

Exploring Marginality in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*: The Traumatic Letters from Queer Immigrants¹

การศึกษาความเป็นชายขอบในเราต่างงดงามแล้วจางหาย:

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Abstract

Receiving several literary awards and nominations, Ocean Vuong's semi-autobiographical novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), explores the themes of race, gender, immigrants, and marginality through the layered hardships of the protagonists - a Vietnamese immigrant and his family in America. The novel has been highly acclaimed by readers for its reflection on profound societal challenges and realistic portrayal of trauma endured by the protagonists. In fact, the critique of trauma in the story has been mostly concentrated on a single dimension, necessitating a multidimensional study of trauma and gender issues. This study centers on the traumatization faced by the protagonist regarding alienation and queerness or homosexuality through the immigrant narratives. The objectives are to investigate the protagonist's traumatization caused by his marginalized status in society, to observe the inheritance of intergenerational trauma processes, and to examine the

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contradiction between queer identity and social norms. This study relies mostly on textual analysis and evidence regarding trauma and queerness. The results show that Vuong's novel critiques challenges and difficulties that marginalized groups encounter. Although American society has frequently been described as welcoming of immigrants and gender diversity, these Vietnamese characters are not truly embraced, indicating a lack of inclusivity.

Keywords: Marginality, Trauma Studies, Queer Studies, Ocean Vuong

บทคัดย่อ

“เราต่างดงมาแล้วจางหาย” นวนิยายกึ่งอัตชีวประวัติของ Ocean Vuong เป็นผลงานประพันธ์ที่ได้รับรางวัลและการเสนอชื่อเข้าชิงรางวัลด้านวรรณกรรมจากหลากหลายสถาบัน ด้วยการชูประเด็นด้านเชื้อชาติ เพศ ผู้อพยพและชนชายขอบผ่านตัวละครหลักที่เป็นผู้อพยพชาวเวียดนามและครอบครัวของเขาที่ต้องเผชิญอุปสรรคจากหลากหลายมิติในอเมริกา ผลงานชิ้นนี้ได้รับการกล่าวขานจากผู้อ่านด้วยการสะท้อนถึงความท้าทายทางสังคมที่ลึกซึ้งและการพรรณนาที่สมจริงถึงตัวละครเอกที่ต้องเผชิญกับบาดแผลทางจิตใจ การวิพากษ์ประเด็นบาดแผลทางจิตใจของผลงานชิ้นนี้ถูกวิพากษ์จากมิตินี้เป็นส่วนใหญ่ จึงจำเป็นที่จะศึกษาประเด็นความเจ็บปวดทางจิตใจและปัญหาทางเพศผ่านมิติที่หลากหลาย งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้มุ่งไปที่ประเด็นบาดแผลทางจิตใจที่ตัวละครเอกที่ต้องเผชิญได้แก่ ความแปลกแยกจากสังคมและความเป็นควีร์หรือรักร่วมเพศผ่านวรรณกรรมของผู้อพยพ จุดประสงค์ของงานวิจัยชิ้นนี้คือการศึกษาด้านบาดแผลทางจิตใจของตัวละครเอกที่เป็นผลมาจากสถานะความเป็นชายขอบ เพื่อศึกษาการสืบทอดบาดแผลทางจิตใจที่ส่งต่อจากรุ่นสู่รุ่น และเพื่อศึกษาความขัดแย้งระหว่างอัตลักษณ์ทางเพศและบรรทัดฐานทางสังคม โดยอาศัยการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลและหลักฐานเกี่ยวกับบาดแผลทางจิตใจและความเป็นควีร์เป็นหลัก ผลการวิเคราะห์เผยให้เห็นว่างานประพันธ์ของ Vuong ได้วิพากษ์ความท้าทายและความลำบากที่ชนชายขอบนั้นต้องเผชิญ แม้ว่าสังคมอเมริกันอันเปรียบเสมือนที่ลี้ภัยจะประกอบไปด้วยผู้อพยพต่างเชื้อชาติและหลากหลายทางเพศ ทว่าผู้อพยพชาวเวียดนามนั้นกลับไม่ได้รับการโอบรับในสังคมอเมริกันอย่างแท้จริง บ่งชี้ถึงการไม่ยอมรับคนทุกกลุ่ม

