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Postcolonial Trauma in Vietnamese American Fiction

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Zásady pro vypracování

Závěrečná diplomová práce se bude věnovat tématu postkoloniálního trauma ve vybraných románech vietnamsko-amerických autorů, jmenovitě *Na Zemi jsme na okamžik nádherní* (2019) Oceana Vuonga a *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003) autorky lê th di m thúyové. Oba romány budou náležitě porovnány, jelikož jsou v jejich jádru témata identity, rodinných vztahů a jejich ovlivnění válkou ve Vietnamu, a také postkoloniální trauma a PTSD. Oba autoři budou zasazeni do vhodného literárního a historicko-kulturního kontextu. Studentka také pojedná nad poetickým jazykem a nelineárním vyprávěním obou románů. Výběr vhodné postkoloniální kritiky bude konzultován s vedoucí. Své analýzy bude studentka vhodně dokládat ukázkami z primárních zdrojů, a také je bude konfrontovat s vhodnými sekundárními zdroji.

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Prohlašuji:

Práci s názvem Postcolonial Trauma in Vietnamese American Fiction jsem vypracovala samostatně. Veškeré literární prameny a informace, které jsem v práci využila, jsou uvedeny v seznamu použité literatury.

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Lucie Vokálová v. r.

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ANNOTATION

This diploma thesis explores the theme of postcolonial trauma in Vietnamese American fiction, focusing on the novels *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong and *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* by Lê Thi Diem Thúy. The thesis provides a brief overview of Vietnamese literature and immigration and places both authors within a relevant cultural and historical context. It also outlines key concepts of postcolonial criticism, with particular attention to postcolonial trauma. The two novels are analyzed mainly in terms of war-related trauma (including PTSD and its intergenerational effects), hybridity, subalternity, and otherness. Furthermore, the thesis examines the use of figurative language and non-linear narrative structures as tools for expressing trauma. The aim of this thesis is to show how postcolonial trauma is articulated in different ways within Vietnamese American fiction.

KEY WORDS

Vietnamese Americans, *OEWBG*, *The Gangster*, trauma

NÁZEV

Postkoloniální trauma ve vietnamsko-americké beletrii

ANOTACE

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá tématem postkoloniálního traumatu ve vietnamsko-americké beletrii, se zaměřením na romány *Na Zemi jsme na okamžik nádherní* od Oceana Vuonga a *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* od Lê Thi Diem Thúy. Práce podává stručný přehled vietnamské literatury a imigrace a zasazuje oba autory do příslušného kulturního a historického kontextu. Dále představuje klíčové pojmy postkoloniální kritiky, se zaměřením na postkoloniální trauma. Oba romány jsou analyzovány především z hlediska traumatu spojeného s válkou (včetně PTSD a jeho mezigeneračních dopadů), hybridity, subalternity a jinakosti. Práce se rovněž zabývá použitím obrazného jazyka a nelineární narativní struktury jako prostředků pro vyjádření traumatu. Cílem této práce je ukázat, jakým způsobem je postkoloniální trauma různorodě vyjádřeno ve vietnamsko-americké literatuře.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Američané vietnamského původu, *OEWBG*, *The Gangster*, trauma

Table of Contents

Introduction

This thesis explores the representation of postcolonial trauma in Vietnamese American fiction, focusing specifically on Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and Lê Thi Diem Thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. For the sake of consistency and clarity, the titles will be abbreviated throughout: *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* as *OEWBG*, and *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* as *The Gangster*.

OEWBG and *The Gangster* are two important works in contemporary Vietnamese American literature that center on the lived consequences of war and displacement. *The Gangster* tells the story of a young Vietnamese girl and her family as they try to build a new life in the United States after fleeing Vietnam. *OEWBG* tells the story of a Vietnamese American boy named Little Dog who writes a letter to his illiterate mother, reflecting on their family's past, their migration from Vietnam to the United States, and his personal journey through trauma, identity, and queer love.

Both novels foreground the immigrant experience, but go beyond traditional refugee narratives to capture the long-lasting psychological and intergenerational impact of the Vietnam War. Through poetic and non-linear storytelling, they offer complex portrayals of identity formation, familial relationships, and the difficulties of articulating trauma, since both novels aim to explore how trauma is experienced, remembered, and transmitted. In particular, the novels highlight the intergenerational transmission of trauma through silence, storytelling, memory, and emotional expression, or its absence.

The first chapter provides an overview of Vietnamese immigration to the United States and Vietnamese American literature. Vietnamese immigration is explored following the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, which put an end to the Vietnam War. Similarly, Vietnamese American literature is also discussed following the year 1975. Also, the broad term Asian American literature is explored. Consequently, Vietnamese American literature, together with the term 1.5 generation, is introduced. Lastly, Lê Thi Diem Thúy and Ocean Vuong are briefly introduced as well.

The second chapter deals with postcolonial criticism and postcolonial trauma theory. Starting with a brief introduction to postcolonial criticism, this chapter explains the difference between the terms post-colonialism and postcolonialism, while also introducing the main representatives in the postcolonial field, such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. The second part of the second chapter focuses on defining postcolonial trauma. First, the broad definition of trauma is introduced, focusing mostly on the work formulated by

Cathy Caruth, one of the leading figures in trauma studies. Then, the relationship between history and fiction is explored while focusing on the connection between trauma and history. Lastly, the difference between trauma studies and postcolonial trauma is explained since postcolonial trauma theory is an interdisciplinary framework that explores the intersections between trauma theory and postcolonial studies.

Chapter three explores the events regarding the Vietnam War in more detail, as well as PTSD and intergenerational impact. Regarding the Vietnam War, reeducation camps as well as the diaspora following 1975, referred to as the boat people, are to be mentioned. Moreover, the poverty that forced people to flee Vietnam is briefly discussed. Concerning PTSD, the general definition is introduced, as well as two relevant symptoms, particularly uncontrollable re-experiencing of the traumatic event and avoidance symptoms. Furthermore, the subchapter on intergenerational impact explores different approaches, including direct storytelling, violence, and silence. Moreover, this subchapter includes the exploration of figurative language in both novels. Particularly, the symbols of butterflies were chosen as they represent generational impact in *OEWBG* and identity in *The Gangster*. The discussion of these symbols is included in this chapter since it serves as a thematic bridge that leads to chapter four, which discusses hybridity.

Chapter four focuses on the concept of hybridity introduced by Homi K. Bhabha. First, the theoretical concept is explored, then specific examples from both novels are provided. Firstly, this chapter discusses how non-linear storytelling contributes to the notion of hybrid identity in both novels. Moreover, it also discusses how non-linear storytelling captures the fragmented nature of trauma in *OEWBG*. This section also explores the significance of naming in *The Gangster*, focusing on the fact that the narrator remains unnamed, which is compared to her father's repeated struggle to spell his name in English.

Chapter five deals with language, particularly how language functions or fails to function as a tool of communication in the family. Two terms relevant to postcolonial criticism are to be introduced – abrogation and appropriation. The concept of appropriation is then used in the analytical part with relevant examples. Regarding the communication in the family, it is explored how trauma distorts the function of language in both novels, both through absence and avoidance.

Chapter six explores the concept of subalternity by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and otherness by Edward Said. This chapter is divided from the previous chapter dealing with language in order to maintain a clear arrangement. However, the concepts of language are interconnected with this chapter for the sake of analysis. The concepts of subalternity and

otherness are introduced simultaneously since the characters are often found in a subaltern position, which makes them viewed as the Other. In the analytical part, topics such as bullying, whiteness, and the importance of English are to be discussed.

The goal of this thesis is to capture how the above-mentioned concepts, including war-related trauma, PTSD, intergenerational impact, language, subalternity, and hybridity, are portrayed in both novels. Where appropriate, the concepts are compared in various contexts. Moreover, the contribution of non-linear storytelling and figurative language to trauma narratives is to be explored.

1. Vietnamese Immigration and Literature

To introduce Vietnamese American literature, it is important to provide an essential background on Vietnamese immigration to the United States. It is vital to note that the following text is just a brief summary of Vietnamese immigration to the USA in order to present a relevant historical context. xu

Wenying Xu, a professor at Florida Atlantic University, states that Vietnamese immigration to the USA has a relatively recent history. Before 1975, the majority of Vietnamese people living in the USA were the spouses and children of US soldiers serving in Vietnam. The first wave of significant Vietnamese immigration began following the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, which put an end to the Vietnam War.[1] Monique T. D. Truong, a Vietnamese American author, specifies that in April 1975, the United States saw the largest and fastest-moving refugee influx in its history when over 86,000 South Vietnamese arrived within a few days.[2] Xu adds that altogether 125,000 Vietnamese left their home country in 1975 and came to work at US military stations in the Philippines, Wake Island, Hawaii, Guam, and Thailand as a part of *Operation New Life*. Consequently, they were sent to the four American refugee facilities: Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, and Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania. For those who escaped from Vietnam and Cambodia, the Indochina Migration and Refugee Act of 1975 established a program of domestic relocation aid. In addition, more Vietnamese started leaving their home country in 1977 due to the hardship and terror caused by the Communist regime of the nation. Therefore, there were about two million Vietnamese who left their homeland in tiny, crammed boats and became known as the boat people. While they were waiting to be accepted by other countries, the majority of them were housed in refugee camps in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Hong Kong.[3]

This significant influx not only altered the demographic landscape of the United States but also challenged prevailing American perceptions of Vietnam and its people. Truong explains that the majority of Americans did not view Vietnam "as a self-defined country […], and Vietnam, North, and South, as countries defined by military conflict did not exist until the U.S. involvement in the haze of the mid-1960s."[4] Truong further comments that as a result,

[1] Wenying Xu, *Historical Dictionary of Asian American Literature and Theater* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2012), 12.
[2] Monique T.D. Truong, "Vietnamese American Literature," in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 221.
[3] Xu, *Historical Dictionary*, 12-13.
[4] Truong, "Vietnamese American Literature," 220.

before the fall of Saigon in 1975, there was not much public interest in the Vietnamese and Vietnamese American communities living in the US. This lack of attention meant that their experiences were rarely documented or studied.[5] Although Vietnamese American literature existed prior to 1975, it did not receive significant attention from the broader public or literary scholars. Only in recent years has there been a growing recognition and discussion of Vietnamese American authors. Therefore, this chapter does not discuss the precise year of Vietnamese American literary emergence but starts with the year 1975, which "stands as a popular signifier for fictional initial entrance and incorporation of people of Vietnamese descent as a racial ethnic group into the social fiber of the United States,"[6] as Truong states.

Following the discussion of Vietnamese immigration, it is important to contextualize the novels analyzed in this thesis within the respective literary context. Xu claims that despite the apparent clarity of the notion of Asian America, the concept of Asian American literature is not self-explanatory. Several significant difficulties have been brought up in discussions over the kind of writing and authors that should be labeled as Asian American.[7] This issue is addressed in *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* by Frank Chin et al. where the authors define Asian American literature as "Filipino–, Chinese–, and Japanese–Americans, American born and raised, who got their China and Japan from the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books…"[8] This definition highlights the exclusion of many Asian American minorities already present in the US. Xu explains that it is because Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino American writers and critics were the most well-established ethnic communities up until the mid-1990s and thus dominated Asian American literature and related studies at the time.[9] However, this perspective shifted in 1997 when editors Elaine H. Kim and Lisa Lowe responded to concerns from underrepresented groups by publishing a special issue titled *Positions*, which, as they state, advocates for "the creation and maintenance of solidarity across racial and national boundaries."[10] Xu comments that this issue of *Positions* signaled a shift from predominantly East Asian American literature to Pan-Asian American literature, incorporating diverse voices from recent immigrants from South and Southeast Asia.[11]

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[5] Truong, "Vietnamese American Literature," 220.
[6] Truong, "Vietnamese American Literature," 220.
[7] Xu, *Historical Dictionary*, 1.
[8] Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, Shawn Wong, and Tara Fickle, "Preface," in *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers,* 3rd ed., ed. Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), xi-xii.
[9] Xu, *Historical Dictionary*, 2.
[10] Elaine H. Kim and Lisa Lowe, *Positions: New Formations, New Questions: Asian American Studies* 5.2 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), xi.
[11] Xu, *Historical Dictionary*, 2.

Xu further elaborates that Asian American literature began as a protest against socioeconomic discrimination, political alienation, and cultural stereotypes. Its authors are often inspired by the history of their participation in the construction of the transcontinental railroad, the establishment of economies in California and Hawaii, legalized exclusion and internment as well as social and cultural marginalization in America. In addition, Asian American literature explores concerns of what it means to be an American, taking into account their historical context.[12] More specifically, the early Vietnamese American authors published autobiographies or memoirs, as Xu states.[13] Michele Janette, a professor at Kansas State University, specifies that these biographies "[recount] history as the authors lived it, portraying lives in which national, global, and personal issues are inextricable from one another."[14] Xu adds that their writings share their experiences of the war and the camps for refugees. One of these first publications is the memoir published by a Vietnamese American writer – Nhuong Huynh, *The Land I Lost* (1982). Later memoirs include, for example, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989) by Phung Thi Le Ly Hayslip, and *South Wind Changing* (1994) by Jade Ngoc Quang Huynh.[15]

Xu talks about another generation of writers that she calls the younger generation – authors who either came as young children or were born in the USA. The majority of people from this generation wrote plays, poems, and novels. Their recurring themes are, for instance, war, memory, race, sexuality, and colonialism. Among those well-known authors are Lê Thi Diem Thúy, Hoa Nguyen, Monique Truong, Bich Minh Nguyen, and Lan Cao.[16] Janette further specifies the term and labels these authors as members of 1.5. generation.[17] Rubén G. Rumbaut, a professor of Sociology at the University of California, states that the term 1.5 generation refers to those who came to the USA in the age range of 6 to 12 years old. These individuals learned (or started to learn) to read and write in their native language, but their education is largely completed in the USA.[18] Janette relates the concept to Vietnamese American literature and further explains that writers of the 1.5 and second-generation Vietnamese Americans in the 21st century contribute to literature not only to assert their cultural identities and make their voices heard, but also as skilled literary professionals. Their work covers a diverse range of genres and

[12] Xu, *Historical Dictionary*, 2.
[13] Xu, *Historical Dictionary*, 13.
[14] Michele Janette, "Vietnamese American Literature," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (30 July 2018): 9.
[15] Xu, *Historical Dictionary*, 13.
[16] Xu, *Historical Dictionary*, 277.
[17] Janette, "Vietnamese American Literature," 10.
[18] Rubén G. Rumbaut "Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts: Decomposing the Immigrant First and Second Generations in the United States," *The International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (2004): 1167.

forms, including conventional novels, experimental fiction, children's picture books, adult graphic novels, theatrical productions combined with elements of rock music, martial arts, and pop culture, as well as hybrid works that blend poetry, song, and photography. In addition, their narratives incorporate a range from historical fiction to hard-boiled detective stories as well.[19] Monique Truong is often recognized as one of the most prominent contemporary Vietnamese American writers. Nina ha, a professor at Virginia Tech University, acknowledges that while Truong is best known for her critically acclaimed debut novel *The Book of Salt*, published in 2003, her earlier contribution, titled *Vietnamese American Literature*, to King-Kok Cheung's 1997 edited volume *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, stands out as one of the few critical essays to engage with the emerging field of Vietnamese American literature produced between 1975 and 1990.[20]

Returning to the topic of Vietnamese American literature in general, Janette claims that at the beginning of the millennium, there was a shift from the narratives of wartime life to the recollections of the traumatic aftermath of Vietnam's reunification. Also, Vietnamese American literature has undergone a form and content diversification in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, going beyond direct engagement with the Vietnam War and the experience of refugees. This shift has resulted in work that rewrites Western canonical characters and genres, challenges conventional literary forms and social identities, and examines US racialization, consumerism, and popular culture.[21]

Because the lives of the authors often shape Asian American literature and the presented themes, this thesis includes essential bibliographical information about both Lê Thi Diem Thúy and Ocean Vuong**.** Seiwoong Oh, a professor in the English department at Rider University, states that Lê Thi Diem Thúy was born in South Vietnam in 1972. Thuy and her father departed the country in 1978 on a fishing boat, and they were eventually sent to a refugee camp in Singapore to await resettlement after being saved by an American navy ship. Both Thuy's older siblings tragically died, and she always felt their presence – a loss that is reflected in her writing.[22] Nina Ha further explains that Thuy commonly employs the water motif to represent exile and loss, including the themes of family, nation, cultural heritage, and identity.[23] S. Oh adds that *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003) is a partly autobiographical novel that

[19] Janette, "Vietnamese American Literature," 10.
[20] Nina Ha, "Lê Thi Diem Thúy," in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Asian American Literature*, ed. Huang Guiyou (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), 930.
[21] Janette, "Vietnamese American Literature," 1.
[22] Seiwoong Oh, *Encyclopedia of Asian-American Literature* (New York: Facts On File, 2007), 160.
[23] Nina Ha, "Lê Thi Diem Thúy," 593.

tells the experience of a nameless narrator, and the novel has also received praise for its precise and poetic language. The book examines an uncommon facet of the Vietnam War: the impact of exile and the immense loss of the Vietnamese people.[24] According to the reviewer Paul Baumann, it is "a refugee's story – a story of Vietnam and America, of youthful yearning and adult resignation, of unimaginable loss and of the tenacity of memory."[25]

Turning now to Ocean Vuong, whose literary style similarly reflects elements of personal and cultural history. According to the website *Poets*, Ocean Vuong was born on October 14, 1988, in Saigon, and immigrated to the U.S. at the age of two and grew up in Hartford, Connecticut. He got a BA from Brooklyn College, where he won the Academy of American Poets College Prize, and later completed an MFA at New York University.[26] The website *Bibliography* further argues that Vuong is widely recognized for his 2019 debut novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, a New York Times bestseller that has been translated into 36 languages. *OEWBG* is framed as a letter from a son to his mother, written with the understanding that she cannot read it. The novel earned widespread critical praise and was awarded the New England Book Award for Fiction in 2019, strengthening Vuong's reputation as one of the most notable writers of the decade. In addition to his novel, Vuong has published two poetry collections: *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016), which received the T.S. Eliot Prize, and *Time is a Mother* (2022), where he explores the grief and emotional aftermath of his mother's death from breast cancer in 2019. Currently, Vuong is an associate professor in the MFA Program for Poets and Writers at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.[27] While both Lê's and Vuong's works draw from aspects of their personal experiences, it is essential to note that these narratives, though deeply personal, are works of fiction. The fictional characters should not be confused with the autobiographical elements; rather, these stories should be approached as crafted literary works, where memory, imagination, and artistic expression intertwine.

