scars of war intersect with the challenges of immigration, revealing how inherited trauma shapes Little Dog's understanding of self and belonging. By situating the novel within the broader framework of immigrant and diasporic literature, this study highlights the universal resonance of trauma as a means of connection, survival, and, ultimately, transformation. The paper contributes to the evolving discourse on trauma in contemporary literature, emphasising how Vuong redefines the boundaries of narrative form to encapsulate the unspeakable echoes of trauma in a fractured yet profoundly beautiful world.

Keywords: War Trauma, Memory Studies, Transgenerational Trauma, Alienation

FULL RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous by Ocean Vuong is a powerful story that captures the intricacy of trauma, memory, and identity through the eyes of Little Dog, a queer Vietnamese-American immigrant. The novel explores the individual and societal aspects of trauma while reflecting on the intertwined strands of identity, family, and history. This paper, using trauma theory, specifically drawing on the observations of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, examines how Vuong's lyrical and fractured prose both reflects the fragmented, non-linear nature of trauma and serves as a healing and connecting medium. This study demonstrates how Vuong pushes the limits of storytelling to capture the unimaginable echoes of trauma in a fractured yet incredibly beautiful world through a thorough examination of the novel's narrative techniques, themes, and characters.

Trauma theory offers a critical perspective for comprehending how *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* depicts suffering, memory, and recovery. In her work, Cathy Caruth highlights the paradox of trauma as an inexplicable and enduring event that shapes identity through its eerie presence:

In the traditional trauma model pioneered by Cathy Caruth, trauma is viewed as an event that fragments consciousness and prevents direct linguistic representation. The model draws attention to the severity of suffering by suggesting the traumatic experience irrevocably damages the psyche. Traumatic experience and its inherent dissociation thwart the application of determinate value to that experience because the level of fright destroys the mind's ability to comprehend it and linguistically code it. The traumatic experience exerts a negative and frequently pathological effect on consciousness and memory that prevents the past from becoming incorporated into a life narrative. The critical emphasis on trauma's unspeakability rests on the claim that extreme experience fractures both language and consciousness, causing lasting damage and demanding unique narrative expressions. (Balaev 4)

This trauma model figures in Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (1996), which takes a particular interpretation of Freud's theories of trauma to advance a broader post-structural concern with the referential limits of language and history. Caruth argues that trauma's latency and dissociation disrupt the ability to understand or represent a traumatic experience fully. The interplay between individual

and societal trauma is highlighted in Judith Herman's groundbreaking book *Trauma and Recovery*, which also emphasises the value of narrative as a tool for reclamation and healing. Herman refers to "remembrance and mourning" of the assault as the second stage of her trauma therapy. Now that the survivor has regained control over their hyperarousal, they will start sharing their trauma story and "transform the traumatic memory so that it can be integrated into the narrative of the survivor's life" (Zaleski 175). This paper analyses how trauma is not merely a theme but also a structuring principle shaping the novel's fractured form, poetic language, and examination of memory and identity, thereby situating Vuong's book within this theoretical framework.

The novel takes place against the tragic legacy of the Vietnam War. The trauma of the war is not a thing of the past for Little Dog and his family; rather, it is a constant, influencing factor in their lives. Little Dog's mother, Rose, and grandmother, Lan, are portrayed by Vuong in ways that demonstrate how the effects of war reverberate through generations and converge with the difficulties of immigration and displacement. At the very beginning of the novel, Vuong narrates an instance from his childhood when he realised the presence of war reminiscence in his mother's psyche:

That time when I was five or six, playing a prank, I leapt out at you from behind the hallway door, shouting, "Boom!" You screamed, face racked 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 didn't know that war was still inside you, that there was a war to begin with, that once it enters you it never leaves. (OEBG 4)

Rose's terrifying reaction to Little Dog's prank showcases the presence of the "pathogenic reminiscence" (Mambrol) within her. There are other instances in the novel that reveal that not only Rose but her mother, Lan, has this very reminiscence.

Vuong's disjointed prose reflects the fragmented character of trauma that spans generations. For those who inherit the pain of historical events, the novel's non-linear structure mirrors the rifts in memory and identity. The difficulties of raising a son in a strange and frequently hostile cultural setting add to Rose's trauma from the war. One interpretation of her violence toward Little Dog is that it reflects the cyclical nature of inherited pain as well as her own unresolved trauma. Even in her moments of frenzy, when she hurt Little Dog, a deep motherly love always remained at her core. Once, they travelled to California to see his father, offering him a second chance. During the flight, the turbulence grew so intense that Little Dog was lifted completely

off his seat before being pulled back down by the seat belt, causing him to burst into tears. Then Rose wrapped one arm around his shoulder, leaned on him, pointed to the thick cloud outside the window and said, "When we get this high up, the clouds turn into boulders-hard rocks-that's what you are feeling" (28). Vuong depicts their relationship's intricacy and the ways that trauma and love coexist by contrasting tender moments with violent ones.

Personal, intergenerational, and historical trauma all come together in Little Dog's relationship with his mother. Rose's interactions with Little Dog are shaped by her experiences as an immigrant and war survivor, resulting in a delicate and intensely personal dynamic. The trauma of having to abort her first child exacerbated Rose's preexisting wartime trauma. She also experienced a horrific upbringing marred by war, an abusive spouse, and ultimately a gay son. However, their love for one another kept them together through all of the difficulties. As Lan tells Little Dog, "She loves you, Little Dog. But she sick. Sick like me. In the brain (122). The demands of her present and the burdens of her past are reflected in her insistence on survival, frequently at the expense of emotional connection.