คำสำคัญ: ความเป็นชายขอบ การศึกษาด้านบาดแผลทางจิตใจ การศึกษาอัตลักษณ์ควีร์ Ocean Vuong

Introduction

The experiences of exclusion, discrimination, inequality, and even dehumanization were imposed upon certain groups of people due to factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, disability, and socio-economic conditions. They are put to the margin of society and into a powerless state which can result in social acceptance and the restriction of access to opportunities; this process of being alienated is regarded as *marginalization*. Marginalization is the way in which society oppresses minority groups such as women, people with disabilities, people of color, homosexuals, indigenous groups, immigrants, people of lower socioeconomic status, and so on, due to those prejudices. Here, the term *marginality* is not used in its economic sense, but in this context, it refers to the relative location of the communities in the geographical, political, social or cultural spaces. Therefore, the margin is often clarified in relation to a center or a connection with a set of ideal values, processes, and resources (Varghese & Kumar, 2022).

For more than half a century, there have been many human rights movements to negotiate their power with the authority and solve marginalized problems, such as the Civil Rights Movement (1954), Stonewall Riots (1969), Black Lives Matter (2013), and Stop Asian Hate (2021). The mentioned minority groups have suffered from being ‘othered’, so they have been always fighting for social acceptance and basic rights. Apart from social and political movements, the lives of marginalized people are also represented in many cultural forms, such as painting, drama, movies, songs, and literature. From the late 1960s through the mid-1990s, Asian American literature was in its emergent phase, as was the term *Asian American*. Not only were the literature and the name emergent, but they were also insurgent, their advocates seeing the literature and the name as expressive of a minority’s urgent political identity (Nguyen, 2015). The Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) was founded in 1968, and it is said to be the first public usage of the term *Asian American* (Kambhampaty, 2020). In addition, the 1950s and 1960s civil rights movement’s success contributed to the early rise in popularity of Asian American literature that followed. Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1978), which received wide acclaim, and Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), as a best-selling novel, have provided rise to other writers (Lim, 2000). The impact of this circumstance passes on to the next generation of Asian American writers. In addition to being Asian American literature, the novel selected for this study belongs to the queer genre. As a result of previous movements on gender equality, books about homosexuality have gradually gained acceptance in society and can be published without restriction.

On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous, written by an Asian American author, Ocean Vuong (2019), explores the idea of marginality through the perspectives of Vietnamese immigrants and homosexuals. Based on his own immigrant family’s experiences, the novel shows their suffering from trauma during the Vietnam War and illustrates the struggles of a marginalized community in America. This semi-autobiography, divided into two parts, is narrated in letters the protagonist writes to his illiterate mother. The first part introduces readers to Little Dog, the protagonist, who is raised by Rose, the mother and Lan, the grandmother who both suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to their experiences during and after the Vietnam War in the late 1960s. Lan was born in the Go Cong District of Vietnam and worked as a prostitute during the war, giving birth to Rose, the daughter of an American soldier. The narrative follows the family migrating to the United States in 1990, and finding home in Hartford, Connecticut, where they struggle as immigrants while negotiating alienated identities with mainstream American culture.

Additionally, the idea of intergenerational trauma is significant in this circumstance since the main protagonist inherits the war trauma from his mother’s violent acts and his grandmother’s recollections of her past in Vietnam. The second part then revolves around homosexuality via the narrator’s journey of self-discovery and social norm confrontation.

Generally, people can experience trauma due to different factors in their lives. However, marginalized groups tend to encounter trauma caused by several more factors compared to people in mainstream culture. The protagonist in this novel suffers traumatization caused by several factors, involving his status as an immigrant, the descendant of war survivors, and being a part of LGBTQ+ group.

Research Questions

1. How is the protagonist traumatized by social obstacles related to his marginalized status?
2. How does the protagonist inherit intergenerational trauma?
3. How can this novel examine the contradiction between queer identity and social norms through the lens of Queer studies?