[24] Oh, *Encyclopedia of Asian-American Literature*, 90.
[25] Paul Baumann, "Washing Time Away," The New York Times, May 25, 2003.
[26] "Ocean Vuong," Poets, accessed May 7, 2025, https://poets.org/poet/ocean-vuong.
[27] "Ocean Vuong," Bibliography, last modified April 14, 2022, https://www.biography.com/writer/ocean-vuong.

2. Introduction to Postcolonial Criticism and Trauma Theory

This chapter provides a general overview of postcolonial criticism and postcolonial trauma theory. Postcolonial criticism is introduced in the broader theoretical context in which postcolonial literature is interpreted. More specific concepts and theoretical terms, such as hybridity, language, subaltern, and otherness, will be discussed in detail in Chapters 4 and 5, where they will be examined in connection with selected literary texts.

Starting with postcolonial theory, it is essential to first clarify the meaning of the term itself. In particular, it is important to distinguish between the hyphenated post-colonial and the unhyphenated postcolonial, as each carries different connotations. The authors of *The Empire Writes Back* explain that the term post-colonial may appear to refer solely to cultural developments following the withdrawal of imperial powers. In earlier studies, it has sometimes been used to differentiate between pre- and post-independence eras, labeling them as the 'colonial period' and the 'post-colonial period' – particularly in the context of constructing national literary histories or comparing different phases of those histories.[28] Building on this interpretation, this thesis uses the unhyphenated form postcolonial to refer specifically to the literary theory and critical framework, rather than indicating the historical period following colonialism. This choice reflects the broader understanding of postcolonialism as an ongoing engagement with the cultural legacies of colonial rule, rather than a term confined to a specific moment in time. This perspective is supported by postcolonial theorists Peter Childs and Patrick Williams, who emphasize that postcolonialism is not simply a historical marker but an ongoing condition that continues to shape global politics, economies, and cultural identities.[29]

One of the central debates in postcolonial theory concerns the question of when postcolonialism begins. While some scholars argue that it starts after decolonization, others, such as the authors Childs and Williams, assert that it encompasses all cultural experiences influenced by colonialism, from the moment of colonization to the present day. This perspective challenges traditional periodization and emphasizes the persistent legacies of colonial structures in modern society.[30] A similar argument is made by Dino Franco Felluga, a professor of English at Purdue University, who stresses that despite the prefix "post" in postcolonial may imply a focus solely on the period following decolonization, the field addresses both the historical

[28] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back,* 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1-2.
[29] Peter Childs, and Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory,* 2nd ed. (Florence: Routledge, 2014), 1.
[30] Childs et al., *An Introduction,* 3.

structures of imperial rule and their continued effects in contemporary contexts.[31] In summary, postcolonialism is not merely a study of the past but an ongoing critical framework that examines the enduring effects of colonial rule. It challenges Western-centric historical narratives, explores hybrid cultural identities, and highlights resistance against imperial legacies.

Felluga also notes that while the foundations of postcolonialism can be traced back to earlier thinkers such as Frantz Fanon (1925–1961), the field gained greater coherence and influence alongside the emergence of poststructuralist theory.[32] Felluga explains that poststructuralism is a theoretical movement that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century as a response to structuralism. It challenges the idea that meaning in language and culture is fixed or stable, emphasizing instead the fluidity of meaning, the instability of texts, and the role of power in shaping knowledge.[33] He further comments that the leading postcolonial scholars of the past five decades, such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Mary Louise Pratt, have incorporated key elements of poststructuralist thought, particularly the deconstruction of binary oppositions, in shaping their central theoretical concepts such as *orientalism, othering, subalternity, hybridity, mimicry, liminal* and *liminality*, the *contact zone*, *transculturation* and other terms. In addition to poststructuralism, postcolonial critics draw significantly on a range of theoretical traditions, including Marxism, feminism, Cultural Studies, psychoanalysis, and the work of Michel Foucault – particularly his concepts of discipline, discourse, and power. However, postcolonial theorists approach these traditions critically, remaining aware of their often Eurocentric assumptions. Overall, postcolonial criticism uncovers how dominant Western cultures preserve their hegemonic power by constructing their identity in opposition to the Other, thereby limiting the ways in which marginalized groups can be represented or understood. Simultaneously, postcolonial criticism explores how colonized peoples resist these dominant narratives by asserting their agency, redefining their cultural identities, and challenging the authority of the colonizer.[34]

Following this introduction to postcolonial theory, the chapter now turns to postcolonial trauma theory, which builds on and responds to broader developments within trauma studies. In order to introduce the postcolonial trauma theory, it is essential to contextualize it within the

[31] Dino Franco Felluga, *Critical Theory: The Key Concepts* (Routledge, 2015), 223.
[32] Felluga, *Critical Theory*, 223-24.
[33] Felluga, *Critical Theory*, 236.
[34] Felluga, *Critical Theory*, 224.

broader framework of trauma theory, as the postcolonial trauma theory directly responds to it and further develops as well as opposes some of its core ideas. Before introducing the terminology, it is crucial to state that postcolonial trauma theory is an interdisciplinary framework that explores the intersections between trauma theory and postcolonial studies. While not officially recognized as a distinct academic field with specific founders or a formalized set of principles, postcolonial trauma theory emerges from the convergence of two established domains: trauma theory, which examines the psychological and cultural effects of traumatic experiences, and postcolonial theory, which critiques the lasting impacts of colonialism on formerly colonized societies and individuals. This theoretical approach seeks to understand how historical traumas, such as colonization, war, and displacement, continue to affect the identities and memories of those living in postcolonial contexts. By linking the psychological insights of trauma theory with the critical perspectives of postcolonial theory, postcolonial trauma theory offers a perspective through which this thesis analyzes the enduring scars of colonialism and the ongoing struggles for identity, memory, and healing in postcolonial societies. For the purpose of this thesis, both trauma and postcolonial trauma are to be defined.

It is essential to first introduce the origin of the term trauma and the terminology connected to this term. Beata Piątek, an associate professor at Jagiellonian University, states that the term trauma is a Greek phrase for wound and has been extensively used in psychology and psychiatry since the 19th century. However, it only entered the discourse of historiography and literary theory in the second half of the 20th century via the USA-based area of Holocaust studies.[35] As Irene Visser, a professor at the University of Groningen, states, the dominant approach in cultural trauma studies was initially formulated by Cathy Caruth at the beginning of the 1990s.[36] Caruth describes the broadest definition of trauma as: "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena."[37]

Moreover, Piątek adds that the term trauma is inseparably connected with memory, and a number of critics involved in different fields of memory studies indicate that the most prospective field of research is the one related to traumatic memory or memory of trauma.

[35] Beata Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma in Contemporary British and Irish Fiction* (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2014), 32.
[36] Irene Visser, "Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47, no. 3 (April 2011): 273.
[37] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 11.

However, it is necessary to take into consideration that the latter phrase can be seen as contradictory in terms because trauma is by definition an event so severe that it cannot be appropriately registered by consciousness, thus it remains unassimilated and is not subject to the normal processes of memory storage or recall, nor can it be forgotten.[38] According to Cathy Caruth, one of the leading figures in trauma studies, "the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it."[39] Piątek further comments that the fact that the event has not been fully processed can be manifested through its returns in the form of unwanted memories, such as flashbacks, hallucinations, and nightmares.[40]

Kai Erikson, an American sociologist known for specializing in the social consequences of catastrophic events, claims that the way term trauma is used in modern society is associated with at least two terminological issues. One has to do with its application in memory studies, literary studies, and psychiatry. It comes from the term's inherent ambiguity, which may refer to both a psychologically damaging occurrence that leaves the victim wounded as well as the subject's condition. Since there is no such thing as an objectively traumatic event, rather, an event is only considered traumatic when it causes psychological trauma in the subject. Therefore, the experience is defined as traumatic by the subject's reaction, thus, the event and its impact on the human psyche are inseparably linked. The other terminological issue has to do with how common the word trauma is, how it is used in daily speech, and how this has led to the term becoming casualized. Following the Vietnam War, it became a widespread non-specialist language in the USA; following media coverage of the 1990s Balkan War crimes, it became widely used in Europe. Since then, the word has permeated ordinary speech (not only in English) and is frequently used to indicate any unpleasant or stressful event; in the popular press, any upsetting event, from divorce to relocation, may be referred to as traumatic. Nevertheless, it is crucial to distinguish between this word's trivialized meaning and its psychiatric roots.[41]

Piątek concludes that since trauma is such an intense experience that falls outside the subject's mental image of the world, it also includes the problem of representation, which is another crucial component of the notion for trauma theory. More specifically, the event was so

[38] Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 32.
[39] Cathy Caruth, "Introduction," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 4.
[40] Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 32.
[41] Kai Erikson, "Notes on Trauma and Community," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 183−85.

shocking and incomprehensible that it resisted assimilation, making it impossible to transform into a cohesive narrative. Since the traumatic event is not subjected to regular memory processes, the event stays present in the mind and haunts the individual, never to be forgotten or recalled at will.[42] The difficulty of representing trauma through narrative structure is a key issue in both novels and will be further examined in Chapter 4, which focuses on the use of non-linear storytelling.

Since both of the novels analyzed in this thesis are fictions incorporating personal stories, as well as historical events, it is important to explain the connection between history and fiction. Caruth explains the importance of the connection between trauma and history as the notion of trauma through which we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not.[43] Furthermore, trauma understanding can aid in overcoming the isolation that traumatic experiences impose on people and cultures. Caruth states that "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, […] history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas."[44] This statement also suggests that trauma can have an intergenerational impact, which is a concept central to this thesis since both novels under analysis explore the transmission of trauma across generations. In addition, Caruth highlights that "trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures."[45] According to this idea, trauma may provide a connection between different historical experiences, and understanding another person's suffering can promote cross-cultural solidarity and the development of new kinds of community. Caruth also emphasizes the importance of considering a crucial question when discussing trauma, which is whether the trauma is the initial confrontation with death or another traumatic event, or is it the continuous experience of living after having survived it?[46] Since both novels analyzed in this thesis explore the aftermath of living with a traumatic event, this question becomes central to understanding the characters' experiences and the narrative structure. Moreover, it invites a deeper examination of whether the core of trauma lies in the original event itself or in the ongoing struggle to cope with its effects over time.

After discussing the terminology surrounding trauma and its connection to history, the focus now shifts to postcolonial trauma. This concept builds upon the previously introduced

[42] Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 33.
[43] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 11.
[44] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 24.
[45] Cathy Caruth, "Introduction," 11.
[46] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 7.

ideas but places them within the specific context of colonialism, war, and displacement. Stef Craps, and Gert Buelens, professors at Ghent University, point out that trauma studies declared engagement in promoting cross-cultural ethical commitment. However, the early works in the trauma studies field (including Caruth's works) center primarily on the traumatic experiences of white Westerners and only use critical approaches that originate from a Euro-American background. Due to this narrow focus and by disregarding non-Western traumatic histories and events and by applying solely Western approaches, there is a risk of maintaining the Eurocentric view and widening the gap between the West and the rest of the world. Therefore, there have been increasing efforts in recent years to recognize the suffering caused by colonial oppression in several disciplines. [47] These disciplines include, for example, mental health professionals, historians, and postcolonial critics who have proposed "theorizing colonization in terms of the infliction of a collective trauma and reconceptualizing postcolonialism as a post-traumatic cultural formation,"[48] as Craps and Buelens claim.

Visser specifies that the new view of trauma, also called decolonized trauma, can be dated to the publication of the issue of *Studies in the Novel* in 2008. One addressed topic includes the convergence of trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies. The trauma theory previously presented by Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub in the 1990s had already drawn criticism because of its controversies, inconsistencies, and limits.[49] In Crownshaw's review of Luckhurst's book *The Trauma Question* (2008), Crownshaw states that the book provides a summary of the theory's fundamental contradictions and inconsistencies and the final conclusion that the trauma theory has significant limits for literary studies.[50]

Craps and Buelens further elaborate on this topic by specifying the diverse perception of trauma. One of the main aims of postcolonial trauma studies is to study traumatic events in a non-Western context and consider cultural variations in trauma treatment. Moreover, postcolonial trauma studies aim to understand colonial traumas such as forced migration, slavery, segregation, racism, political violence, and genocide. In order to examine the above-mentioned topics, it is crucial to consider to what extent Western theoretical models apply to non-Western contexts. That is why it is essential to modify the Western models into a culturally

[47] Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels," *Studies in the Novel* 40, no. 1/2 (March 2008): 2.
[48] Craps and Buelens, "Introduction," 2.
[49] Irene Visser, "Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects," in *Decolonizing Trauma Studies: Trauma and Postcolonialism*, ed. by Sonya Andermahr (Basel: MDPI, 2016), 7.
[50] Rick Crownshaw, "Reviews," *Textual Practice* 23, no. 3 (July 2009): 503.

specific environment to achieve a broader range of applications.[51] Another specification of postcolonial trauma studies lies in the perception of individual psychology. Craps and Buelens state that trauma has previously tended to focus on individual psychology. However, in postcolonial perception, trauma is viewed as a collective experience. Thus, it cannot be specifically identified until the focus of trauma study is shifted from the individual to larger social units, such as communities or nations.[52]

Visser summarizes that apart from the already mentioned Eurocentric tendencies and perception of individual psychology, efforts to decolonize trauma include a gradual process of shifting away from the orientation toward Freudian psychoanalysis and its emphasis on melancholy and stasis. Additionally, there has been a shift towards expanding the theoretical field and an increasing openness to culturally specific modes of addressing and negotiating trauma. Nowadays, trauma is seen as a very complex phenomenon in postcolonial studies. Trauma is seen as simultaneously acute, individual, and event-based, as well as communal and chronic. At the same time, it can not only impair people and communities but also strengthen people's sense of self and reestablish social cohesion. Postcolonial literary studies capture and rebuild the entire complexity of trauma within its own historical, political, and cultural settings.[53]

[51] Craps and Buelens, "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels," 3.
[52] Craps and Buelens, "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels," 4.
[53] Visser, "Decolonizing Trauma Theory," 20.

3. Vietnam War and PTSD

In order to provide a clear framework for the thesis, it is important to acknowledge the Vietnam War's complex development, which was shaped by political, ideological, and strategic dynamics. However, given the complexity of the conflict, this chapter will focus only on aspects directly relevant to the thesis. In particular, the Fall of Saigon in 1975 is a key event to highlight, as it marked the official end of the Vietnam War and the reunification of Vietnam under communist leadership.

The Vietnam War, also called the Second Indochina War, was a conflict lasting from 1955 to 1975. Ngiêm Dương, a scholar publishing works in the field of history, states that the Vietnam War was one of the most controversial and significant armed conflicts of the 20th century. The historical context of the Vietnam War can be traced back to the colonial period when France controlled Vietnam. During this time, the Vietnamese people's yearning for freedom and unity gave rise to a strong national identity and fueled anti-colonial resistance, culminating in the First Indochina War (1946–1954). This conflict, fought between the French colonial forces and the Viet Minh, a coalition led by communist revolutionaries, ultimately ended with the division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel under the Geneva Accords. However, this temporary division only deepened tensions, as the ideological split between the communist North, led by Ho Chi Minh, and the anti-communist South, supported by the United States, escalated into the Second Indochina War – better known as the Vietnam War. The causes of the conflict were numerous and complex, but the ideological clash between communism and anti-communism was a key factor.[54]

Dương further states that the vision of the communist North led by Ho Chi Minh aimed to create a socialist Vietnam, while the non-communist South led by Ngo Dinh Diem sought to maintain non-communist rule.[55] He adds that another important factor concerning the Vietnam War was the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union, which resulted in the US supporting the South Vietnamese government in its efforts to stop the spread of communism throughout Southeast Asia.[56] The United States considered the growth of communism as a threat to its global interests. Therefore, they pursued a containment strategy, providing military and economic assistance to anti-communist countries such as South Vietnam.[57] Since the development of the Vietnam War was very complex and included aspects of political,

[54] Ngiêm Dương, "The Vietnam War: An Analysis of History, Causes, and Impacts," *International Journal of Science* 5, no. 2 (2023): 346.
[55] Dương, "The Vietnam War," 350.
[56] Dương, "The Vietnam War," 346.
[57] Dương, "The Vietnam War," 350.

ideological, and strategic dynamics that would be too extensive for this thesis, only information relevant to this thesis is to be mentioned. Dương summarizes that the Vietnam War claimed millions of lives and caused widespread suffering. After all, civilians suffered the brunt of the conflict, experiencing the horrors of war, such as bombs, forced relocation, and crimes perpetrated by both sides.[58] In the context of the thesis, it is essential to mention the Fall of Saigon in 1975, which symbolized the end of the Vietnam War and reunified Vietnam under communist leadership. Quan Manh Ha, a professor at the University of Montana, adds that following the communist takeover in 1975, people who had supported the Saigon government in the South were afterward detained in communist reeducation camps for several years.[59]

Referring to the war-related context in *The Gangster We Are All Looking For,* Ba served in the South Vietnamese Army during the Vietnam War. Therefore, after the end of the war, he was among those who were involuntarily detained in the reeducation camps. Lê Hữu Tri claims that 200,000 to 250,000 former regime members were required to report for reeducation. These *students* were detained in remote camps for weeks up to decades, depending on a variety of criteria, such as the level of involvement in the overthrown government, family history, and behavior in the camp.[60] Hoang Minh Vu, a diplomatic historian of 20th-century Vietnam and the Asia-Pacific, elaborates that both manual labor and political classes were conducted in the camps. Moreover, low nutrition, inadequate health care, rough conditions, and rigorous work and punishments often led to numerous deaths. In the newly created socialist society, these graduates carried their past with them and were excluded from certain educational and career options, while many went on to immigrate and wrote memoirs.[61] Although Ba himself does not directly share his past with the readers, it is possible to learn something about his experience in the reeducation camp through the girl's recollection of memories:

> [o]ne afternoon, more than twenty years ago, they had released him from the reeducation camp. He was dropped off near the church beside Highway One. He walked over to the cyclo drivers […], and introduced himself. They let out a cry and threw their arms in the air and apologized. They had not recognized him. Maybe it was because he was so thin or because something in his face had changed or perhaps it was because all their memories were blasted.[62]

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[58] Dương, "The Vietnam War," 347.
[59] Quan Manh Ha, "Conspiracy of Silence and New Subjectivity in *Monkey Bridge* and *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*," *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement* 8, no. 1 (2013): 5.
[60] Lê Hữu Tri, *Prisoner of the Word: A Memoir of the Vietnamese Re-education Camps* (Seattle: Black Heron Press, 2001), 18.
[61] Hoang Minh Vu, "Recycling violence: The theory and practice of reeducation camps in postwar Vietnam," in *Experiments with Marxism-Leninism in Cold War Southeast Asia,* ed. Matthew Galway, and Marc H. Opper (Australia: ANU Press, 2022), 219-220.
[62] Lê Thi Diem Thúy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 143.