Vuong explores the subtleties of their relationship through Little Dog's letters to Rose, revealing the layers of suffering, resiliency, and love that characterise their connection. For Little Dog, writing serves as a means of healing, enabling him to process his own trauma while observing his mother's hardships. As he writes, "I am writing to reach you – even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are". Little Dog writes the letter to his mother, who cannot read English, making his words both an attempt to bridge the emotional and generational gap between them and a recognition that true understanding may remain elusive. This narrative technique highlights the healing power of storytelling and positions it as a means of filling the gaps left by trauma.

A microcosm of marginalised experiences can be found in Little Dog's personal traumas, which include the violence he experienced as a child and the difficulties he faced navigating his queer identity. As an immigrant, Little Dog, born in Vietnam, in addition to being queer, was always taunted by his schoolmates, who never left a chance to torture him both physically and mentally. Little Dog mentioned one such incident from his school days where his schoolmates tortured him on the school van:

All around me the boys jostled each other. I felt the wind from their quick-jerked limbs behind my neck, their swooping arms and fists displacing the air. Knowing the face I possess, its rare features in these parts, I pushed my head

harder against the window to avoid them. That's when I saw a spark in the middle of a parking lot outside. It wasn't until I heard their voices behind me that I realised the spark came from inside my head. That someone had shoved my face into the glass. (24)

The relationship between Little Dog and Trevor, a white working-class boy, is depicted by Vuong in a way that emphasises the intersections of race, class, and sexuality while illuminating the intricacies of vulnerability and desire in a setting characterised by social marginalisation. Trevor's words helped Little Dog find beauty in his body that he had failed to recognise until then. The idea of the invisibility of existence is evident in the words of Little Dog, when Trevor enquired of him, "Where were you before you met me?", to which Little Dog replied, "I think I was drowning" (237). What Little Dog found in Trevor's eyes was a beautiful recreation of his own body, which he felt earlier had no existence of its own.

The novel's portrayal of trauma is intricately linked to its investigation of queer identity. Little Dog struggles with internalised shame, social rejection, and the fear of severing ties with his family as he comes to terms with his sexuality. The emotional depth of these encounters is conveyed by Vuong's poetic prose, which results in a story that is both intensely personal and universally relatable. Nevertheless, when Little Dog met Trevor, the novel's overall feel changed. Little Dog looked at himself in the mirror, seeing for the first time a body he could love. "It was an accident, my beauty revealed to me," he wrote, "I was day-dreaming, thinking about the day before, of Trevor and me behind the Chevy, and had stood in the tub with the water off for too long. By the time I stepped out, the boy before the mirror stunned me" (107). This new identity that Little Dog found quenched the thirst in himself to the question of who he was. At this moment, there was a sudden metamorphosis of the body, from an object of embarrassment seeking anonymity to something that reveals itself as worthy of desire. Vuong questions conventional notions of identity and belonging by placing Little Dog's queerness within the larger framework of trauma and resiliency.

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous is a narrative embodiment of trauma through its fractured, non-linear structure. In contrast to moments of stark realism, Vuong's use of lyrical prose captures the fragmented character of traumatic memory, which defies traditional chronology and coherence. This narrative technique encourages readers to engage with the text on an emotional and experiential level while also reflecting the psychological effects of trauma. Within the larger context of immigrant and diasporic literature, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* places personal experiences of trauma. Vuong portrays Little Dog's family in a way that emphasises the

connections among cultural alienation, displacement, and intergenerational suffering, demonstrating how trauma is both a shared and an individual experience. The book examines immigration and diaspora, highlighting the tenacity of underprivileged groups in the face of historical and systemic oppression. Vuong challenges mainstream narratives by amplifying the voices of those often overlooked, creating space for alternative storytelling. Through this, the book underscores how trauma can serve as a powerful force for transformation, survival, and connection.

Despite its focus on pain and loss, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is ultimately a testament to the resilience of storytelling. For Little Dog, writing becomes a form of healing, allowing him to reclaim his narrative and assert his identity in the face of trauma. Vuong's novel highlights the therapeutic potential of storytelling, positioning it as a means of bearing witness to human fragility and strength. Through its fragmented structure and lyrical language, the novel captures the complexities of trauma while offering a space for reflection and reconciliation. Vuong's work emerges as a powerful example of how literature can serve as a vehicle for understanding, connection, and transformation, bridging the gaps created by trauma and creating possibilities for healing.

Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* offers a profound and multifaceted exploration of trauma, weaving together personal, intergenerational, and historical dimensions to create a narrative that is both deeply intimate and universally resonant. By employing trauma theory and engaging with themes of immigration, identity, and resilience, this paper has examined how Vuong's fragmented, lyrical prose encapsulates the disjointed nature of traumatic memory while offering a means of healing and connection. Through its portrayal of Little Dog's experiences, Vuong's novel challenges conventional understandings of trauma, identity, and storytelling, redefining the boundaries of contemporary literature. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* emerges not only as a narrative of pain but also as a testament to the transformative power of resilience and the enduring strength of the human spirit.

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