Literature Review

1. Trauma Studies: Intergenerational Trauma

Trauma studies examine how trauma is reflected in literature and society through an examination of cultural, psychological, and rhetorical aspects. Kurtz (2018) points out that a trauma theory's fundamental assumption provides a method of portraying the experience of trauma in a way that ordinary language cannot. In addition, memory is also an important subject because "studies that focus on memory related to trauma explore how these traumatic memories shape or distort the victims' own perception of the Self and the other" (Alcázar, 2022, p. 7). In addition, with memory as a significant conductor, *intergenerational trauma*, a specific form of psychological trauma, occurs within families and communities. It can be transferred through attachment connections in which a parent has been exposed to relational trauma and has long-term effects for individuals, including a tendency to subsequent trauma (Isobel et al., 2019). Hirsch (2008) furthers intergenerational memory and exemplifies the transmission of postmemory during the Holocaust to the second generation. This transmission of postmemory can exemplify the "second generation" being those who inherit trauma encountered by their ancestry.

In relation to traumatic memory, the Vietnam War, which began in 1955 and ended in 1975, was a major chapter of the Cold War in the Indochina region between the United States and Soviet Union as both players fought to dominate global ideological and geological powers (Minh, 2023). It, in fact, originated a medical conceptualization of the term *post-traumatic stress disorder* (PTSD), which was previously prescribed as "shell shock," "war neurosis," and "soldier's heart" (Crocq & Crocq, 2000). Desir (n.d.) defines Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a mental health condition that happens when individuals have experienced or observed traumatic incidents such as disasters, terrible incidents, terrorist attacks, war and conflict, rape and sexual assault, past trauma, violence between lovers, and bullying. The way victims cannot eliminate traumatic memories in the past from their mind and suffer it although the actual incidents have already ended can be explained as post-traumatic stress disorder as seen in war survivors. People with PTSD may experience nightmares and flashbacks of traumatic events, avoid any reminders of the traumatic incidents, and have negative thoughts and problems with memory, concentrating, and sleeping (Mayo Clinic, 2022). According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2024), there are five criteria for the testing and diagnosis of PTSD. Patients who experience at least one re-experiencing symptom, one avoidance symptom, two arousal and reactivity symptoms, and two cognition and mood symptoms for at least one month would be diagnosed with PTSD. Although symptoms may begin within a month, they may not appear for years after the incident. Hence, the interconnection of trauma studies and intergenerational trauma can elucidate psychological elements and their contributions toward characterization in fiction. Eastman (2003) reveals that

PTSD is found in literary works like Heinemann's *Paco's Story* (1989), depicting an aftermath of the Vietnam War experiences.

2. Queer Studies

The exploration of trauma studies and marginalization intersects with the evolving field of Queer Studies, which critically examines the constructs of gender, sexuality, and identity within the broader social framework. The history of queer theory is intertwined with queer activism, and it is both a historical movement and a transformative force that is altering the way that gender and sexuality are perceived in academic fields as well as, increasingly, in the public sphere. The term *queer theory* was first used by Teresa de Lauretis who proposed studying gay and lesbian sexualities on their own terms, rather than as variations of heterosexuality. She continued by arguing that gay and lesbian sexualities should be viewed as forms of countering prevailing discourses and opposition to cultural homogenization (Amory et al., 2022)

For Somerville (2020), "queer theory's most original move was to describe itself as a form of "subjectless critique that, unlike the identity knowledge, could not be defined by its object of study" (p.18). Queer theory emerged out of the fields of lesbian, gay, and gender studies and feminist ideas shape the queer thinking. Thus, one measure of feminism's impact on queer theory might positively be its sustained attention to gender. More fundamentally, queer theory builds on the feminist, claiming that gender is a social construct (Jagose, 1996). In addition, the beginning of queer theory was influenced by three major figures through which the field was conceived: Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and Michel Foucault. They all wrote their most canonical queer theoretical texts before the inception of a field (Somerville, 2020). McCann and Monaghan (2020), compare the works of Butler and Sedgwick as follows:

Both scholars took queer as a means of destabilizing, unsettling, revealing, subverting, opening and questioning established norms around categories of sex, gender, sexuality and identity. They sought to reveal the mechanisms through which these categories are naturalized in Western culture. Butler offered a way to deconstruct the relationship between sex and gender, demonstrating how both are produced as effects of the heterosexual matrix. Sedgwick, on the other hand, focused largely on the relationship between gender and sexuality. Her work demonstrates that sexuality is comprised of many characteristics (not just gender of one's "orientation"), challenging the notion that sexual identity is supposed to organise into a seamless unitary category. (p.150)

According to both thinkers, the term *queer* can be used to openly challenge, expose, subvert, and disturb conventional conventions surrounding sex, gender, sexuality, and identity categories. Foucault, on the other hand, exemplifies the paranoid criticism that Sedgwick reviews as dominant within politicized humanistic scholarship. Foucault proposes three essential terms within queer theory: sexuality, normativity, and biopolitics. For Foucault, sexuality is a key switch point of modern biopower (Somerville, 2020).