This excerpt reveals the lasting impact of Ba's time in the reeducation camp, even though he never directly shares his past. Instead, his trauma is conveyed through the fragmented memories of his daughter. His physical transformation, so extreme that even familiar faces fail to recognize him, symbolizes the deep scars left by his imprisonment. Even the change in his face suggests that it must have been an incredibly difficult experience that will continue to influence his future actions.

Referring again to the historical context, the living conditions in Vietnam worsened following the Fall of Saigon in 1975 due to political repression and economic collapse. Consequently, many people, including former detainees of the camps, chose to flee the country. As a result, according to Nghia M. Vo, a researcher of Vietnamese history and Vietnamese-American culture, the 1975–1992 diaspora (also referred to as *boat people*) included almost two million people who went to other countries or continents in search of freedom that was lacking in their home countries. They represented a wide range of nationalities, including Americans, Chinese, and Vietnamese, as well as sociopolitical and religious backgrounds such as soldiers, professionals, nationalists, fishermen, Buddhists, Catholics, communists, and returnees.[63] *The Gangster* tells a story about a Vietnamese family through the eyes of a small child who left Vietnam with her father by boat. In 1978, the father and his daughter arrived in San Diego with only a few belongings. They departed Vietnam because of the harsh conditions following the Vietnam War, and because her father was detained in a reeducation camp. Although it is unclear how he could leave the camp, the details, especially how he endangered not only his life but also the life of his little daughter on an incredibly risky boat journey, indicate that the decision to leave Vietnam was a matter of life and death, as the little girl recollects their journey:

> [a]long with other people from our town, we floated across the sea, first in the hold of the fishing boat, and then in the hold of a U.S. Navy ship. At the refugee camp in Singapore, we slept on beds side by side and when our papers were processed and stamped, we packed our few possessions and left the camp together. We entered the revolving doors of airports and boarded plane after plane. We were lifted high over the Pacific Ocean.[64]

In this excerpt, the imagery of floating across the sea in a fishing boat, then transitioning to the hold of a U.S. Navy ship, highlights the risky and uncertain nature of the refugees' journey.

[63] Nghia M. Vo, *The Vietnamese Boat People, 1954 and 1975-1992* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Co, 2006), 117.
[64] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 3-4.

Moreover, the description of moving through airports and being lifted high over the Pacific Ocean can symbolize both physical escape and emotional detachment from their homeland, which they all had to experience. This sense of emotional dislocation is further explored in another memory, where the narrator reflects on her final night in Vietnam: "[t]he night I left Vietnam, it was my father who carried me down to the beach and placed me on the fishing boat. During hours that must have been ones of fear, anxiety, and desperation, my only memory is of how calmly I sat waiting for him."[65] This quote captures a powerful moment from the narrator's departure from Vietnam since trauma can fragment or distort memory, especially in children, who may not fully process or register the emotional weight of the moment at the time. The calmness described is not necessarily an absence of fear, but rather a coping mechanism, possibly dissociation or emotional numbness in the face of overwhelming circumstances.

The unnamed narrator further describes the traumatic night when they left Vietnam by explaining that her mother was unfortunately left behind as their escape plan was revealed, and someone supposedly called the police. Consequently, the escape plan was chaotic and her father was not able to find her mother. As the narrator says: "[i]n a panic, he returned to the boat hoping she would have found her own way there, only to realize, as it pulled away from the shore, that my mother's must have been among the many voices, each calling for help as he passed by in the water."[66] This excerpt explains why the narrator's mother was left behind in Vietnam. The father's frantic search and ultimate failure to locate her underscore the chaos and desperation surrounding the escape attempt. The mother's voice, one of many calling for help, becomes a symbol of the countless loved ones lost or separated during these rushed and often dangerous departures. Moreover, this moment highlights the trauma of forced separation and the long-lasting emotional burden it imposes on refugees. This traumatic moment of separation is not confined to the past, but leaves a lasting emotional impact on Ba. As will be discussed later, the memory of these voices continues to haunt him, resurfacing as a symptom of unresolved trauma and PTSD.

Shifting to *OEWBG*, where Little Dog describes the harsh conditions in Vietnam, especially poverty, that forced them to flee Vietnam. Erika Lee, a history professor at Harvard University, comments that after the Vietnam War, there was a massive influx of Southeast Asians into the USA: "[f]rom 1975 to 1980, almost 433,000 refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos arrived in the United States, peaking in 1980. By the early 1980s, an average of 50,000

[65] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 105.
[66] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 105.

refugees were admitted every year."[67] Little Dog explains the hardship in his narrative: "Vietnam – which, thirteen years after the war and still in shambles – would grow so dire that we would flee the very ground he stood on."[68] Jeffrey T. Gibbons, an associate professor of literature at the United States Military Academy at West Point, comments that although many Southeast Asian refugees' goal was to flee war, poverty, and political persecution, hundreds of thousands continued to face financial hardship after resettling in the United States.[69] Yen Le Espiritu, a professor of Ethnic Studies at University of California, claims that "[i]n 1990, the poverty rate of Vietnamese in the United States stood at 25 percent, down from 28 percent in 1980 but still substantially higher than the national average of 12 percent."[70] Little Dog's family proves this claim since his mother works in a nail salon and has to provide for their whole family, including Little Dog and his grandmother, Lan. The struggle with poverty while living in Hartford is often mentioned in the narrative, for example, when Little Dog and his mother go shopping: "[t]hose Saturdays at the end of the month when, if you had money left over after the bills, we'd go to the mall."[71] Throughout the story, it is repeatedly mentioned how the family struggled with money and how difficult it was for Rose to provide for her whole family. More instances concerning war-related topics are to be mentioned in the following section where post-traumatic stress disorder is to be discussed.

Both of the novels analyzed in this thesis explore the aftermath of war, which is often manifested in the form of PTSD. This chapter introduces the term and highlights two relevant symptoms to this thesis. Starting with the broadest definition, PTSD is a term that stands for post-traumatic stress disorder. Jonathan I. Bisson et al. define PTSD as "a mental disorder that may develop after exposure to exceptionally threatening or horrifying events. PTSD can occur after a single traumatic event or from prolonged exposure to trauma."[72] Piątek mentions that it is noteworthy that the majority of subsequent developments in trauma research following Freud and Pierre Janet, a pioneering French psychologist in the field of dissociation and traumatic memory, had some connection to the treatment of Holocaust survivors or troops impacted by war. Many Vietnam War veterans in the United States exhibited psychological symptoms, which prompted clinical research and ultimately resulted in the introduction of post-traumatic

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[67] Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2016), 325.
[68] Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous (*New York: Penguin Press, 2019), 21.
[69] Jeffrey Tyler Gibbons, *Asian American War Stories: Trauma and Healing in Contemporary Asian American Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 126.
[70] Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), 157.
[71] Vuong, *OEWBG, 7.*
[72] Jonathan I. Bisson, Sarah Cosgrove, Catrin Lewis, and Neil P. Robert, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 351, (November 2015): 1.

stress disorder in the American Psychological Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1980. While the Manual only outlines diagnostic criteria and does not speculate on the causes of mental disorders, it does include a causal factor in its definition of PTSD.[73] The authors of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* state that PTSD can be caused by exposure to a traumatic "stressor that would evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost everyone [and that] is generally outside the range of usual human experience."[74]

Deborah Kaminer and Gillian Eagle, who are both university professors in the Department of Psychology, state that most people will suffer some level of distress after a traumatic incident as they attempt to cope with what has occurred. Common reactions include anxiety and moderate sadness, upsetting thoughts and recollections of the traumatic incident, difficulties sleeping, and hyper-awareness of any indicators of danger. To cope with these symptoms, many trauma survivors may choose to avoid discussing what happened, withdraw from interaction with others, and feel emotionally numb when they think about the event. These emotions can remain for a few days, weeks, or even months after the traumatic experience before gradually fading, without interfering with the survivor's ability to operate normally. However, for some trauma survivors, the symptoms as mentioned above may not fade with time and continue to cause significant impairment in their professional and social lives. PTSD is a psychiatric diagnosis developed to reflect such a stress reaction.[75] According to Allan Young, an anthropologist and the former professor in Social Studies in Medicine, it was during the Vietnam War that the phenomenon known as PTSD gained recognition in social knowledge and institutional practice, notably in the United States. Moreover, Young contends that PTSD is in part a social construct arising from the unique postwar historical circumstances.[76]

PTSD encompasses a wide range of symptoms, however, for the purpose of this thesis, two particularly relevant symptoms will be mentioned. As Kaminer and Eagle claim, the first symptom of PTSD includes various types of re-experiencing the event in ways that the trauma victim cannot deliberately control. For example, the survivor may notice that pictures and ideas about the trauma continue to enter their thoughts throughout the day, despite their best efforts to block them out. At night, this intrusion may manifest as dreams about the trauma.

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[73] Piątek, *History, Memory, Trauma*, 38.
[74] American Psychiatric Association (APA), *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* 3rd ed (Washington: American Psychiatric Association (APA), 1980), 236-8.
[75] Deborah Kaminer and Gillian Eagle, *Traumatic Stress in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010), 29.
[76] Allan Young, *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 113.

Furthermore, whenever the person encounters something that reminds them of the trauma (known as a traumatic trigger), they experience intense distress and fear, as well as physical symptoms associated with the body's natural response to danger (known as the 'fight, flight, or freeze' response), such as increased heart rate, muscle tension, and sweating. Subsequently, the survivor might experience flashbacks to the trauma, particularly if they come across a trigger or reminder of the incident. As opposed to only a vision or thinking about the incident, flashbacks involve a strong sensory re-experiencing of the trauma (hearing the same noises, feeling the same sensations on the skin, and smelling the same aromas). Therefore, the survivor is constantly trapped in the moment of the trauma through all of these symptoms.[77]

Kaminer and Eagle further elaborate that the second symptom of PTSD involves avoidance symptoms. Since discussing the event with others may trigger anxiety and distress all over again, trauma survivors frequently want to avoid discussing the trauma. For many survivors, recalling or discussing the experience is just as frightening as going through it all over again. Family and friends could find this difficult to comprehend as it is a common belief that trauma experience needs to be discussed in order to feel better. Additionally, survivors can try to avoid thinking about the trauma at all, focusing on anything else whenever the idea of the trauma arises. These attempts at mental avoidance typically only partially succeed, as intrusive thoughts and pictures persistently force their way into consciousness. Additionally, the victims may numb themselves emotionally in an attempt to escape the upsetting emotions connected to the trauma, which leaves them feeling emotionally distant or isolated most of the time.[78]

In *The Gangster,* Ba experiences the avoidance symptoms as described above since he tries to avoid talking about his trauma but it is such a big part of his life that he is unable to escape it, and it shows in the form of violent outbursts, as described in the following example:

> [Ba] becomes prone to rages. He smashes televisions, VCRs, chases friends and family down the street, brandishing hammers and knives in broad daylight. Then from night until early morning he sits on the couch in the living room, his body absolutely still, his hands folded on his lap, penitent. He sits in that position for hours, graced by the darkness, straining toward things no one can see.[79]

This excerpt reflects Ba's response to the trauma caused by his personal experience during the Vietnam War and his subsequent reeducation camp imprisonment. His past is marked by traumatic events such as forced separation from his wife during the escape with his daughter,

[77] Kaminer and Eagle, "Traumatic Stress," 31-32.
[78] Kaminer and Eagle, "Traumatic Stress," 32.
[79] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 116.

which has left him with unprocessed trauma that emerges through violent outbursts and silence. His behavior illustrates his response to trauma: he alternates between explosive rages and complete emotional withdrawal, avoiding any discussion of his experiences with his family.

Within the framework of postcolonial trauma theory, Ba's experience and behavior exemplify the ongoing impact of colonial and wartime events. Ba's inability to communicate his past reflects a coping mechanism of avoidance, as described in trauma studies by Kaminer and Eagle, where individuals struggling with PTSD may attempt to block out memories, fearing that discussing them could trigger overwhelming distress. Yet, his internal suffering surfaces involuntarily through his destructive actions, highlighting the inadequacy of silence as a means to manage his trauma.

Referring back to the previously mentioned context of the family's escape from Vietnam as part of the boat people, the traumatic moment when Ba was forced to flee without his wife adds a lasting dimension to his psychological suffering. This forced separation, occurring under chaotic and life-threatening conditions, is not a trauma left in the past. Rather, it resurfaces persistently, manifesting as a symptom of PTSD. As the narrator reflects: "[y]ears later, even after our family was reunited, my father would remember those voices as a seawall between Vietnam and America or as a kind of floating net, each voice linked to the next by a knot of grief."[80] This quote suggests that Ba's trauma is not only rooted in war or political imprisonment, but also in the emotional wound of having to abandon a loved one. Moreover, the imagery of the seawall may suggest not just a barrier, but a permanent emotional divide – a sense of isolation and grief that separates Ba from both his homeland and his new life in America. Meanwhile, the floating net functions as a symbol of the image of voices and memories that remain suspended in his mind, impossible to forget, each one tied to another by shared loss. Overall, such images reflect the intrusive and persistent nature of PTSD symptoms: memories that are not integrated into a narrative of healing, but instead linger in the subconscious, returning involuntarily and disrupting the present.

Shifting the focus to *OEWBG,* where the symptom of re-experiencing the event in ways that the trauma victim cannot deliberately control can be found. Little Dog describes a situation when one or two days before Independence Day, the neighbors were shooting fireworks and he describes Lan's reaction: "[w]hen I turned, she was on her knees, scratching wildly at the blankets. […] ‚Shhh. If you scream,' I heard her say, ‚the mortars will know where we are."[81] This excerpt reveals Lan's struggle with postcolonial trauma and PTSD. Her behavior – falling

[80] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 105.
[81] Vuong, *OEWBG,* 19.

to her knees and scratching wildly at the blankets, and warning that if you scream, the mortars will know where we are demonstrates a flashback to wartime, where she involuntarily relives the terror of hiding from bombarding. This reaction aligns with the postcolonial trauma theory, particularly as Kaminer and Eagle describe the intrusive symptoms of PTSD, where memories from the traumatic event forcefully resurface, often in response to surrounding triggers. In contrast to Lan's reaction to fireworks, there is a notable moment when she remains unaffected upon hearing gunshots. Especially given its similarity to fireworks, it might reasonably be expected to elicit a strong reaction. Instead, she appears to be the only member of the family who remains calm. One evening, as the family gathers to listen to Lan's story after dinner, a gunshot is heard in the street, as Little Dog reflects:

> "[w]e all screamed – you [Rose], Aunt Mai, and I – our cheeks and noses pressed to the floor. 'Someone turn off the lights,' [Rose] shouted. After the room went black for a few seconds, Lan said, 'What? It's only three shots.' […] 'Is it not? Are you dead or are you breathing?' […] 'In the war, entire villages would go up before you knew where your balls were.' […] 'Now turn the light back on before I forget where I left off.'"[82]

This passage, unlike the earlier one involving fireworks, illustrates an instance in which Lan does not respond to a potential traumatic trigger. Her composed behavior highlights the unpredictable and inconsistent nature of trauma responses, which often change and are manifested in non-linear ways. This moment exemplifies how trauma can emerge in waves, unstable, and unpredictable. The following chapter will further explore how such traumatic experiences are mirrored not only in character behavior but also through the narrative structure.

Unlike Ba in *The Gangster*, Lan processes her trauma by openly sharing her life story, recounting her escape from a doomed marriage, her move to Saigon, and ultimately her forced engagement in sex work for American soldiers. Her storytelling is a form of release, an attempt to confront and perhaps integrate her traumatic past within her personal narrative. As shown in the excerpt when Little Dog recollects his memories: "Lan told me one day, while I was plucking hew white hair, that when she first arrived in Saigon, after running away from her doomed first marriage, after failing to find a job, she ended up as a sex worker for American GIs on R&R."[83] Lan's storytelling contrasts with Ba's avoidance, revealing different approaches to coping with postcolonial trauma and PTSD. While Ba's avoidance strategy isolates him from his family, Lan's disclosure allows her family members to understand and potentially foster connections with those around her. Moreover, plucking grey hair with a

[82] Vuong, *OEWBG*, 21.
[83] Vuong, *OEWBG,* 46.

family member is seen as a ritual in Vietnamese culture, as it is in many other Asian cultures. It conveys a sense of closeness since it is a form of service expressing a strong sense of love.

In addition to Lan's trauma, Rose's trauma is explored as well. As it is explained at the beginning of the novel, Rose is the daughter of a white American soldier who was deployed in the Navy in Cam Ranh Bay. Therefore, Rose is born during the war to an American father and a Vietnamese mother, and her experience of trauma is closely intertwined with her mother's own suffering. As it is further revealed in the narrative, Rose was forced to abort her first, which was a secret that she never revealed to Little Dog before. During their conversation, she told him about the year "1986, the year my brother, your son, appeared. How, four months into your pregnancy, when a child's face becomes a face, your husband, my father, pressured by his family, forced you to abort him. 'There was nothing to eat.'"[84] Confronted with overwhelming poverty, Ma made the painful decision to abort Little Dog's older brother, which continues to be a trauma that, along with the scars of war, continues to haunt her even after starting a new life in the United States, and Little Dog bears the weight of this pain alongside her. Her abortion continues to haunt her in the present, as she tells Little Dog:

> '[h]e came to me, you know […] My boy, he came to me in a dream, about a week after the hospital. He was sitting on my doorstep. We watched each other for a while, then he just turned and walked away, down the alley. I think he just wanted to see what I looked like, what his mom looked like. It was a girl. Oh God…Oh god, I was seventeen.'[85]

This excerpt highlights Ma's lingering PTSD, rooted not only in the traumas of war but also in the personal pain of having to abort her child as a teenager. Dreaming about her unborn child can serve as an expression of unresolved grief and the constant presence of loss. Moreover, it offers insight into the desperation and helplessness of a teenage girl facing impossible choices.