3. Ocean Vuong: Immigrant Narratives and Previous Studies

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous has achieved significant acclaim, including its status as an instant bestseller on The New York Times list. The novel has been translated into numerous languages, including Spanish, French, German, Italian, and Thai. This widespread recognition has prompted extensive critical analysis, particularly regarding the novel's poetic prose style, its portrayal of the immigrant experience in America, and its exploration of queer identity, generational differences, and the impact of trauma on families.

Since Vuong's masterpiece is a story of immigrants, it can be categorized in the literary genre as "immigrant narratives". Rothe and Pumariega (2020) define it as a constructive means to help immigrants therapize traumatic conditions and losses related to migration, and to manage with the process of conversion of identity. For example, a literary work such as Narrative of Diaspora (2013) by Walter S. H. Lim portrays the experiences of Chinese immigrants, demonstrating how early Chinese Americans negotiated their identity with the mainstream culture in America.

A significant body of research focuses on On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous (2019) in relation to gender and societal norms. Slopek (2021) in "Queer Masculinities: Gender Roles, the Abject, and Bottomhood in Ocean Vuong's On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous" examines how Vuong uses queerness to explore cultural boundaries and gender roles. This study highlights the central queer relationship and character connections, analyzing language use, moments of coming out, and the blending of gender roles to understand the novel's representation of queer identities.

Further research such as Diamanti's (2023) "Testimonies of Trauma and Possibilities of Healing in Ocean Vuong's On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous," explores intergenerational trauma, particularly within the context of the Vietnamese American immigrant experience during the Vietnam War. Diamantis investigates the provocative nature of trauma and the potential for healing through the protagonist's epistolary narrative, using letters addressed to his mother. Focusing on the voiceless, Eren (2022) in "'Fruit of Violence': The Subaltern Refugee and the Intersection of Oppressions in Ocean Vuong's On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous" explores how Vuong, as a queer, second-generation Vietnamese American, portrays the complex intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality. This research emphasizes the intersectional trauma experienced by Vietnamese refugees in America and highlights the transformative potential of addressing resentment through letter-writing.

While these studies analyzed specific aspects of On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous, combining aspects such as the immigrant narrative, gender identity, and intergenerational trauma could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the protagonist's life conditions and contribute to raising awareness about marginality in contemporary American society.

Research Methodology

The data was collected from Vuong's On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous (2019) as a case study by examining the social contexts of the novel, theoretical frameworks, and previous research studies. The textual analysis is conducted on this novel with the integration of and concepts regarding marginalization, immigrant narratives, trauma studies, and queer studies. The first research question will be investigated of how the protagonists negotiate with

their marginalized status. To clarify the second question, psychological information is applied to examine the inheritance of intergenerational trauma. Lastly, the third question will be answered mostly based on how queerness is represented in the novel.

Findings and Discussion

1. The Cruel Society: To Be Targeted, To Be Excluded

In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Ocean Vuong highlights the painful reality of being marginalized, especially language barriers faced by immigrant youngsters like Little Dog. His challenges with the English language are about more than simply communication; they are also about identity, belonging, and the dreadful isolation that comes with being different. Vuong demonstrates how words may not only exclude, but also injure an individual, particularly in a society that is quick to criticize people who do not fit its model. One of the most crucial moments in the novel occurs when Little Dog, at about nine years old, is bullied by other children on the school bus. Little Dog tried to hide and avoid them even before they started bullying him. This suggests that he had been bullied before or lacked confidence in his language skills. His attempts to avoid attention failed, and as the bully torments him: “*Speak English... Don't you ever say nothin'? Don't you speak English?*” (Vuong, 2019, p. 24). The school bus, an ordinary setting, becomes a battleground where identity and survival are at stake. This trauma is compounded by the intersection of his sexual orientation and immigrant status. The taunts he endures are not just about language; they cut deeper since the English language seems to be a weapon used by mainstream culture people to oppress those whose mother tongue is not English. This scene is more than a childhood memory; it is a reflection of the broader societal rejection that many immigrants and LGBTQ+ individuals face.