Similarly, the Little Girl in *The Gangster* is burdened with the death of her brother, which is caused by a form of communicative silence in the family. The familial trauma is caused by the death of the Little Girl's brother, who drowned in the sea before the family left Vietnam. However, the trauma is mentioned only later in the narrative, and the family members avoid talking about it because it is an extremely painful topic for them. Both the father and the mother intentionally remain silent as a way to suppress their pain. Although the girl is aware that her brother died, her parents never openly discuss it, which leaves her with a painful gap between what she senses and what she actually knows. This silence fuels her curiosity and confusion.

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[84] Vuong, *On Earth* ,133.
[85] Vuong, *On Earth* ,137-38.

She yearns for answers, which is revealed in a dialogue between her and the mother: "Ma says, isn't it funny how sky and sea follow you from place to place as if they too were traveling. Thinking of my older brother, who was still in Vietnam, I asked Ma, 'If the sky and the sea can follow us here, why can't people?' Ma ignores my question."[86] Her mother avoids answering the question because of the painful memories that come back when she thinks about her dead son. Caruth explains that for trauma survivors, silence can serve as a form of self-protection. Speaking about traumatic experiences may not only be painful, but the very act of being heard, or hearing oneself, can also be painful. While silence may seem like a form of defeat, it can also become a refuge, a coping mechanism, and a way of maintaining a sense of control. It represents both exile and belonging, functioning as a place where pain is contained but never fully processed. In this sense, silence is not just the absence of speech, but a space where trauma resides and persists.[87]

This emotional void compels the Little Girl to imagine conversations with her brother, as if he were alive: "I could throw my arms around his neck and then, pushing him away, holding him at arm's length, I could ask him all my questions: Where did you go? Why didn't you take me with you? Was it cold there?"[88] In this quote, the Little Girl's imagined conversation with her brother reveals her yearning for answers and connection, underscoring how imagination can become a tool for coping with loss. Moreover, the Little Girl's constant thoughts about her brother stem from her parents' unresolved trauma because their refusal to speak about his death leaves her to fill the silence with her own imagination.

As the narrator further recalls her memories, she says that "[t]he only thing I couldn't drive away was the memory of my brother, whose body lay just beyond reach, forming the shape of a distant shore."[89] This quote deepens the emotional resonance of her grief. The metaphor of his body forming the shape of a distant shore evokes both physical and emotional distance. He is close enough to be envisioned but forever unreachable. This image not only reflects her longing and unresolved mourning but also symbolizes the loss experienced by the entire family.

The dynamics of PTSD reflect a broader pattern in trauma literature and theory, since PTSD not only affects the individual but often echoes through generations. The pain of war becomes anchored in memory, behavior, and silence. This is reflected in both novels through

[86] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 89.
[87] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 58.
[88] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 74.
[89] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 118.

poetic contemplation on war's lingering presence. In *The Gangster*, the narrator's mother voices the war's unending nature by saying that "war is a bird with a broken wing flying over the countryside, trailing blood and burying crops in sorrow. […] War has no beginning and no end. It crossed oceans like a splintered boat filled with people singing a sad song."[90] In this quote, war becomes a metaphor that transcends time and space. It is not a past event, but an ongoing presence that migrates with the refugee, contaminates new landscapes, and remains embedded in everyday life. Moreover, the bird with a broken wing and the splintered boat can be seen as a symbol of the lasting damage and the impossibility of closure. This unresolved nature of trauma and war also resonates in *OEWBG*, where Little Dog asks: "[w]hen does a war end? When can I say your name and have it mean only your name and not what you left behind?"[91] The question underlines how memory and identity are forever entangled with historical violence. For the next generation, war does not end with peace treaties or relocation, but it continues to live in names, and family heritage. These reflections form a transition to the next subchapter, which explores the intergenerational impact of war. While PTSD is experienced directly by survivors, its emotional and psychological impact does not stop with them. Instead, they are inherited by children through stories and behaviors that continue shaping identity in the aftermath of displacement.

3.1. Intergenerational Impact

Both of the novels deal with the Vietnam War and its lasting effect not only on those who directly experienced it but it also touches upon the topic of the intergenerational impact of the war. Espiritu observes that "[t]he process of generational transmission of war memory is complex and difficult, not only for survivors but also for their children, as the latter move between honoring their elders' memory and constructing their own relation to this contentious legacy."[92] Laren McClung, a poet from Philadelphia, and Yusef Komunyakaa, a professor at New York University, further elaborate on this topic by stating:

> [w]hen one inherits the residue of a parent's experience of war…one also inherits an abstraction, maybe in the form of total silence, or in the form of a family history told and retold at the dinner table. But the said and unsaid leave only impressions. What

[90] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 87.
[91] Vuong, *OEWBG,* 12.
[92] Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 140.

> descendants of war witness may persist in the body of a parent, though much is left to the imagination and to a perpetual search.[93]

Both novels show the impact of intergenerational transmission of trauma from a parent or grandparent to the child. Starting with *OEWBG*, Little Dog describes a situation when he was five or six years old and wanted to play a prank on his mother. He hid behind the door and shouted "Boom!" His mother screamed, started to cry, and was gasping. Little Dog did not understand her reaction, as he explains: "I was an American boy parroting what I saw on TV. I didn't know that the war was still inside you [Ma], 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."[94] In this statement, Little Dog shows one of the story's central struggles in the narrative, which is the difficulty in comprehending Ma's war trauma and its lasting effects on not just herself but her close relatives as well. Subsequently, understanding the legacy of others' trauma becomes one of the most significant obstacles on Little Dog's path. Moreover, Little Dog was born more than ten years after the Vietnam War ended, which means that he did not experience it firsthand. As a result, the war feels distant to him, and he initially admits that he was unaware it had affected his mother. However, he comes to recognize the profound and lasting effects of the war on his mother and grandmother, Lan. He understands that once someone has lived through war, its impact remains with them indefinitely, continuing to resonate in their present lives. Espiritu supports this idea by stating: "[f]or the children of survivors and witnesses of the Vietnam War, these episodes confirm that the war is ever-present for their parents, whether they speak about it or not."[95]

The next excerpt illustrates how Little Dog's narrative shows glimpses of Lan's inter-related war trauma which are essentially provided in the form of transgenerational flashback. Lan often shares her personal stories from the past with Little Dog. These stories are transformative for him as her story of life in Vietnam completely absorbs him. While listening to her stories, he shares:

> [a]s she spoke, my hand slowed, then stilled. I had forgotten myself in [Lan's] story, had lost my way, willingly […] But I wasn't asleep. I was standing next to her as her purple dress swayed in the smoky bar, the glasses clinking under the scent of motor oil and cigars, of vodka and gunsmoke from the soldier's uniforms.[96]

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[93] Laren McClung and Yusef Komunyakaa, *Inheriting the War: Poetry and Prose by Descendants of Vietnam Veterans and Refugees* (S.l.: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017),
[94] Vuong, *On Earth ,* 4.
[95] Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 148.
[96] Vuong, *OEWBG,* 23.

Little Dog's description implies that his grandmother's experiences and history are passed down to him, allowing him to be mentally transported back to the war and the bar where Lan worked as a prostitute. Furthermore, Little Dog's reflections suggest an awareness of his grandmother's wartime trauma, as her stories are not just narratives to him but serve as a means for him to grasp her experiences. As Little Dog describes how he perceives Lan's stories:

> the blank walls did not so much fill with fantastical landscapes as open into them, the plaster disintegrating to reveal the past behind it. Scenes from the war, mythologies of manlike monkeys, of ancient ghost catchers from the hills of Da Lat who were paid in jugs of rice wine, who travelled through villages with packs of wild dogs and spells written on palm leaves to dispel evil spirits.[97]

In this excerpt, Lan's storytelling becomes something more than just imagining the stories – it starts to change the space around him. Lan's seemingly real storytelling and his imagination are so strong that they seem to break through the real world, making the past feel physically present. As a consequence, this shows that for Little Dog, telling stories is not only about describing events but also about bringing them to life. The difference between what is real and what is imagined becomes blurred. This instance also highlights how storytelling can be a powerful tool: it helps Little Dog connect with his history, his culture, and the people who came before him. Overall, Little Dog's narrative conveys the struggle he faces in coming to terms with and piecing together his family's history of trauma. Little Dog's situation corresponds with Laren McClung's quote mentioned above because his narrative embodies the combination of his mother's silence and Lan's history told and retold, which then, as Jeffrey Tyler Gibbons claims, complicates his search for understanding, sympathy, and love.[98]

Furthermore, Little Dog is influenced by his mother's trauma as well, and he perceives Ma's symptoms of PTSD since he was a child. At one point, he acknowledges:

> "[t]o be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once. I read that parents suffering from PTSD are more likely to hit their children. Perhaps there is a monstrous origin to it all. Perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war."[99]

In this excerpt, the metaphor of the monster being a hybrid signal captures the paradox of a parent who is both protector and source of harm. In the context of PTSD, especially among survivors of war or violence, unresolved trauma can lead to abusive behaviors, even when love

[97] Vuong, *OEWBG ,* 22.
[98] Gibbons, *Asian American War Stories*, 123.
[99] Vuong, *On Earth* ,13.

and care are also present. The quote above acknowledges this dissonance: a parent with PTSD may resort to violence, but not out of hatred, rather as a symptom of their own unresolved psychological damage. Moreover, the idea that violence prepares the child for war suggests a transmission of trauma, where violence becomes both a manifestation of the parent's pain and a misguided attempt to prepare the child for a harsh, threatening world. Rose's violent behavior will be examined in greater detail in Chapter Four, particularly in relation to the novel's use of fragmented storytelling as a narrative response to trauma.

Moving on to the novel *The Gangster,* where a communicative disruption exists between the narrator and her father, Ba, because of his silence. Ba, a quiet man, never shares his past experiences with his daughter. The unnamed narrator observes events unfolding in her family, as she is aware of some of her parents' conflicts and traumas. However, the reasons for their actions remain unclear and are often misunderstood by the young girl, as her parents rarely share their past with her. Quan Manh Ha describes this behavior as a *conspiracy of silence*, which means that the narrator's parents are constantly burdened by their past. Still, they struggle to convey its importance in the present because they either avoid discussing it with their child or try to hide it even from themselves. However, the conspiracy of silence often causes the transfer of the parents' unresolved issues to their children.[100]

The role of silence can be noted when the Little Girl describes how she communicates with her father. In this case, the narrator's father's silence causes a lack of communication between him and the girl. When she mentions her father's voice, who is also called Ba, she describes it as a voice that "echoes from deep down like a frog singing at the bottom of a well. His voice is water moving through the reed pipe in the middle of a sad tune. And the sad voice is always asking and answering itself."[101] In this excerpt, figurative language will be used to exemplify the complicated relationship between the father and his daughter.

Firstly, the well may represent more than physical distance because it holds back feelings and thoughts that would otherwise have been shared or understood if they just surfaced, but now they are hidden deep down. Secondly, the likening to the frog shows an unheard voice because the girl hears a sound but not any words, which means that Ba's thoughts and emotions are buried within him, unapproachable by others, including his daughter. This description is given another layer by the imagery of water moving through a reed pipe because it implies melancholic and restrained channeling of Ba's emotions, which are nevertheless present. The sad tune mirrors the way he interacts with others, especially his own daughter. The voice is

[100] Ha, "Conspiracy of Silence," 3.
[101] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 10.

indirect, and it filters emotions, resulting in sorrowful and distant communication. Furthermore, the fact that his voice is sad and always asking and answering itself emphasizes the feeling of solitude and self-containment in Ba's character. There are also elements of internal dialogue present in his life, where one gets the impression that this conversation never goes beyond himself. This could imply an unresolved conflict, but it never translates into a shared experience. On the daughter's side, this implies that her father was never there for her in terms of exchanging ideas or talking about his feelings because he is trapped in his own world, leaving her on the outside. Overall, it is a lack of communication that creates distance and misunderstanding between them, making the girl yearn for an attachment with her father. Moreover, the imagery used in the passage underscores the depth of their gap, making it clear that Ba's silence is a defining feature of their relationship and shapes the way they interact, or more likely fail to interact, with each other.

In addition, Ba seems to be a distant and quiet man who does not share his troubles and unpleasant experiences with his daughter. When talking about sharing the experience, it is also important to mention that Ba does not share his past either with his daughter or his wife. Instead, he only shares it with a Vietnamese man of his age who then becomes his best friend: "[s]ipping bottles of beer, they talked about the war and how it was their youth and how when it ended it was like waking from a long dream or a long nightmare. And now the war was in the past."[102] Ba's friendship with the other Vietnamese man enables him to share stories over bottles of beer, which at the same time provides a stark contrast to the silence he maintains at home. The act of discussing the war implies that Ba is capable of opening up, but only in a specific context. The way he describes war suggests that it is a defining experience for him – one that shaped his identity and also haunts his present. However, his ability to discuss it with a peer rather than with his family highlights his emotional isolation. By keeping these conversations limited to someone who has been through what he went through directly, Ba seeks to shield the people he cares about from what may have been a terrible experience. However, this tendency to try to protect them consequently creates a gap between him and his family. His wife and daughter are unable to fully understand the depth of his pain because he chooses not to share it with them.

This silence not only isolates Ba but also alienates his daughter, illustrating how unspoken trauma within families can influence relationships and hinder intergenerational understanding. As Leona Toker, a professor of English at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, states that "[i]n information theory, the absence of a message is a message in its own right. For

[102] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 13.

example, in the novel, silence [can] speak through manipulative informational gaps.[103] His daughter's lack of access to her father's story prevents her from understanding his behavior and instead leaves her to interpret his behavior on her own. Ba's experience thus underscores the implications of postcolonial trauma, where the scars of colonialism and conflict affect families and disrupt emotional bonds, causing isolation and misunderstanding across generations.

Since this chapter discusses intergenerational impact, the symbols of butterflies used in both books are to be compared as they symbolize memory, generational trauma, and identity. Starting with *OEWBG*, Vuong uses the monarch butterfly as a symbol of generational trauma and inherited memory. As it is represented: "[m]onarchs that survived the migration passed this message down to their children. The memory of family members lost from the initial winter was woven into their genes."[104] In this example, a parallel between memory and familial trauma is drawn, suggesting that suffering does not end with the generation that endured it, but it continues and is encoded into the lives of those who follow.

Moreover, this idea is also represented in explaining what it means to be a survivor: "[m]aybe a survivor is the last one to come home, the final monarch that lands on a branch already weighted with ghosts."[105] In this quote, survival is not simply living through a catastrophe, but also bearing its aftermath. The survivor becomes the one who is burdened with remembering what others could not speak. Little Dog, representing the final monarch, is not only living with his own experiences but is also absorbing the unprocessed pain of his mother and grandmother. In order to survive, in this sense, is to carry memory – to hold the ghosts of family history, to feel their weight, and to make meaning from what remains.

Finally, the imagined vision of the monarchs fleeing "not winter but the napalm clouds of your childhood in Vietnam. I imagine them flying from the blazed blasts unscathed, […], cool air, their wings finally, after so many conflagrations, fireproof."[106] This quote links the Vietnam War to the broader theme of migration and resilience. The description of the monarchs' wings becoming fireproof suggests a yearning for resistance to inherited pain. It can be seen as a desire for healing, for a body and identity untouched by the influence of history. Overall, through the images of monarch butterflies, the ambiguous inheritance Little Dog receives is articulated: generational trauma, survival coupled with trauma, and memory inseparable from pain. The monarchs serve not only as a metaphor for endurance but also as a

[103] Leona Toker, *Eloquent Reticence Withholding Information in Fictional Narrative* (S.l.: The University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 1.
[104] Vuong, *OEWBG,* 12.
[105] Vuong, *OEWBG,* 13.
[106] Vuong, *OEWBG,* 14.

symbol of the continuous inheritance of trauma, as it is carried and transformed across generations. Little Dog's identity, particularly his bond to his mother and grandmother, is therefore not just relational but also historical, shaped by migration.

Contrastingly, in *The Gangster*, butterflies are used as a symbol of the narrator's identity. Particularly, it represents the alienation and loneliness that she experiences in a new country. One day, the little girl finds a paperweight on Mel's desk in which is an entrapped butterfly. She is fascinated by the butterfly, and she tries to listen to it, but at first, she only hears her breath. However, after a while, she says: "but then I heard a soft rustling, like wings brushing against a windowpane. The rustling was a whispered song. It was the butterfly's way of speaking, and I thought I understood it."[107] This excerpt symbolizes the first time the narrator is able to form some kind of connection in the USA, even though it is an imagined one. Ha further elaborates on this idea and states that the narrator connects with another living being whose situation mirrors her own sense of entrapment and dislocation. Prior to this moment, her interactions had been marked by linguistic and cultural alienation. Because of the language barrier, she struggled to engage in meaningful communication and was only partially grasping conversations.[108] For example, after the little girl, her father, and the four uncles were accepted in Mel's house, the narrator states: "[e]ven without understanding a word of what they were saying, the tone of their voices troubles us."[109] Here, the narrator reveals the detachment she experiences in a new social setting. Therefore, language, or the lack of access to it, then becomes a source of anxiety, which further amplifies her detachment. Referring back to the symbol of the butterfly, the little girl decided to tell her uncles about the butterfly, and she wants them to help her get it out of the glass. They respond:

> Uncles: "That butterfly got itself into a lot of trouble flying into a disk. […] Yeah, what do we know about butterflies stuck in glass. I never saw anything like it in Vietnam. […] It must be dead now, that butterfly."
> Little Girl: "No, I heard it rustle its wings. It wants to get out!"
> Uncles: "Listen to me, little girl, no butterfly could stay alive inside a glass disk. Even if its body was alive, I'm sure that butterfly's soul has long since flown away."
> Little Girl: "Yes, that's how I think of it also. No soul in that glass disk. If there's no soul, how can the butterfly cry for help? I asked."
> Uncles: "But what does crying mean in this country? Your Ba cries in the garden every night and nothing comes of it."[110]

[107] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 25.
[108] Ha, "Conspiracy of Silence," 11.
[109] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 6.
[110] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 27.