Limited English language proficiency hindered communication and isolated Little Dog, leading to being ridiculed and excluded by other children who saw him as inferior. The intertwining of linguistic, identity and racial issues means that immigrant youth are frequently marginalized, facing discrimination and rejection, and are at higher risk of bullying (Maynard et al., 2016). Although he told his mother about the incident, she couldn't protect him due to her own lack of English proficiency, highlighting the problem of language barriers for immigrants in America. Another example highlights the impact of language barriers as follows:

The time I [Little Dog] tried to teach you to read the way Mrs. Callahan taught me, my lips to your ear, my hand on yours, the words moving underneath the shadows we made. But that act (a son teaching his mother) reversed our hierarchies and with it our identities, which in the country, were already tenuous and tethered. After the stutters and false starts, the sentence warped or locked in your throat, after the embarrassment of failure, you slammed the book shut. “I don't need to read”, you said, your assimilate expression crunched, and pushed away from the table. “I can see—it's gotten me this far, hasn't it?” (Vuong, 2019, p. 5)

Vuong illustrates the struggle of language barrier that the immigrants face. Little Dog's attempt to teach his mother to read highlights the difficulty of embracing a new culture and language.

Despite the necessity of learning English, Rose rejects this notion, stating, “*I don’t need to read*” (Vuong, 2019, p. 5). This refusal underscores the complexity of the immigrant experience, where preserving cultural identity clashes with the pressure to conform with the majority. Rose’s resistance reflects issues within marginalized communities, including age limitations on learning, beliefs in Asian seniority, and the desire to preserve cultural heritage.

2. The Repeating Wounds: Intergenerational Trauma

Being a descendant of war survivors and raised in hardship throughout his childhood, Little Dog indirectly inherits war trauma, as his grandmother Lan and Rose sometimes display symptoms of PTSD—in other words, he is a victim of intergenerational trauma. A significant indication can be observed when he expresses the feeling of endurance growing up in this family, which can link to the process of intergenerational trauma: “*When can I say your name and have it mean only your name and not what you left behind?*” (Vuong, 2019, p. 12) The question implies his despondency living among traumatized guardians; it suggests that the speaker, Little Dog, wants to know when he can call his mother’s name without her war experiences attached to it. To say her name in this context may remind her of memories during the war, in other words, a flashback. There is a circumstance that indicates how flashback can evoke the protagonist’s traumatic experiences in the readers’ mind, which resembles Little Dog calling his mother’s name. On page 4, for instance, Little Dog shouts Boom! and Rose becomes panicky suddenly. He, as a boy, cannot tease his mother while it is a regular practice in other families. In addition, it imprisons Little Dog and his family to live traumatized. For that reason, a flashback of wartime reminds Rose of cruel memories and brings Little Dog the feeling of despondency. Thereupon, the question possibly contains a trauma-related element that shows how the family lives with trauma; the name called by a son may be embroiled with past memories that still linger in her mind, imprisoning them with the past.

Apart from flashbacks of wartime, Little Dog witnessing violent behaviors caused by panic can also lead to traumatization. According to Atwoli et al. (2015), “it is possible that witnessing may trigger other psychological problems in vulnerable individuals” (p. 1236). When Rose, for instance, is in panic; “The time with the kitchen knife—the one you picked up, then put down, shaking, saying quietly, ‘*Get out. Get out*’” (Vuong, 2019, p. 9). Little Dog certainly receives the image of dread, establishing an incident that can cause negative psychological outcomes. It can be inferred that similar circumstances can occur periodically, becoming a collection of perceived violent images. Similarly, when Rose is triggered by an object or a sound that reminds her of a chapter of memories during wartime, “[t]hat 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” (Vuong, 2019, p. 4), it possibly arouses another possibility of traumatic outcomes to Little Dog by witnessing her panicking the same way as he perceives Rose holding a knife in panic. Hence, the tendency for trauma transmission via such periodic behaviors from Rose to Little Dog can be increased, leading to another means for him to inherit intergenerational trauma.