The dialogue between the little girl and her uncles presents a divide in perception. While the little girl still holds onto a hopeful belief that the butterfly is alive and capable of communication, the uncles reject this optimism. Their dismissal reflects the hardship they have been through in their life – war, displacement, and loss. Their skepticism suggests an understanding of survival not as a matter of physical endurance but of spiritual destruction. The soul, as they argue, has already departed. In this sense, the butterfly also becomes a symbol of the refugee experience – physically present but absent in the mind, thus preserved yet lifeless. The narrator's insistence: It wants to get out!" can be seen as her own desire to be seen, understood, and liberated from the metaphorical glass that contains her language barriers, trauma, and cultural alienation. Her question, "If there's no soul, how can the butterfly cry for help?" articulates her concern about the possibility of being heard in a context that does not recognize or respond to her emotional reality. This is made even more visible by the reference to her father, who "cries in the garden every night and nothing comes of it." In this instance, the little girl begins to understand that in this new country, expressions of pain are often invisible, inaudible, or disregarded. Overall, the butterfly serves primarily as a symbol of the narrator's own identity struggle. It reflects both the impossibility of full expression in a foreign land and the constant desire to be understood, and to break through the glass, just like the butterfly.

One day, the narrator tries to release the butterfly trapped in the paperweight, which also symbolically expresses her own yearning for freedom. As it was already mentioned, the butterfly becomes a metaphor for her fluid identity, caught between cultures, generations, and languages. Therefore, her act of freeing it is an attempt to break free from the constraints of a life shaped by war, migration, and displacement. However, this act leads to her family being expelled from Mel's home, highlighting how her desire for freedom is incompatible with the conditions of their refugee existence in America. Moreover, this moment reveals the limits of hospitality and tolerance in their new country. The narrative structure also supports this interpretation since the family's banishment is stated before the incident itself is described. As it is revealed in the story:

> [o]ne Friday afternoon in December, a week before Christmas vacation, I tried to free the butterfly. The result was Mel told Ba, the four uncles and me to pack our things and get out. Ba said it wasn't my fault; it wasn't anybody's fault. Ba said these things happen.[111]

[111] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 31.

Asha Jeffers, a professor at Dalhousie University, explains that this reverse cause-and-effect order stresses how unjust their banishment is, reinforcing the sense of instability that defines the narrator's world. Moreover, her father's refusal to assign blame further deepens this emotional complexity. Thus, his response reflects a kind of postcolonial fatalism, a learned resignation to the repeated losses and displacements that come with both war and migration. Rather than blaming her for wanting freedom or Mel for pushing them out, he accepts the event as inevitable.[112]

[112] Asha Jeffers, "'I Was Certain I Saw My Future in Him': Coming into Intergenerational Empathy and Escape in lê thi diem thuy's The Gangster We Are All Looking For," *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics* 6(2), no. 26 (December 2022): 4 .

4. Hybridity

Hybridity is one of the key concepts in postcolonial theory, most prominently associated with the work of Homi K. Bhabha. David Huddart, an associate professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, notes that Homi K. Bhabha, born in 1949 in Mumbai, India, is regarded as a key figure in the field of postcolonial criticism. His work introduces several complex and influential ideas, such as hybridity, mimicry, difference, and ambivalence, which explore how colonized groups have challenged colonial dominance, revealing that such authority is often less stable than it appears. Bhabha's theories help to understand today's world, which is characterized by a contradictory mix of highly declared cultural diversity and the complexly interconnected networks of globalization. Therefore, colonialism is not merely a historical event but continues to shape the present, urging a rethinking of intercultural dynamics.[113] Overall, Bhabha is known for his influential contributions to postcolonial discourse, particularly through his examination of identity, culture, and power in colonial and postcolonial contexts. His theorization of hybridity has become central to understanding the complex processes of cultural interaction and transformation that emerge from colonial encounters. Rather than viewing cultures as fixed or isolated, Bhabha uses hybridity to highlight the fluid, dynamic, and often ambivalent nature of cultural identity.

Consuela Wagner, an academic researcher, states that hybridity refers to the process of identity formation among individuals who are shaped simultaneously by multiple cultural reference systems, such as migrants. In the social sciences, hybridity alongside with diversity has become a key concept for understanding social reorganization and developing appropriate responses to cultural heterogeneity. In everyday language, hybridity is often described as a process of mixing, blending, overlapping, or crossbreeding.[114] In general, hybridity can be defined as seeing one's cultural identity as a blend of two or more cultures.

According to Childs and Williams, Homi K. Bhabha's idea of *hybridity* further complicates identity formation, arguing that colonized subjects exist in a space of cultural in-betweenness, where they adopt and resist colonial influences simultaneously.[115] Homi Bhabha defines hybridity as: "the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the 'pure' and original identity

[113] David Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1.
[114] Consuela Wagner, "Migration and the Creation of Hybrid Identity: Chances and Challenges," Research Association for Interdisciplinary Studies, (August 2016): 241.
[115] Childs et al., *An Introduction*, 122.

of authority)."[116] Christina-Georgiana Voicu, an academic researcher, notes that Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) is a pivotal work in hybridity theory, examining the liminality of hybridity as a source of colonial anxiety. His main point is that colonial hybridity, as a cultural form, created ambivalence in the colonial rulers and so changed the authority of power. The notion of hybridity is one of the essential terms in postcolonial discourse, and Bhabha's views have become central to the topic of hybridity.[117]

Nasrullah Mambrol, a scholar from Kannur University, observes that the term hybridity is closely linked to Homi K. Bhabha's exploration of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Rather than viewing this relationship as binary or oppositional, its inherent interdependence is emphasized, suggesting that both identities are mutually constructed through their interaction.[118] Central to this process is what Homi Bhabha refers to as the *Third Space of Enunciation* – a conceptual space in which all cultural statements and systems are negotiated and formed. Building on this idea, cultural identity emerges within this paradoxical and ambivalent space, making the notion of any pure, hierarchical culture impossible. Recognizing the complexity and fluidity of this Third Space allows us to move beyond an exoticized appreciation of cultural diversity. Moreover, it encourages an understanding of hybridity as an empowering condition in which cultural differences can actively engage and coexist.[119] As Bhabha states:

> [i]t is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory […] may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity.[120]

Mambrol further comments that the in-between zone contains the burden and meaning of culture, which is why the concept of hybridity is so significant. In postcolonial discourse, hybridity is commonly used to refer to simple cross-cultural interaction. This usage of the phrase has been frequently criticized since it typically involves rejecting and ignoring the imbalance and inequality of the power interactions it refers to. It has been criticized for reproducing assimilationist strategies by emphasizing the transformational cultural, linguistic,

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[116] Homi K. Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders," in *Literary Theory: An Anthology,* ed. Julie Rivkin, and Michael Ryan (Maiden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 1175.
[117] Christina-Georgiana Voicu, "The Paradigm of Cultural Hybridity in the Postcolonial Discourse," *Philologia* 7, no. 1 (June 2021): 159.
[118] Nasrullah Mambrol, "Homi Bhabha's Concept of Hybridity," Literary Theory and Criticism¸ last modified April 8, 2016, https://literariness.org/2016/04/08/homi-bhabhas-concept-of-hybridity/.
[119] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 37.
[120] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 38.

and political implications on both the colonized and the colonizer by hiding cultural distinctions.[121]

Connected to the term hybridity is hybrid identity. Wagner states that characteristic features of hybrid identity typically include the presence of multiple cultural backgrounds, the interplay between self-identification and external ascription, and the continuous negotiation of personal identity. Moreover, the key aspect of hybrid identity is belongingness, which can take several forms. Some migrants, particularly those from the first generation, are unwaveringly loyal to their home nation. Even if this emotional experience persists, at a cognitive level, multiculturalism is acknowledged, indicating a modest to medium degree of hybridity, with just a few reflections and internal disputes. However, the second-generation immigrants frequently have a sense of double belonging due to socialization in both environments. These migrants reject assimilation in favor of hybridity as a solution to decision-making pressures. This group's cultural code-switching often allows for the transition from one form of identification to another.[122]

Having discussed the theoretical frame of hybridity, it is now essential to examine how this concept is reflected in the novels. One of the most significant narrative strategies through which hybridity and trauma are expressed is non-linear storytelling. In both works, fragmented chronology and disrupted narrative structure become tools that mirror the fractured, hybrid identities of the protagonists. Starting with *The Gangster*, the novel contains several aspects of representing hybrid identity, including being second-generation immigrant, growing up in a mixture of Vietnamese and American culture, intergenerational trauma inherited from close relatives as well as non-linear storytelling. The author of *The Gangster* is a woman from the group of Vietnamese Americans known as the 1.5 generation, who came to the US at a very young age and were raised in their parents' new country. The unnamed narrator in her book has a similar experience since she grows up and enters adolescence in the United States, but she lacks her mother's guidance because they were forced to leave Vietnam before her mother could join them. In order to capture the characters' awareness of their sense of displacement, estrangement, and hybrid identities, Le constructs a non-chronological narrative that combines flashbacks from the past with current voices and events. As Lisa Suhair Majaj, a Palestinian-American writer and critic, states:

> [m]emory plays a familiar role in the assertion of identity by members of ethnic and minority groups; family stories frequently ground ethnic identification, and the

[121] Mambrol, "Homi Bhabha's Concept of Hybridity."
[122] Wagner, "Migration and the Creation of Hybrid Identity," 242.

> popularized search for "roots" is often articulated as "remembering who you are." Memory functions on both a cultural and a personal level to establish narratives of origin and belonging; myths of peoplehood, like memories of childhood, situate the subject and agency possible.[123]

Ha comments that the narrator tries to navigate between two geographical universes while constantly looking to the past and to the future, which further complicates her search for identity in the present. However, she never stops trying to recollect and find her identity. The fact that she is not given access to the family histories, which Majaj suggests are crucial for tying her ethnic heritage to the future in America, makes her search for identity much more complicated. Moreover, the novel explores the complex conflicts that parents and the narrator face due to personal and national history. They are caught between a painful past in Vietnam and a promising future in the US. Thus, the characters are trapped by cultural and historical conditions, resulting in a "neither-here-nor-there" mindset.[124]

In *OEWBG*, Ocean Vuong uses a non-linear storytelling as a way to explore the fragmented nature of trauma. Rather than following a straightforward timeline, the narrative mimics the way traumatic memory actually functions; it comes in flashes, loops, and sudden disruptions. Moreover, trauma is not recalled neatly, but it resurfaces in waves, often triggered by seemingly unrelated moments, which is reflected in the structure of the novel. For instance, when Little Dog recounts the horrific scene of a macaque monkey's brain being eaten while it is still alive, which is a moment full of violence and helplessness, the narrative abruptly shifts to an explanation of Lan's name. As it is presented in the novel:

> The monkey is tied to a beam under the table. It jostles about. With its mouth muffled behind a leather strap, its screams sound more like the reel of a fishing rod cast far across a pond.
>
> **S**eeing the letters on the boy's chest, the woman remembers her own name. The possession of a name, after all, being all they share. "Lan," she says. "Tên tôi là Lan." My name is Lan. Lan meaning Orchid. Lan the name she gave herself, having been born nameless. Because her mother simply called her *Seven,* the order in which she came into the world after her siblings.[125]

This sudden shift from a brutal, dehumanizing scene to a moment of naming and personal identity is intentional, since it illustrates how the traumatized mind often moves unpredictably between painful recollection and emotional detachment. The shift provides a momentary escape

[123] Lisa Suhair Majaj, "Arab American Literature and the Politics of Memory," in *Memory and Cultural Politics,* ed. A. Singh, J. T. Skerrett, and R. E. Hogan (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 266.
[124] Ha, "Conspiracy of Silence," 7-8.
[125] Vuong, *OEWBG,* 39.

from violence, not only for the narrator but also for the reader. The monkey's suffering becomes almost unbearable, and the narrative's alternation to Lan's name offers a kind of escape. However, Lan's explanation of her name soon reveals its own painful backstory: she had to name herself after running away from an arranged marriage at seventeen, only to be rejected and shamed by her mother afterwards. In this way, the narrative moves from one kind of trauma to another, showing how pain is layered and inescapable. After this moment, the story returns to the monkey scene, reinforcing how trauma resurfaces in fragments and cycles. Overall, Vuong's non-linear structure captures this emotional reality of traumatic experience, not just talking about trauma but making the readers experience its disorientation, persistence, and unpredictability.

Another example of how Ocean Vuong uses non-linear storytelling as a form of a powerful tool to embody the psychological effects of trauma is present in the novel. Rather than presenting events in a linear or cohesive way, the novel's fragmented structure mirrors the emotional disorientation caused by traumatic experience. The story often jumps in time, interrupts itself, or returns to painful memories without warning, reflecting how survivors of trauma experience memory. As Anne Whitehead, a professor at Newcastle University, states: "[n]ovelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection."[126] An example of starting a paragraph by repeating the same phrase to introduce a moment of violence can be seen in the novel: "[t]he time you threw the box of Legos at my head. The hard wood dotted with blood."[127] Several paragraphs later, after slightly shifting the topic, the phrase appears again: "[t]he time with your fists, shouting in the parking lot, the late sun etching your hair red. My arms shielding my head as your knuckles thudded around me."[128] Through these flashbacks, Little Dog's memories of Rose's violent outbursts are shown. Her unstable behavior is presented through fragmented storytelling, capturing the way traumatic memories often return – not as complete stories, but in broken, scattered moments that interrupt one another. Quan Manh Ha, and Mia Tompkins, professors at the University of Montana, comment that in contrast to the conventional narrative sequencing, Vuong illustrates how painful memories need to go beyond

[126] Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 3.
[127] Vuong, *OEWBG,* 6.
[128] Vuong, *OEWBG,* 7-8.

linguistic boundaries in order to be represented properly.[129] Therefore, the story is not told in a straightforward or linear way, instead, it mirrors the disjointed and fragmented nature of PTSD and trauma. Little Dog tells his story in a non-traditional style because, as he says: "[t]his was how it was given to me: from mouths that never articulated the sounds inside a book."[130] Ha and Tompkins state that this fragmented narrative mirrors how trauma is experienced in irregular and unpredictable waves. In addition, the structure captures various shifts between memories, reflections, and poetic imagery, which highlights how trauma does not follow a fixed timeline. Moreover, the epistolary form creates a sense of empathy and draws the readers into the emotional world of the narrator, making the readers feel the emotional and psychological weight of growing up in a family shaped by war, loss, and silence.[131]

Another feature connected with hybrid identity is the naming used in *The Gangster*. One of the most striking features of the narrative becomes the deliberate absence of the narrator's name. The narrator's namelessness is not just a passive omission but a purposeful act of refusal. Her decision to withhold her name reflects a deeper psychological and existential struggle, which is tied both to intergenerational trauma and the complex formation of a hybrid identity. Her deliberate decision not to reveal her name can be seen when she plays with a friend in her apartment, as she describes their conversation: "[u]pside down, you look like a boy. You look like the brother of… And then she said my name."[132] Interestingly, the narrator never says her name out loud. This omission is significant since her name is not simply unspoken, but it becomes rather purposefully silenced. As a result, it can be seen as a symbol of an identity she no longer claims, one that is entangled with the unresolved legacies of her upbringing and dislocation. Another example is provided when she refuses to respond to her name after being approached by a man on the street:

> I crossed the street when this man called me, called my name. I let that name fall around me, never once sticking to me, even when he yelled, "You liar! I know it's you." I kept moving as the lilting syllables of my own name fell around me like licks of flame that extinguished on contact, never catching.[133]

[129] Quan Manh Ha, and Mia Tompkins, "'The Truth Is Memory Has Not Forgotten Us': Memory, Identity, and Storytelling in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*," *Rocky Mountain Review* 75, no. 2 (2021): 217.
[130] Vuong, *OEWBG,* 224.
[131] Ha, and Tompkins, "'The Truth,'" 211.
[132] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 71.
[133] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 100.

This excerpt provides an illustration of the narrator's complex relationship with her own name and her identity as well. Her refusal to respond to the man who calls her on the street can be perceived as a symbolic rejection of a former self, one tied to a past she is actively attempting to leave behind. Even after being called a liar, the narrator ignores his calling by continuing to walk away, denying the authority of that name to define or reach her. Furthermore, the imagery of flames in the above-mentioned excerpt further symbolizes the girl's situation since fire is typically associated with transformation or destruction, yet here the flames lose their effect. They extinguish upon touching her, suggesting that the power of her name is no longer valid. This disconnection points to an estrangement from her previous identity, which is likely rooted in both her traumatic past and her shifting sense of self in a new cultural environment. Ultimately, this moment captures the narrator's duality – caught between the identity that has been ascribed to her and the one she is trying to construct. The name is no longer a marker of belonging, but a ghost of who she used to be, made even more painful by its recognition by others and its increasing irrelevance to her lived experience.

The next comment that "it was my father who taught me how to do this, how to keep moving even when a bone in the leg was broken or a muscle in the chest was torn"[134] reveals how the narrator has inherited not only trauma but also a survival strategy rooted in emotional suppression and endurance. Jeffers comments that her father's resilience, forged through pain, becomes a model she adopts but transforms. While he may have used this strength to endure and stay within the context of the Vietnam War, she uses it to break away. This duality reflects both empathy and distance, as she accepts what he taught her, but applies it to escape the identity and past he represents.[135] Overall, her namelessness becomes a site where trauma and resistance converge. As she lives between cultures, languages, and histories, it creates a hybrid identity – one that may be perceived as unstable and fluid. Thus, the absence of a name is not merely a withholding from the reader but a representation of the narrator's ongoing negotiation with identity, memory, and belonging in the aftermath of displacement and inherited pain.

The father's struggle with spelling his name in English adds another layer to the narrative's complex engagement with identity and belonging. While his name is explicitly stated, unlike the narrator's, it still does not grant him a stable or secure sense of self. On the contrary, the scene where he repeatedly tries and fails to spell his name reveals a profound sense of disorientation and alienation:

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[134] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 100.
[135] Asha Jeffers, "'I Was Certain I Saw My Future in Him'", 11.

> before he could spell out his whole name, the letter preceding the one to appear would often be gone. Like a blind man circling a small room, searching for but always missing the door that led to the hallway, the stress, the open air, he would repeat each letter of his name over and over again, in a tone more hushed and halting than the time before.[136]

In this excerpt, the simile deepens the portrayal of the father's disorientation and emotional entrapment. The description of a blind man trapped in a confined space serves as a representation of his psychological state, one marked by spatial and symbolic limitation. The small room can be interpreted as the mental and cultural enclosure in which he finds himself after migration: a space too narrow to accommodate the full scope of his identity and experiences, yet one he cannot escape. The act of circling reinforces the cyclical, repetitive nature of his struggle, suggesting that he is locked in a perpetual search for release. Moreover, his blindness, in this context, is not physical but symbolic because he is unable to orient himself within the new cultural and linguistic system, thus unable to access the door that might lead to relief, integration, or self-acceptance.

It is further mentioned that: "[e]ven when he was able to spell his whole name, he couldn't quite trust that this was he himself. Were these the letters? Was this his name?"[137] The father's alienation from his own name, particularly his inability to confirm if it is really his name, underscores the failure of cultural translation. In the host country, his name loses its symbolic resonance and function. This symbolic breakdown is not just personal, but it also reflects the exclusion of immigrants from dominant cultural narratives. His identity, shaped through Vietnamese linguistic and cultural frameworks, becomes unintelligible in the American context. His name, which was once a signifier of self, now becomes foreign, uncertain, and estranged. This dynamic can also be understood within the framework described by Linda Trinh Võ, a professor at the University of California. She observes that studies assessing the level of Asian American assimilation often rely on a rigid binary, categorizing individuals either as *gangsters*, representing non-assimilation, or as *model minorities*, symbolizing successful assimilation into American society.[138] Ha applies this perspective to Le's novel, suggesting that the categorization of *gangsters* may help explain the title, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. By casting Ba, the fictional father, as a *gangster*, the novel highlights his perceived failure to assimilate and frames his identity confusion within broader struggles with cultural

[136] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 114-115.
[137] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 115.
[138] Linda Trinh Võ, "Vietnamese American Trajectories: Dimensions of Diaspora," *Amerasia Journal, 29, no.* 1 (2003): x.

displacement. Ba's fractured relationship with language, exemplified by his inability to spell and trust his own name, can be seen as a symbol of both societal exclusion and internalized alienation.[139]

In contrast, the narrator's refusal to disclose her name operates as an active form of resistance and self-reinvention. Both the father's struggle and the daughter's silence reflect the deep impact of inherited trauma: the daughter's uncertainty about her identity mirrors her father's fractured self-perception, shaped by the scars of war, migration, and social marginalization. His trauma, likely rooted in his experiences of the Vietnam War and exacerbated by his inability to find acceptance in the United States, manifests in symptoms of PTSD, as well as in his loss of linguistic and cultural attachment. Overall, the motif of naming in the novel serves as a symbol for the destabilization of identity under conditions of trauma, migration, and hybridity. Both characters exist within the Third Space described by Homi Bhabha, negotiating between histories, languages, and cultures. Their fragmented relationships with their own names highlight different aspects of hybrid identity: the narrator's fluid, evolving self contrasts with the father's painful sense of estrangement and loss.

[139] Ha, "Conspiracy of Silence," 10.

5. Language

This chapter discusses the role of language, both as a medium of expression and a mechanism of exclusion in shaping the invisibility and agency of marginalized subjects**.** The concept of language is particularly relevant to the narratives in question, where questions of visibility, voice, and power are central to the portrayal of identity and trauma.

Starting with language in general, Ashcroft et al. explain the importance of language in postcolonial discourse by stating that language occupies a central role in postcolonial discourse because the colonial process itself begins with linguistics. Control over language, whether through the suppression of indigenous tongues, the elevation of imperial language as a normative standard, or its imposition in new territories, remains one of the most effective instruments of cultural control. Language not only frames how reality is perceived but also assigns meaning to the world through naming. Its embedded values, conceptions of history, geography, identity, and social difference, become the foundation upon which colonial economic, political, and cultural systems are built. In addition, one of the most subtle aspects of linguistic power lies in naming, which serves as a means of rendering the colonized world intelligible and therefore controllable. For example, the term African reflects European historical constructs that often ignore the complex cultural, linguistic, and economic distinctions within the continent. Therefore, to name something is to claim authority over it. Furthermore, the institutionalization of the colonial language through education systems helped anchor the worldview it represented, reinforcing its dominance as the lens through which both colonizers and the colonized came to understand reality.[140]

The authors of *The Empire Writes Back* further elaborate on the importance of language by stating that in postcolonial literature, language is not merely a means of communication but a powerful instrument of resistance and cultural redefinition. In order to challenge the dominance of the colonial center, postcolonial writing often reclaims and reshapes the colonizer's language, adapting it to reflect the realities of the colonized context. This process unfolds in two key ways. The first, which is called *abrogation*, involves rejecting the authority and prestige of standard English as dictated by the colonial center. The second, *appropriation*, consists of adapting and transforming the language to fit new, localized meanings – thereby creating a linguistic distance from colonial power and asserting cultural autonomy. To explain the terms in more detail, abrogation involves rejecting the cultural categories imposed by

[140] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 261.

imperial discourse, including its aesthetics, its prescriptive norms for correct language use, and its claims to fixed, inherent meaning. This act is central to the decolonization of language and the emergence of alternative modes of expression. However, without the accompanying process of appropriation, abrogation risks remaining a mere inversion of colonial norms – still bound to the structures it seeks to resist. On the other hand, appropriation is "the process by which the language is taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience,"[141] or, as Raja Rao, an Indian-American writer, explains "to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own."[142] The authors of *The Empire Writes Back* further comment that this adaptation allows the language to serve as a tool for diverse cultural experiences, even among communities that may appear similar. All postcolonial literatures, then, are inherently cross-cultural, as they navigate the space between inherited linguistic forms and localized meaning-making. This tension between the rejection of colonial linguistic authority and the creative transformation of the language through local influence defines the practice of postcolonial writing.[143]

An example of appropriation is illustrated in *OEWBG,* where the postcolonial tension between the dominant language and lived cultural experience is reflected. The following passage demonstrates how Little Dog and his family engage with language not merely as a means of communication but as a tool of subordination and survival. When Little Dog reflects on the use of the word *sorry* in the nail salon, he writes:

> [i]n the nail salon, *sorry* is a tool one uses to pander until the word itself becomes currency. It no longer merely *apologizes,* but insists, reminds: *I'm here, right here, beneath you.* It is the lowering of oneself so that the client feels right, superior, and charitable. In the nail salon, one's definition of *sorry* is deranged into a new word entirely, one that's charged and reused as both power and defacement at once. Being sorry pays, being sorry even, or especially, when one has no fault, is worth every self-deprecating syllable the mouth allows. Because the mouth must eat.[144]

This excerpt shows how language becomes more for the family than just communication, now it serves as a survival tool, a performance of subordination, and ultimately a redefinition of meaning. The standardized English definition of sorry as an apology is altered because it becomes a form of economic and social negotiation. In this context, sorry signals not guilt but strategic submission, and emotional labor because of economic necessity. In this way, the quote

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[141] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back,* 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 37-38.
[142] Raja Rao, *Kanthapura* (New York: New Directions, 1948), vii.
[143] Ashcroft el al., *The Empire Writes Back, 38.*
[144] Vuong, *OEWBG*, 91-92.

exemplifies linguistic appropriation since the English language is made to bear the burden of a Vietnamese-American immigrant experience, and its meaning is adapted to serve a different purpose that suits the environment, now it serves as a linguistic performance meant to appease customers and secure livelihood.

Similarly, this dynamic of linguistic appropriation and survival is echoed in *The Gangster*, where a Mexican baker, working in a French bakery, learns English through cassette tapes as he moves through his daily tasks. Much like the redefinition of *sorry* in the nail salon, language here becomes more than a means of communication – it transforms into a performance of assimilation and a form of labor. The baker "listened to English-language tapes and repeated aloud the sentences and phrases as he moved around the kitchen,"[145] speaking not to another person but to his surroundings: "'[h]ello,' he said to a bag of flour. […] 'How are you?' he asked the counter. […] Of the measuring cup he asked, 'Where is the train station?' Kneading the dough, he said, 'Thank you very much.' And then, 'You are so very welcome.'"[146] The act of speaking English in this context becomes mechanical, underscoring its role as a tool for social integration rather than expression. Just as *sorry* is removed of its original emotional meaning and used to convey submission and economic necessity, the baker's mechanical repetition of English phrases reflects the pressure to conform linguistically in order to access opportunity. In both cases, English is appropriated and repurposed, since it no longer functions purely as a language but instead becomes an instrument of negotiation, where the speaker must perform fluency to be seen, heard, and allowed to survive.

Referring to language in general, this section begins by exploring how language functions or fails to function as a communication tool within the family. In *OEWBG*, language plays a central role in shaping the narrative. This is evident from the very first line, when Little Dog writes: "[d]ear Ma, I am writing to reach you – even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are."[147] The line highlights the paradox of communication in the novel because language is both a tool of connection and a reminder of distance. The narrator uses writing to bridge the emotional and generational gap with his mother. However, she cannot speak English and is illiterate because she was not able to finish her education in Vietnam due to a bombing that destroyed the elementary school she attended. Little Dog comments on his mother's language skills by saying: "[w]hen it comes to words, you possess fewer than the coins

[145] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 112.
[146] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 112.
[147] Vuong, *OEWBG*, 1.

you saved from your nail salon tips in the milk gallon under the kitchen cabinet."[148] On the contrary, Little Dog is educated in the US, and he manages to master the English language, while Rose will probably never be able to read his letters because their upbringings in completely different environments block their mutual understanding. In addition, Birgit Neumann, a professor at Heinrich Heine University in Düsseldorf, observes that Vuong's writing challenges the built-in violence and cultural dominance of the English language by reshaping it through a form of translation that emphasizes its foreignness rather than adapting it to seem familiar or natural.[149]

Similarly, in *The Gangster*, the struggle with language is presented, while not caused by a literal language barrier, but manifested as an inability to express trauma and memory. Language is explored through the lens of family relationships. Although the characters possess the language necessary to communicate, their attempts often fail because the emotional scars of a traumatic past haunt them. While *OEWBG* highlights the alienation that comes from lacking the language of power, *The Gangster* shifts the focus inward, portraying how trauma can silence language even when words are available. In both cases, communication fails, but for fundamentally different reasons. An example of an indirect language barrier in *The Gangster* is portrayed when the narrator says: "[t]here is not a trace of blood anywhere except here, in my throat, where I am telling you all this."[150] This quote emphasizes how language becomes the source of pain, suggesting that speaking or narrating one's experience is itself a painful act. The trauma is encoded in the voice, specifically in the very attempt to articulate what has happened**.** Moreover, another passage underscores the emotional burden of linguistic failure: "I would choose falling asleep on rooftops and on the lawns of strangers to lying in my own bed, surrounded by knots of memories I had no language with which to unravel."[151] Here, the absence of language to process or express memory symbols the narrator's alienation since she is left alone with her memories, unable to share them with anybody. The memories remain unspoken, unprocessed, which illustrates that even when one shares the same language as others, trauma can render communication impossible. This inability to communicate is further complicated by the silence surrounding the above-mentioned death of the narrator's brother, which remains a deeply painful and unresolved family trauma. The family avoids speaking about him, as if language itself would make the loss more real or unbearable. This unspoken

[148] Vuong, *OEWBG*, 29.
[149]Birgit Neumann, "'Our Mother Tongue, Then, Is No Mother at All – but an Orphan': The Mother Tongue and Translation in Ocean Vuong's on Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous," *Anglia* 138, no. 2 (June 4, 2020): 292.
[150] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 99.
[151] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 117.

grief creates emotional distance between family members, and language becomes a space of avoidance rather than connection. Language in both novels does more than reflect culture, it embodies trauma, power, and survival. However, what happens when language fails entirely, or when one cannot speak at all? This question leads to the topic of subalternity and otherness.

6. Subalternity and otherness

This chapter introduces two key theoretical concepts – Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the *subaltern* and Edward Said's concept of *otherness*. Both frameworks are essential for understanding the dynamics of marginalization and representation within the texts under analysis. While Spivak's concept of the subaltern focuses on those whose voices are systematically silenced within both colonial and postcolonial discourses, Said's theory of otherness lays the groundwork for examining how dominant cultures construct and define the marginalized *Other*.

The theme of language in postcolonial theory naturally leads to the question of who is allowed to speak and be heard, which is a concern that is explored by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the *subaltern*. While language can function as a medium of cultural expression and potential resistance, it can simultaneously operate as a mechanism of silencing those who exist outside dominant power structures. This tension becomes particularly evident in Spivak's interrogation of voice, agency, and representation in relation to marginalized subjects. Although silence is often understood in binary opposition to speech, this thesis approaches silence not merely as the absence of language or vocalization, but as a condition that may reflect deeper realities such as trauma or the structural impossibility of being heard within dominant social frameworks. Silence, in this sense, is not simply a passive state but can result from systemic forms of exclusion and marginalization. Importantly, silence may also carry meanings of its own: it can signal resistance, a refusal to conform to imposed categories, or the presence of experiences that resist articulation within dominant discourse. Rather than being the opposite of speech, silence emerges as a complex phenomenon, one that can simultaneously embody loss, agency, and constraint.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is an Indian literary theorist known for her valuable work in postcolonial theory. Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) remains a foundational text in postcolonial theory, interrogating the limits of representation for marginalized voices within dominant discourses. Graham K. Riach, a professor at the University of Amsterdam, suggests that the title of the above-mentioned essay can be considered somewhat misleading. Although it undoubtedly investigates the question of whether subalterns can speak, its deeper concern lies in whether they can truly be heard. Various factors hinder the ability of the subaltern to speak, the most significant being that individuals in positions of power, such as scholars, religious authorities, and other privileged figures, often speak on behalf of the subaltern. In doing so, they silence these marginalized voices and take away their power.

Therefore, if subalterns were given both the ability to speak and a platform where their voices could genuinely be heard, they might finally gain meaningful political representation.[152]

According to Childs and Williams, Spivak draws on a range of influences – from Marxism and feminism to deconstruction and poststructuralism. In addition, the tendency of Western intellectuals to speak on behalf of the oppressed, reinforcing the concept of silencing, is criticized.[153] Praveen V. Ambesang, an assistant professor of English, adds that central to Spivak's argument is the concept of the subaltern, which refers to individuals who have been and continue to be marginalized by the prevailing Western culture. As for the origin of the word, the subaltern comes from a military term which means of a lower rank. Spivak borrowed this term from Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and redefined the term to describe those who exist outside hegemonic power structures and are thereby rendered inaudible within mainstream frameworks.[154]

Riach adds that Spivak examines how academic work, particularly that produced in the West, often distorts representations of so-called Third World populations, meaning people from developing nations. Moreover, the role of subaltern women is explored since their position is underscored by their dual marginalization: first, as colonized subjects, and second, as women. In addition, a key concept in her argument is *epistemic violence*, which refers to harm done through ideas, language, and writing, rather than physical force. One example of this is how historical narratives often exclude subaltern voices. When oppressed groups are denied the chance to tell their own stories or have their experiences acknowledged, they are essentially erased from history. This silencing is especially severe for subaltern women.[155] As Spivak puts it: "[i]f, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow."[156] In her view, both colonialism and patriarchy work together to suppress the voices of these women.[157]

In the essay, Spivak ultimately concludes that "the subaltern cannot speak"[158] because they are consistently spoken for by those in positions of power and denied the opportunity to represent themselves. Even when subalterns do manage to speak, their voices are not truly heard

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[152] Graham K. Riach, *A Macat Analysis of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Can the Subaltern Speak?* (London: Macat International Limited, 2016), 11.
[153] Childs et al., *An Introduction,* 157.
[154] Praveen V. Ambesang, "Postcolonialism, Gayatri Spivak and the Subaltern: Struggle and Voices of the Disenfranchised," *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)* 9, no. 1 (2021): 340.
[155] Riach, *A Macat Analysis*, 11.
[156] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* ed. Cary Nelson (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), 287.
[157] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 287.
[158] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 308.

or acknowledged. Riach explains that Spivak defines speaking not merely as vocalizing words, but as a dialogic act that requires both a speaker and a responsive listener.[159] Spivak observes that "[w]hen you say cannot speak, it means that if speaking involves speaking and listening, this possibility of response, responsibility, does not exist in the subaltern's sphere."[160] Riach comments that without someone truly listening and responding, speech fails to function as communication. For example, a poor laborer might say: "[n]o matter how hard I work, my family doesn't have enough to eat," but unless that statement is heard and taken seriously by someone who can act on it, it remains ineffective. It is concluded that subaltern speech fails to transmit its message in a way that can lead to recognition or change, and therefore cannot truly be considered speech in a political or transformative sense.[161]

Riach summarizes that Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* is considered a foundational text in postcolonial studies and has frequently been reprinted in various collections of her work and translated into numerous languages, such as Spanish, German, Chinese, and Hebrew. What sets it apart is its distinctive combination of deconstructionist and feminist theory to critique the social, cultural, and political consequences of colonialism.[162]

Building on the topic of language and subaltern voices, the concept of *otherness* becomes essential as it captures how characters are marked as fundamentally different, often exoticized, silenced, or dehumanized by the dominant culture. In the texts analyzed, characters are repeatedly perceived as the *Other* due to their language, cultural background, or racial identity. The concept of otherness is connected to Edward Said's critical work *Orientalism* (1978), which is widely regarded as one of the foundational texts in postcolonial theory. Edward Said was a prominent literary theorist and cultural critic. Known for his groundbreaking work *Orientalism*, Said played a key role in shaping postcolonial studies and brought attention to issues of identity, imperialism, and representation. According to David Herman, a professor at North Carolina State University, Edward Wadie Said, born in Jerusalem in 1935 to Palestinian Christian parents and raised in Cairo, emerged as the most prominent Palestinian intellectual. His voice gained global significance during a period when Islam, the state of Israel, and Middle Eastern affairs were becoming central to international political discourse.[163]

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[159] Riach, *A Macat Analysis*, 12.
[160] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Leon de Kock, "Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 23, no. 3 (1992): 46.
[161] Riach, *A Macat Analysis*, 12.
[162] Riach, *A Macat Analysis*, 12.
[163] David Herman, "Edward Said (1935-2003)," *Salmagundi*, no. 143 (2004): 78.