In general, storytelling and family are connected elements of familial traditions. Families transmit a legacy of memories from one generation to the next by narrating both their best and worst life stories (Kiser et al., 2010). In the novel, storytelling of family seems to cause a negative outcome, as the family history is traumatic rather than desirable, especially when those stories are conveyed by tellers with PTSD. Livanou et al. (2023) posit that “[l]istening to people talk about their trauma experiences involves indirect exposure to trauma and can trigger emotional distress” (p.243). For instance, Little Dog mentions that “*Lan, through her stories, was also traveling in a spiral. As I listened, there would be moments when the story would change not much, just a minuscule detail*” (Vuong, 2019, pp. 27-28). His observation towards minor changes of storytelling by Lan indicates the frequency she tells stories about the war to Little Dog. It can be explained that “anyone who engages empathetically with survivors of traumatic incidents, torture, and material relating to their trauma, is potentially affected, including doctors and other health professionals” (British Medical Association, 2022). Listening to or hearing traumatic events is another form of Little Dog receiving intergenerational trauma. In addition, the fragmentation of Lan’s storytelling reflects how intergenerational trauma affects an individual and it is discernible in the unchronological letters, challenging traditional semi-autobiographical writing. This storytelling approach reveals how the past continues to influence the present, highlighting the emotional scars left by war.

3. “I Gave Birth to a Healthy, Normal Boy”: Challenges of Gender Identity

In addition to struggles with the immigrant experiences, Vuong illustrates the lives of LGBTQ+ people through the perspectives of Little Dog and his lover, Trevor. They helped each other with sexual self-discovery at a time when there was a strong hatred and heavy prejudice towards LGBTQ+ people. The bond between Little Dog and Trevor grows stronger as they find comfort in their shared experiences of abuse on the tobacco farm. However, their friendship becomes more complicated when they discover their mutual sexual desire during their teenage years, challenging societal norms in the 60s-70s that did not accept homosexuality as he said: “*Because the sunset, like survival, exists only on the verge of its own disappearing. To be gorgeous, you must first be seen, but to be seen allows you to be hunted.*” (Vuong, 2019, p. 238). The quote reflects Little Dog, who grapples with his queer identity—coming out as a queer demands immense bravery, as it entails confronting potential prejudice and violence. However, it also represents their humanity, which shows a rejection of submitting to fear or shame. Here, the journey of self-discovery can be compared to watching a sunset, where there are moments of both light and darkness, representing the highs and lows of reflection. In such a way, the sun eventually sets, LGBTQ+ people who explore their identity experience a mix of acceptance and rejection. They face difficult choices and fear how society will judge them, yet they still desire to be accepted.

On the other hand, Trevor grapples with the fear of being hunted by social judgment and internalized homophobia. Villines (2021) defines *internalized homophobia* as the adoption of negative societal views about one’s own LGBTQ+ identity, leading to feelings of shame, self-hatred, or denial. This often stems from growing up in a society that stigmatizes or discriminates against LGBTQ+ individuals. Trevor’s struggle to accept his own identity

exemplifies this phenomenon when he asks Little Dog: “*Please tell me I am not, he said, I am not a faggot. Am I? Am I? Are you?*” (Vuong, 2019, p. 155) This quote delves into the complexities of identity, specifically Trevor’s inner battle with societal expectations around sexuality. Trevor’s plea reflects the challenges many homosexuals experience in accepting their true identities among societal judgment and derogatory labels. Despite finding solace in his bond with Little Dog, Trevor’s journey is fraught with internal conflict as he struggles to reconcile his desires with the expectations placed upon him as a man.

Being LGBTQ+ is discriminated against by people in society as it is evident when Little Dog and Trevor cannot reveal their intimate relationship or sexual identity. However, Little Dog decides to develop his LGBTQ+ identity by coming out to and telling his mother that he likes boys. Rose stays silent after hearing her son’s inwardness, then she promptly asks him about his dressing preference, if he is going to wear a dress. She fears that her son will get killed for dressing up as a girl because she sees the news about gays getting attacked publicly in America. Little Dog, to console his mother, promises that he will not wear a dress, and he has never worn it before, but it appears to be a lie. In fact, he used to wear it when he was young, and was called by ugly names like freak, fairy, and fag. Apparently, he knows the negative effects and dangers of dressing as a girl, but he wears a dress again when grows up. It happens when he is with Trevor, which he explains as a feeling of safety; they are afraid of nobody, not even themselves. Little Dog performs his queerness in a way that does not align with social stereotypes relating to his gender by dressing up like a girl. However, it is contrary to his will as he cannot openly express his femininity in public because of the limited freedom of gender expression. Inferred by Little Dog’s condition, LGBTQ+ people in the society he lives in are still experiencing gender prejudice, discrimination, and the threat of violence. Queer people’s self-expression is limited by the norms and values of society by being discriminated against and criminalized. For Sears (2015), “Queer theory presented the cross-dressing figure as a metaphor for the instability and fluidity of gender and sexual identities” (p.8). However, Sears (2023) also states that during the nineteenth century, anti-cross-dressing laws operated as flexible tools for policing a wide range of gender transgressions. Moreover, during the mid-19th to mid-20th century, some US regions passed laws that forbade public appearances in “disguise” or “masquerade.” These laws are commonly known as masquerade laws to threaten, harass, and silence homosexual people. People who were arrested could have their name published in the newspaper so that they have a criminal record, potentially destroying their futures (Baska, 2023).

Furthermore, at the end of the letters, another social judgment towards LGBTQ+ people is revealed through the question that Rose asks her son: “[W]hen did this all start? I gave birth to a healthy, normal boy. I know that. When?” (Vuong, 2019, p.131). She is strongly convinced that her son’s act of coming out of the closet is tantamount to social illness. This scene recalls the general public’s attitudes towards gay people in America during the 50s-60s because homosexuality was considered a mental disorder. McCann and Monaghan (2020) state that gender and sexuality have historically been pathologized, especially in discourses related to medicine, psychiatry, and psychology. According to Drescher (2015), “theories of Pathology regard adult homosexuality as a disease, a condition deviating from “normal,” heterosexual development” (para. 4).

Besides, Trevor also shares Rose's belief that homosexuality is an illness as he asks Little Dog if he will be gay forever because he [Trevor] will stop being gay in a few years (p.188). Trevor presumably thinks he is sick from an infection that might cause sexual deviance. Undeniably, Trevor is a homosexual, which makes his statement more complicated than Rose's. The heterosexual norm that stigmatizes gay people and pushes him to suffer from internalized homophobia; thus, he is afraid of negative attitudes towards gay men and the expectations of masculinity. As a result, he refuses to accept his queer identity. In other words, the above excerpt is regarded as sexual fluidity that can be experienced by anyone with any sexual orientation identity, including people identifying as a gay, or heterosexual. According to Diamond (2016) the ability for situation-dependent flexibility in sexual responsiveness, or sexual fluidity, is what enables people to experience variations in their desire for same- or other-sex interactions throughout both short- and long-term periods. In a few years, Trevor may no longer be attracted to men, or he may be attracted to both men and women.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the intersectionality of trauma in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* to shed light on how the author utilizes an individual's painful past to complicate his marginalized status as a homosexual Vietnamese immigrant. For instance, Rose's warning against her son's coming out as a homosexual, fearing that this would lead to an extreme hatred and fatal punishment, reflects the rejection of hostile American society in the 1970-80s. His alienated status as an immigrant also culminates in the discrimination of Asians as seen in their attempt to blend in with the American society to establish their mixed identity. By analyzing the trauma experienced by the characters, particularly Little Dog, and its effects on their personal identities and relationships, the research employed trauma theory and queer framework to offer a nuanced understanding of Vuong's work.

The study argues that Vuong's portrayal of trauma reveals the profound psychological and emotional impacts on LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly in the context of family dynamics, societal rejection, and homophobia. The findings highlight how trauma shapes the characters' identities and their struggles with self-acceptance and societal acceptance. With the form of unchronological letters that challenge the fragmented narratives of war memory, Vuong's depiction of trauma underscores the complexity of the characters' experiences and their responses to societal acceptance/ rejection and familial pressures. Further research could explore additional aspects of trauma in Vuong's work, such as a comparative analysis with other literary representations of trauma in LGBTQ+ literature or an examination of how Vuong's portrayal of trauma intersects with historical and cultural contexts. Future studies might also investigate the role of trauma in shaping narrative structures and character development in similar contemporary works.

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