Shehla Burney, a professor at Queen's University at Kingston, states that Said's *Orientalism* critically examines how the West has historically represented the East, arguing that these portrayals are not neutral but are instead shaped by power dynamics and serve to construct the Orient as the ultimate Other.[164] According to Said, non-European countries were consistently portrayed as exotic, mysterious, and underdeveloped.[165] Moreover, Said explains Orientalism in practice as "a systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period."[166] In other words, Said asserts that the Orient was not originally a reality but a Western cultural invention – a projection of traits that the West refused to acknowledge in itself, such as cruelty, irrationality, or sensuality.[167] Anita Dimitrijovska-Jankulovska and Milica Denkovska, lecturers at Cyril and Methodius University in Macedonia, state that Said's primary aim was to uncover how Europe and America constructed specific ideas and images of the Orient. Through contrasting themselves with the East, Western societies were able to define their own identities in opposition to what they deemed the Other.[168]

Burney adds that *Orientalism* had a profound and lasting impact across the humanities and social sciences, reshaping disciplines such as Literary Studies, Anthropology, Cultural Studies, History, Politics, Women's Studies, Media Studies, Indigenous Studies, and Fine Arts. Moreover, Said's work marked a major turning point in how the East is viewed and understood. In general, *Orientalism* reveals how deeply rooted systems of power, knowledge, cultural dominance, and imperial ideology are embedded in colonial discourse, which consistently frames the Orient as fundamentally different and inferior.[169] Jankulovska and Denkovska note that these portrayals of the Orient contributed to the formation of otherness as a key concept in postcolonial theory. The term refers to how colonized peoples are marginalized, defined by their difference from the imperial center, and represented as a homogeneous group with undesirable traits. In colonial discourse, any non-European space is often perceived as inferior, threatening, or insignificant. Yet this construction of the Other is not always consistent since

[164] Shehla Burney, "Orientalism: The Making of the Other," *Counterpoints* 417 (2012): 23.
[165] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1978), 51.
[166] Said, *Orientalism*, 3.
[167] Said, *Orientalism*, 4.
[168] Anita Dimitrijovska-Jankulovska, and Milica Denkovska, "Postcolonial 'Otherness,'" *SCIENCE International Journal* 2, no. 1 (2023): 47.
[169] Burney, "Orientalism," 23.

there is a noticeable duality. The Other is at times viewed as dangerous and barbaric, while at other times seen as passive and harmless.[170]

In this thesis, the concept of otherness will be examined in connection with language, subaltern identity, and whiteness, particularly concerning the experiences of Vietnamese immigrants in the USA. Otherness will serve as a critical lens to explore how linguistic and racial differences contribute to marginalization and to the positioning of non-white, non-native individuals as outsiders within a dominant cultural society. In this thesis, the process of being othered is not only seen as a marker of exclusion but also a source of postcolonial trauma since it reflects the effects of cultural alienation, historical displacement, and the enduring impact of colonial ideologies. Through this perspective, the thesis aims to reveal how narratives of identity and trauma are shaped by the ongoing dynamics of power, belonging, and resistance.

In *OEWBG*, language plays a crucial role not only in communication within the family but also in how individuals are perceived and treated within the broader American society. While language plays an important role between Rose and Little Dog, it also becomes a marker of difference in public spaces. Their limited English proficiency not only creates practical barriers but also signals their outsider status, thus being seen as the Other. As a result, language becomes a site of vulnerability, where miscommunication leads to embarrassment, exclusion, and, at times, direct discrimination. This shift from familial environment to public alienation reveals how language shapes their experiences of otherness and exposes them to acts of bullying and marginalization. The emotional and psychological toll of marginalization due to language barriers affects not only the first-generation immigrants but also the second generation. From an early age, Little Dog faces discrimination and racial bullying, such as when a boy on the school bus grabs him, and demands: "'[s]peak English,' 'don't you ever say nothin'? Don't you speak English?' […] He was only nine but had already mastered the dialect of damaged American fathers."[171] The boy continues to mock his silence and pushes Little Dog's head into the window. However, for Little Dog, the trauma does not end at the bus station, as he comments: "I let their laughter enter me."[172] Little Dog feels helpless since he does not receive any help, and he lets their mockery get into his head since he sees it as a lasting and weakening marker of his place in American society. Juliana Chang, a professor at Santa Clara University, observes that "[s]hame is the feeling that one is bare, vulnerable, and exposed to the gaze of the

[170] Dimitrijovska-Jankulovska, and Denkovska, "Postcolonial 'Otherness,'" 47.
[171] Vuong, *OEWBG*, 24.
[172] Vuong, *OEWBG*, 25.

Other."[173] Gibbons connects this quote with Little Dog's situation since it expresses the shame Little Dog feels in that moment. His vulnerability, his silence, and his perceived weakness are clearly visible to the bully who, despite being only nine years old, has already learned the behavior and language shaped by racism and patriarchal power.[174] Moreover, the shame that Little Dog feels is not brief, but it is internalized and shapes Little Dog's understanding of himself and his social position.

Similarly, a more subtle yet impactful moment of alienation occurs in *The Gangster* when the narrator recalls her first day of school. When she comes as the first Vietnamese child and her teacher introduces her to the class by "holding a globe in one hand as [the teacher] gave it a spin with the other [hand], and then pointing with her finger at an S-shaped curve near a body of water."[175] This classroom scene introduces not only the narrator's isolation but also the subtle ways in which educational systems mark and exoticize those perceived as different. The teacher's act of pointing to Vietnam on the globe attempts to explain the narrator's origins to her peers, but in doing so, it turns her into a representation of foreignness rather than a member of the class. Therefore, the narrator is not introduced as an individual but rather as geographically mapped, and her identity is reduced to a shape on the globe. Thus, instead of being incorporated as a classmate, she is framed as a foreign body isolated from the collective. This notion is further developed when the narrator describes how she feels about the situation: "[a]s I stood before them in a dress the color of an Easter egg, with my feet encased in clear plastic sandals, the other students looked at the globe and then back at me again. Some whispered behind their hands. Some just stared. I imagined the stripes on my underwear flashing on and off, like traffic signals, under the dress."[176] This excerpt deepens the emotional resonance of the narrator's alienation by focusing on her embodied self-consciousness. The hyper-awareness of her clothing and imagined exposure reflects the intensity of being under observation and feeling exposed. Moreover, the other children's whispers and stares compound the shame, turning a moment meant to welcome the girl into the class into social isolation and being seen as the Other.

Later in *The Gangster*, the narrator describes another situation in which her identity is reduced to a linguistic label and thus being seen as the Other: "[t]hey call us Yang because one year a bunch of Laotian kids with the last name Yang came to our school. The Navy Housing

[173] Juliana Chang, *Inhuman Citizenship: Traumatic Enjoyment and Asian American Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 66.
[174] Gibbons, *Asian American War Stories*, 127.
[175] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 19.
[176] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 19.

kids started calling all the refugee kids 'Yang.'"[177] This naming reduces the narrator and her peers to a single foreign identity, regardless of their actual national or personal background. Just like the scene in which the teacher points to Vietnam on a globe to introduce her, this form of naming reveals the tendency to oversimplify and generalize non-American students. In both cases, language is not used to include or welcome, but to categorize, isolate, and ultimately erase difference through misrecognition, which ultimately leads to the feeling of otherness.

Referring back to *OEWBG*, particularly to the bullying that Little Dog experiences on the school bus. In response to the above-mentioned bullying, Little Dog tries to assimilate himself to fit into the American environment. His mother suggests that Little Dog drink American milk, believing it will make him stronger and help him better assimilate into American society. As he drinks it, Little Dog reflects: "both of us hoping the whiteness vanishing into me would make more of a yellow boy. I'm drinking light, I thought. I'm filling myself with light. The milk would erase all the dark inside me with a flood of brightness."[178] This moment reveals the understanding of racial hierarchies, as both the mother and the son equate whiteness with strength, acceptance, and visibility. The act of drinking milk becomes a symbol for attempting to absorb whiteness, to cleanse oneself of perceived racial and cultural deficiency. Furthermore, it illustrates their shared hope that proximity to whiteness will protect him from being marked as the Other.

This internalized association between whiteness and acceptance is mirrored, though more indirectly, in *The Gangster*, where whiteness operates not through explicit reflection but through visual and spatial symbolism. In *The Gangster*, whiteness is positioned as a normative and desirable standard, associated with order, cleanliness, and belonging. This view is expressed in a moment when Mel insists that the uncles paint the walls using white color because "[i]t's clean."[179] While the comment seems ordinary, it implicitly reinforces whiteness as not only aesthetically superior but also morally and socially preferable. Unlike the apparent symbolism in *OEWBG*, the reflection on whiteness in *Gangster* is more subtle, and operates through implication and atmosphere rather than explicit self-reflection.

In addition, the relationship between Little Dog and Trevor in *OEWBG* further complicates and deepens the theme of whiteness. As Little Dog reflects: "[Trevor] was white, I never forgot this. He was always white. […] I was yellow. In the dark, our facts lit us up and

[177] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 89.
[178] Vuong, *OEWBG*, 27.
[179] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 10.

our acts pinned us down."[180] Despite their emotional and physical intimacy, the racial divide between them remains inescapable. Their bodies, even in darkness, are marked by color, which determines their power and visibility. When Little Dog describes Trevor as "the hunter, […] the carnivore,"[181] it aligns Trevor with the figure of the colonizer, one who dominates, consumes, and takes, while casting Little Dog as the colonized, the object of that consumption. Overall, the language evokes a dynamic of conquest and submission, which suggests that their intimacy is always haunted by a broader structure of racialized power. What might appear as love or desire is entangled with domination and reveals how deeply colonial and racial narratives shape personal relationships. Furthermore, the power dynamic between Little Dog and Trevor becomes even more significant when the meaning of the narrator's name is taken into consideration. Little Dog is not merely a nickname, but a protective gesture from his grandmother – an act of love expressed through apparent degradation. In Vietnamese tradition, children are sometimes given unflattering or humble names to ward off evil spirits. Therefore, in this context, the name Little Dog functions as a paradoxical term of endearment. The name becomes a symbol of vulnerability masked as worthlessness – a defense mechanism for survival. It is even explained that the name can be interpreted as "the more tender one."[182] When positioned against Trevor – the white, masculine, and dominant figure – Little Dog's name further underscores his symbolic role as the submissive, thus the colonized. Within their relationship, Little Dog is not only a lover but also a colonized body, someone who has been taught to make himself seem less visible in order to stay alive. While the relationship with Trevor reveals how race and colonial dynamics shape intimacy, another embodied moment of otherness occurs not in romance but in the public sphere, as shown in a humiliating scene at the butchery, which is to be described.

The experience of being cast as the Other intensifies in a humiliating moment at the butchery when Little Dog's mother, unable to speak English, attempts to mimic an ox in order to communicate with the butcher. It becomes one of the most devastating depictions of shame and exclusion because she starts to perform the animal with her body while making mooing sounds, and then she "move[s], carefully twisting and gyrating so [the butcher] could recognize each piece of this performance: horns, tail, ox. But [the butcher] only laughed, his hand over his mouth at first, then louder, booming."[183] Rather than offering help, the butcher laughs and

[180] Vuong, *OEWBG*, 111-12.
[181] Vuong, *OEWBG*, 155.
[182] Vuong, *OEWBG*, 18.
[183] Vuong, *OEWBG*, 30.

reduces her performance to a spectacle. When Rose asks Little Dog to translate what they want to buy, he is not able to do it because of his limited language skills, and they leave the shop with different goods than they originally wanted to buy. This scene underscores how language, or the lack of it, can remove a person of dignity and mark them as foreign, even subhuman, which also functions as a performance of otherness, since Rose is dehumanized. In response, Little Dog asks:

> what if the mother tongue is stunted? What if the tongue is not only the symbol of a void, but is itself a void, what if the tongue is cut out? […] Our mother tongue, then, is no mother at all – but an orphan. Our Vietnamese a time capsule, a mark where your education ended, ashed. Ma, to speak in our mother tongue is to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war."[184]

In this instance, language is not seen as a source of identity or connection, but a wound, rendered useless in a society that demands English as a condition for belonging. Neumann explains that in this context, the concept of the mother tongue loses its symbolic connotations and is taken literally as the mother's language, which Little Dog inherits from his mother. However, his mother's speech exhibits discontinuity and rupture instead of the emotive continuity that the mother tongue usually provides, since it bears the scars of historical and political oppression. Moreover, for Little Dog, language dispossession is not merely symbolic but it becomes an absence that affects his sense of self. The quote underscores the connection between language and the body by framing the tongue as a void, a site of disintegration. In this way, linguistic insufficiency is shown to threaten both bodily integrity and one's embodied sense of identity.[185] According to Rebecca L. Walkowitz, a professor at Rutgers University, this fragmentation destabilizes the notion of linguistic possessivism, which conveys ideas of an independent, self-contained person who, in addition to a language, possesses "unique, permanent qualities that permit him or her to exercise sovereignty and free will."[186] Furthermore, the last part that compares the mother tongue to war can be seen as a reminder of the war that continues to structure Vietnamese-American relations and reshape the relationship between language and community. Neumann observes that the change from the notion of the mother tongue to that of the orphan tongue replaces the family romance with traumatic solitude and alienation. Instead of imagining language as the basis of a seemingly natural community, Vuong's text suggests that for Little Dog, as for many other speakers of Vietnamese, there is no given or original

[184] Vuong, *OEWBG*, 31-32.
[185] Neumann, "'Our Mother Tongue,'" 285.
[186] Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 26.

ground for an ethnic community.[187] Although the scene in the butchery centers on language and shame, *The Gangster* addresses otherness through a more resistant lens, focusing on spatial belonging and misrecognition.

In contrast to the scene in the butchery shop, the sense of being marked as the Other is echoed in *The Gangster*, even though in different forms of realization. The Little Girl acknowledges how outsiders perceive her community: "[s]ome people think it's dirty but they don't know much about us."[188] Her voice, however, resists this imposed judgment, countering it by foregrounding the hidden beauty of her neighborhood: "[t]hey haven't seen our gardens full of lemongrass, mint, cilantro and basil […] How about the Great Wall of China that snakes like a river from the top of the steep hill off Crandall Drive…?"[189] This passage reveals the tension between perception and reality, between the dominant culture's ignorance and the lived experience of the Vietnamese American. Rather than internalizing the shame projected onto her community, the Girl reclaims her environment as a site of cultural pride and continuity. Yet the very need to defend or explain this beauty highlights the persistent condition of otherness, where the community must constantly assert its value in the face of external misunderstanding or dismissal.

Moreover, the theme of otherness becomes fully visible when the family is evicted by a new building owner in Linda Vista, who assumes that his lower-income Asian tenants will not be able to afford the rent. The family's socioeconomic position leaves them with no means to resist this decision. In this way, they are placed in a subaltern position, not because they are silent, but because they lack the power and representation to contest the eviction. As it was introduced in the theoretical part about subalternity, the subaltern is not merely someone who is oppressed, but someone who cannot speak in a way that is recognized by dominant systems of meaning and power. Here, the family's lack of access to institutional recourse renders them voiceless in the face of displacement. In response, Ma breaks down in the car:

> "I want to know, I want to know … who is doing this to us?" Hiccupping she says, "I want to know, why – why there's always a fence. Why there's always someone on the outside wanting someone … something on the inside and between them … this … sharp fence. Why are we always leaving like this?"[190]

[187] Neumann, "'Our Mother Tongue,'" 285.
[188] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 90.
[189] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 90.
[190] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 97.

In this quote, the mother's grief reveals not only immediate emotional pain but also accumulated historical trauma, specifically the repeated experience of displacement, instability, and exclusion. The symbolic reference to the fence functions on multiple levels: as a literal barrier that separates the family from home and belonging, and as a symbolic structure of power that divides the included from the excluded, the citizens from the perpetual outsiders. The sharp fence may suggest not only separation but also violence, since it is not a neutral boundary, but one that wounds. This image symbolizes the persistent condition of being kept at the threshold of American life: close enough to be visible, but never truly allowed in, which corresponds with the concept of otherness as spatial a symbolic exclusion. This moment represents not just a moment of economic vulnerability, but it is a deeper crisis of identity and belonging, one that reinforces how systems of race, class, and nationality repeatedly position Vietnamese refugees as unwanted. In this way, the act of being evicted is not a singular injustice, but a reiteration of a longer history of displacement – first by war, then by migration, and finally by structural racism in the host country. This cyclical experience of being cast out parallels the alienation experienced in *OEWBG*, where the inability to fully pass linguistically reinforces feelings of exclusion.

The importance of English is shown when Little Dog confirms his awareness that English is crucial in the USA by saying: "[e]ven when [Rose] looked the part, [her] tongue outed [her]. One does not 'pass' in America, it seems, without English."[191] This quote highlights Little Dog's understanding of how language functions as one of the main means to be accepted in American society. His observation underscores how a lack of mastery in English can mark someone as foreign, regardless of appearance. In this way, language becomes a tool of social sorting, reinforcing who belongs and who remains an outsider. The idea that one does not pass without English reveals how language is tied to legitimacy and assimilation. Therefore, English does not serve just as a means of communication, but it is a marker of cultural inclusion and power.

Referring again to the traumatic event in the butchery shop, Little Dog responds to his family's embarrassment by making a vow: "never [to] be wordless when you needed me to speak for you. So began my career as our family's official interpreter. 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."[192] Little Dog takes responsibility and becomes the necessary connection between Lan, Rose, and American society.

[191] Vuong, *OEWBG*, 52.
[192] Vuong, *OEWBG*, 32.

In this way, it is illustrated how Little Dog takes on the role of mediator between his family and the dominant culture and becomes their voice in a society that leaves them linguistically invisible. His decision to never be wordless again in moments of need is not just an act of love, but one of political and cultural necessity. In doing so, he becomes a translator of the subaltern, those who exist outside structures of institutional power and cannot easily speak or be heard within dominant discourse. In this case, it is his mother, Rose, because as a non-English speaker, she occupies a subaltern position in the U.S. context: she is voiceless in public spaces, her presence is marked by misunderstanding and humiliation, like in the butcher shop. Only through Little Dog's interpretation does she gain access to visibility and legibility in American society. Overall, this excerpt shows the representation of the subaltern who cannot be heard unless someone else speaks for her. Therefore, language reveals the struggle to make the marginalized recognized within dominant systems. Ha, and Tompkins add that Little Dog's story can be visible and meaningful within the American context only by writing it in English.[193] As Viet Thanh Nguyen, a Vietnamese-American professor and novelist, points out, American studies typically only engages with texts in English, highlighting the need to use the dominant language to gain recognition.[194] Similarly, Neumann argues that while Vuong gives voice to characters like Rose and Lan, doing so in English reinforces the very Anglocentrism that demands such translation.[195] Although learning English and receiving an American education gave Little Dog the tools to tell his story, finding his voice required overcoming years of being silent and invisible.

Similarly, the importance of English is acknowledged in *The Gangster* when Ba establishes his gardening service and chooses the name "Tom's Professional Gardening Service."[196] By selecting an American-sounding name, Ba attempts to align his business with mainstream expectations, using English as a strategy to gain credibility and acceptance in a predominantly white, English-speaking society. Moreover, the Little Girl becomes his secretary because she "speak[s] the best English,"[197] which also highlights the pressures placed on immigrant children to bridge the linguistic and cultural divide between their families and the outside world. Overall, in both narratives, English becomes more than a practical necessity

[193] Ha, and Tompkins, "'The Truth,'" 215.
[194] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Refugee Memories and Asian American Critique," *Asia Critique,* vol. 20, no. 3, (2012): 919.
[195] Neumann, "'Our Mother Tongue,'" 290.
[196] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 89-90.
[197] Thúy, *The Gangster*, 90.

because it represents access to economic opportunity, social legitimacy, and a way to navigate the immigrant experience.

7. Conclusion

Both *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* offer insights into the Vietnamese American experience, particularly through the lens of trauma, identity, and displacement. By exploring these themes across different generations and narrative styles, both novels deepen the understanding of the long-term effects of war, migration, and marginalization.

Chapter three explores the causes and manifestations of postcolonial trauma in the two novels. In *The Gangster*, the chapter highlights the impact of the reeducation camps and the forced migration of the so-called boat people following the Vietnam War. In *OEWBG*, it focuses on the poverty that compelled the family to flee Vietnam, as well as the continuing economic hardship they experience after arriving in the United States. The second part of the chapter examines post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with particular attention to two relevant symptoms: intrusive re-experiencing of traumatic events and avoidance. These symptoms are compared in the context of both novels, as each character processes trauma differently. The analysis demonstrates how avoidance-related symptoms manifest in the character of Ba in *The Gangster*, and this is subsequently compared to Lan in *OEWBG*, who repeatedly returns to her traumatic memories. The chapter also discusses how the loss of a close family member can contribute to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder. In both novels, although the trauma is expressed differently, it results in an intergenerational impact, which shows how unprocessed trauma affects not only the direct victims but also those who come after them.

Part of the third chapter is devoted to the theme of intergenerational trauma. In *OEWBG*, this theme is explored through Lan's vivid storytelling, which makes Little Dog feel emotionally involved in experiences that predate his own life. Moreover, Little Dog is influenced by his mother's trauma as well, since it manifests in violent outbursts towards him. In contrast, *The Gangster* introduces the concept of a conspiracy of silence, where the narrator's parents remain silent about their past. This silence, while serving as a coping mechanism, ultimately becomes a burden passed onto their child. For the Little Girl, the absence of open communication creates a sense of alienation, as she is left without answers or understanding.

Because both novels employ a poetic style, the recurring image of butterflies is analyzed as a metaphor reflecting different aspects of trauma and identity. In *OEWBG*, butterflies symbolize the transmission of trauma across generations. In contrast, in *The Gangster*, butterflies are associated with the narrator's personal sense of identity and emotional isolation. Here, the

butterfly becomes a symbol of entrapment, reflecting the narrator's feeling of being lost and confined in a foreign environment.

Chapter four introduces the concept of hybridity introduced by Homi K. Bhabha. It is concluded that non-linear storytelling contributes to the notion of hybrid identity. The constant shifting between past and present, and trying to figure out life in the new country complicates the search for identity. Moreover, in *OEWBG*, the non-linear storytelling captures the fragmented nature of trauma since it resurfaces in waves, which is reflected in the structure of the novel.

The analysis in chapter four also deals with the symbolic role of the narrator's namelessness in *The Gangster*. It is stated that her namelessness becomes a space in which trauma and resistance intersect. While existing among different cultural, linguistic, and historical boundaries, she develops a hybrid identity shaped by displacement. Thus, her namelessness is not simply an omission but a deliberate reflection of her fluid and unsettled sense of self, shaped by inherited trauma and ongoing processes of negotiation with memory and belonging. In contrast, her father's troubled relationship with his own name is explored. Although his name is explicitly stated, his repeated inability to spell it correctly in English reveals a deeper sense of confusion and alienation. This repeated failure signals his disrupted identity and highlights how trauma, migration, and linguistic displacement have destabilized his sense of self. Overall, these examples illustrate how the act of naming (or its absence) functions as a metaphor for fractured identity in the context of trauma and hybridity. The daughter's silence and the father's linguistic struggle are both marked by inherited pain, historical dislocation, and cultural marginalization. Their fragmented relationships with their own names highlight different aspects of hybrid identity: the narrator's fluid, evolving self contrasts with the father's painful sense of estrangement and loss.

Chapter five focuses on the role of language within trauma narratives. It begins by introducing two key concepts from postcolonial theory: abrogation and appropriation. While abrogation is mentioned, the analysis centers on appropriation, as it appears in both novels. Appropriation here symbolizes how language shifts from being a primary tool of communication to becoming a means of performing subordination and reconfiguring meaning. In *OEWBG*, this shift is exemplified by the altered use of the word *sorry* within the context of a nail salon. Rather than functioning as a genuine apology, *sorry* becomes a performative gesture of strategic submission. It becomes a form of emotional labor aimed at preserving economic stability. This redefined usage highlights how language is shaped by power dynamics and necessity. A similar instance of linguistic appropriation is found in *The Gangster*, within

the context of a French bakery. Here, a Mexican baker learns English through cassette tapes while performing daily tasks. He practices by speaking to inanimate objects, which suggests that language acquisition becomes a mechanical routine rather than a communicative process. Speaking English in this context functions more as a tool for social integration and survival than for meaningful interaction. Ultimately, both examples demonstrate how language, under conditions of displacement and marginalization, is adapted and repurposed. It loses its original communicative purpose and gains new functions shaped by trauma, labor, and cultural hybridity.

This chapter also examines how language functions within families affected by postcolonial trauma. In *OEWBG*, language emerges as a central conflict, as Little Dog and his mother Rose do not share a common language. Rose is illiterate because she was forced to leave school in Vietnam due to war-related hardship. Also, she cannot speak English because the learning process evokes feelings of shame and trauma, which prevents her from engaging in meaningful communication. As a result, their relationship is marked by profound linguistic and emotional distance.

In *The Gangster*, the difficulty with communication also plays a key role, but it is not rooted in a literal language barrier. Instead, it arises from an inability to articulate trauma and memory. Although the characters speak the same language, their communication is impaired by emotional silences that stem from unresolved pain. Here, language is not absent, but deliberately withheld. It represents a form of communicative silence shaped by grief and trauma. The novel portrays how familial trauma, particularly the death of the Little Girl's brother, who drowned before the family fled Vietnam, creates difficulties in expression and understanding. While *OEWBG* focuses on linguistic alienation caused by a lack of access to the dominant language, *The Gangster* highlights the internal struggle that occurs even when linguistic tools are available. Ultimately, both novels illustrate how trauma distorts the function of language in family relationships, whether through absence or avoidance.

Chapter six deals with subalternity and otherness, often with particular attention to the role of language. First, language use within the broader American society is examined, revealing that both protagonists, Little Dog in *OEWBG* and the Little Girl in *The Gangster,* experience bullying and are perceived as the Other due to their linguistic inadequacy or foreignness associated with their Vietnamese identity. The notion of whiteness is also addressed, as it is presented as the standard in American society. Particularly, Little Dog demonstrates an awareness of this norm and a desire to conform in order to avoid being

perceived as different. In *OEWBG,* whiteness plays an important role not only within the dominant culture but also within the romantic relationship between Little Dog and Trevor.

Importantly, this thesis does not treat subalternity solely as the inability to speak within dominant discourse, following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's framing, but rather adopts a broader understanding. Subalternity is conceived here as any form of being ignored, silenced, or rendered voiceless within dominant society. This includes circumstances in which individuals or groups are unable to resist or challenge decisions that affect their lives due to their marginalized position.

In *OEWBG*, subalternity is closely tied to language since the characters lack access to the language of power, which renders them unheard and, consequently, othered. This is evident, for example, in the scene at the butchery, where mockery directed at Little Dog and his family borders on dehumanization. Similarly, in *The Gangster*, otherness arises from the dominant society's indifference toward minority communities, such as Vietnamese Americans. A more subtle instance of subalternity appears when the family in *The Gangster* is evicted from their home due to the fact that the building is to be modernized, and they cannot afford to pay the rent. Their inability to oppose the decision underscores their lack of power and voice. Ultimately, both novels underscore the importance of English as a key to visibility and audibility in society, suggesting that language proficiency is not only a tool for communication but is also essential for recognition and agency.

Resumé

Tato diplomová práce se zaměřuje na zobrazení postkoloniálního traumatu ve vietnamsko-americké beletrii. Cílem je analyzovat různé způsoby, jimiž je toto trauma vyjadřováno v románech *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (*Na Zemi jsme na okamžik nádherní*) od vietnamsko-amerického autora Oceana Vuonga a *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* od autorky stejného původu, Lê Thi Diem Thúy. V první z uvedených knih tvoří hlavní postavy chlapec Little Dog, jeho matka Rose (v práci také označovaná jako Ma) a babička Lan. V druhém románu vystupuje jako hlavní postava bezejmenná dívka, která je v této práci označována jako Little Girl nebo také the unnamed narrator (bezejmenná vypravěčka). Kromě ní jsou důležitými postavami také její rodiče, označovaní jako Ba a Ma.

První kapitola se zabývá problematikou vietnamské imigrace do Spojených států a vietnamsko-americkou literaturou. Vietnamská imigrace je zmíněna především v souvislosti s obdobím po roce 1975, kdy skončila válka ve Vietnamu a Spojené státy zažily největší a nejrychlejší příliv uprchlíků ve své historii, kdy během několika dní dorazilo více než 86 000 obyvatel Jižního Vietnamu. Stejně tak je v této kapitole zahájena diskuze o vietnamsko-americké literatuře, která je sledována od roku 1975. Přestože vietnamsko-americká literatura existovala již před tímto datem, nedostávalo se jí větší pozornosti, a to jak ze strany veřejnosti, tak literární kritiky. Zmíněna je rovněž problematika asijsko-americké literatury, která zpočátku zahrnovala pouze omezený okruh skupin asijských imigrantů. Tento úzký pohled se začal měnit v roce 1977, kdy se mezi asijsko-americké autory a jejich tvorbu začaly zahrnovat také další menšinové skupiny. Dále je představena skupina autorů označovaná termínem generace 1.5 – autoři, kteří se narodili ve Vietnamu, ale do Spojených států přišli v dětství. Do této generace spadají i oba autoři analyzovaných románů. Následně jsou uvedeny základní biografické údaje obou autorů. Přestože některé životní události se do jisté míry odrážejí v jejich literární tvorbě, je důležité brát v potaz, že se jedná o fikci.

Druhá kapitola se zaměřuje na postkoloniální kritiku a teorii postkoloniálního traumatu. Nejprve je objasněn rozdíl mezi termíny post-koloniální a postkoloniální. Zatímco první z nich může naznačovat pouze období následující po konci kolonialismu, druhý označuje širší kritický rámec, který se zabývá kulturními, politickými a společenskými důsledky kolonialismu, a to jak v minulosti, tak v přítomnosti a zahrnuje také myšlenky z postkoloniální literární kritiky. Z tohoto důvodu je v práci důsledně používán termín postkoloniální bez pomlčky. Druhá část kapitoly pojednává o postkoloniálním traumatu. Nejprve je představena základní terminologie traumatu, na kterou postkoloniální trauma teorie navazuje a dále ji rozvíjí tak, aby zahrnovala

i hlavní myšlenky z postkoloniální kritiky. V rámci obecné trauma teorie jsou využívány zejména myšlenky Cathy Caruth, která patří mezi přední teoretičky traumatologických studií. Pozornost je rovněž věnována vztahu mezi traumatem a historií. Na závěr jsou představeny klíčové přístupy postkoloniální kritiky, mezi které patří zejména důraz na zohlednění mimozápadních kontextů a kulturních specifik při porozumění traumatu. Postkoloniální studia traumatu se soustředí na zkušenosti spojené s kolonialismem, jako je například nucená migrace, otroctví, segregace, a rasismus.

Třetí kapitola se věnuje válce ve Vietnamu, posttraumatické stresové poruše (PTSD) a mezigeneračnímu dopadu traumatu. V souvislosti s válkou jsou zmíněny reedukační tábory a také vietnamská diaspora po roce 1975, často označovaná jako boat people (lidé na lodích). V tomto kontextu je analyzována postava Ba a Little Girl. Ba byl po skončení války uvězněn v reedukačním táboře, a následně společně s dívkou emigroval z Vietnamu. Dále jsou popsány tvrdé životní podmínky, především chudoba, které přiměly Little Doga a jeho rodinu Vietnam opustit. V souvislosti s PTSD je nejprve představena její obecná definice a následně jsou blíže vysvětleny dva relevantní symptomy, a to především nekontrolovatelné znovuprožívání traumatické události a symptomy spojené s vyhýbáním se podnětům připomínajícím trauma. V analytické části je ukázáno, jak se symptomy spojené s vyhýbáním projevují u postavy Ba, přičemž je tento přístup porovnán s postavou Lan, která se naopak ke svým traumatickým vzpomínkám neustále vrací. Pozornost je dále věnována i tomu, jak může ztráta blízkého člena rodiny přispět k rozvoji posttraumatické stresové poruchy.

Podkapitola o mezigeneračních problémech zkoumá různé způsoby přenosu traumatu, včetně přímého sdílení traumatických vzpomínek, násilí a mlčení. V analytické části je ukázáno, jak se trauma může přenášet z jedné generace na druhou prostřednictvím různých přístupů. U Lan se jedná o přímé sdílení traumatických zážitků s Little Dogem, zatímco u Rose se posttraumatická stresová porucha projevuje násilným chováním vůči svému synovi. Dále je analyzována role ticha v románu *The Gangster*, kde je mlčení vnímáno jako mechanismus vyrovnávání se s traumatem. Tato podkapitola se dále věnuje analýze obrazného jazyka v obou románech. Konkrétně byly vybrány symboly motýlů, které v románu *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* představují mezigenerační dopad a v *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* symbolizují identitu. Diskuze o těchto symbolech je zařazena do této kapitoly, neboť slouží jako přechod vedoucí ke čtvrté kapitole, jež se věnuje hybriditě.

Čtvrtá kapitola se zaměřuje na koncept hybridní identity, jak ji definuje Homi K. Bhabha. Hybridita je obecně chápána jako vnímání vlastní kulturní identity jako směsi dvou či více kultur. Součástí této kapitoly je také diskuze o nelineárním vyprávění, které přispívá k

utváření hybridní identity. V románu *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* navíc nelineární struktura odráží fragmentární povahu traumatu, které se vrací ve vlnách, což se promítá i do narativní struktury díla. Analýza se dále věnuje skutečnosti, že vypravěčka v *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* nemá jméno, respektive jej nesděluje čtenáři. Tato bezejmennost není pouze opomenutím, ale vědomým vyjádřením její proměnlivé a neukotvené identity. Problematika s jmény je dále rozvinuta při zkoumání vztahu jejího otce k vlastnímu jménu. Přestože je jeho jméno v textu výslovně uvedeno, otec není schopen správně ho opakovaně napsat v angličtině. Jejich rozdílné vztahy ke jménu odhalují různé aspekty hybridní identity: zatímco identita vypravěčky je proměnlivá a vyvíjející se, otec nese bolestný pocit odcizení a ztráty.

Pátá kapitola pojednává o roli jazyka, především o tom, jak funguje komunikace v rámci rodinných vztahů. S ohledem na postkoloniální kritiku jsou představeny dva klíčové termíny: lingvistická abrogace (abrogation) a apropriace (appropriation). V analýze je následně využit pojem apropriace, který označuje přizpůsobení a přetvoření jazyka tak, aby odpovídal novému, lokalizovanému významu. V románu *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* se tento posun projevuje například ve významové proměně slova „sorry" v kontextu nehtového salónu. Slovo zde nefunguje jako upřímná omluva, ale stává se gestem strategického podřízení. Podobný příklad jazykového uzpůsobení se nachází i v *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, konkrétně v prostředí francouzské pekárny, kde se osvojování jazyka mění v mechanickou rutinu, spíše než v nástroj skutečné komunikace. Oba příklady nakonec ukazují, jak je jazyk za podmínek marginalizace přizpůsobován a přeformulován. Následně je porovnán způsob, jakým jazyk funguje v rámci rodinných vztahů: zatímco *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* se zaměřuje na jazykové odcizení způsobené nemožností ovládat dominantní jazyk, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* poukazuje na složitost komunikace, která přetrvává i při znalosti společného jazyka. Oba romány ukazují, jak trauma narušuje funkci jazyka v rodinných vztazích – ať už jeho nepřítomností, nebo záměrným vyhýbáním se komunikaci.

Šestá kapitola se zabývá pojmy subalternity a jinakosti. Pojem subalternita, jak jej definuje Gayatri Spivak, označuje jedince, kteří jsou marginalizováni převládající západní kulturou. Jinakost je konceptem Edwarda Saida a označuje způsob, jakým jsou postavy vnímány jako zásadně odlišné. Tyto postavy bývají často exotizovány, umlčovány nebo znelidšťovány dominantní kulturou. Oba hlavní protagonisté, Little Dog (z *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*) a Little Girl (z *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*), jsou v americké společnosti vnímáni jako odlišní kvůli jazyku, nebo vietnamskému původu. Oba zažívají šikanu

a pocit vyloučení. V této souvislosti je diskutován i pojem „bělošství“ jako kulturní norma, k níž se někteří postavy snaží přiblížit, aby nebyli považováni za jiné.

Diskutována je i subalternita, která v této práci není chápána pouze jako neschopnost mluvit jazykem většinové společnosti, ale obecněji jako stav marginalizace, umlčení nebo nemožnosti odporu vůči rozhodnutím, která ovlivňují život jednotlivce či skupiny. V *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* je subalternita silně spojena s jazykem, jelokž postavy jako je například Rose nemají přístup k jazyku moci a jejich hlas tak zůstává nevyslyšen. V *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* se jinakost projevuje v lhostejnosti společnosti vůči vietnamské menšině, například v situaci, kdy je rodina vystěhována z bytu a nemá možnost situaci ovlivnit. Oba romány tak ukazují, že ovládání angličtiny není jen prostředkem komunikace, ale i nástrojem uznání a společenské účasti.

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