

Absence, Loss, and the Ripple Effects of War

CĂTĂLINA-DIANA TELIBAN

Universitatea din București

catalina.teliban@s.unibuc.ro

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War has always been a central theme in literature as a whole, and particularly in the case of trauma related literature, which focuses on investigating the effects that trauma, and therefore war, have on the psychology and development of individuals. In this article, I propose two recent trauma novels of the Asian American literary tradition (*The Surrendered* by Chang-Rae Lee and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong), which I use as case studies in order to explore the ripple effects of war (in particular loss, absence, and intergenerational trauma) on the lives of two characters, June Han and Little Dog, whose lives the novels depict from their childhood and into their adulthood. In this context I analyze post-war life both following direct exposure to war (June), and indirect exposure (Little Dog), uncovering thus how the trauma produced by wars haunts an individual all throughout their life, even after the danger of the war is seemingly over, and how the suffering produced during the war mutates and devolves into different types of post-war suffering.

The topic of war has long been central in the development of literature, and has therefore been approached through many different lenses and angles, both in its depictions and in critical studies. The trauma novel represents one of the most notable ways to approach the topic of war in literature, as it is a subcategory of novels which are interested not only in the artistic and literary depictions of this subject, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in the ways in which wars affect the individual and the collective psyche(s) of those who find themselves to become part of the catastrophe, in one way or another. With this framework in mind, I aim to bring forth in the present article a case study of the belated effects of war, starting from childhood and going into the adulthood of those both directly and indirectly exposed to war, as seen in two recent Asian American trauma novels: *The Surrendered* by Chang-Rae Lee, and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong. The two novels were published in 2010 and 2019 respectively, and they provide a close look at the Korean War and respectively the Vietnam War, touching on the prolonged effects that these wars have had on families native to said countries, who found themselves forced to emigrate to the United States for safety.

Within this literary context, my goal in this article is to compare and contrast how the development of children is affected by direct exposure to war (the case presented in Lee's novel), as well as indirect exposure (presented in Vuong's novel), in order to emphasize that, in the case of the people native to the countries pillaged by war, the suffering does not end when the battle ends, but rather this suffering changes forms and continues to afflict the lives of both the first victims, and their descendants. Throughout this endeavor, I place the focus on the depictions of the psychological and psychosocial ripple effects of the two wars in question, from their beginning and one generation past their end, rather than focusing simply on the war period, as a means to hopefully present a more nuanced representation of war as seen in literature.

The first novel, Chang-Rae Lee's *The Surrendered*, follows the character of June Han, a little girl who is orphaned traumatically during the Korean War, and her life thereafter. In contrast, Little Dog, the main character and narrator of Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, is born during the Vietnam War, but his family (consisting of his mother and grandmother), flee to the United States when he is just a two-year old baby, and the novel follows his development as a child and adult growing and living under the trauma that his family experienced. Thus, by using these two particular novels, I aim to present the ways in which literature aids in telling the more complex stories of consequences derived from war, that haunt an individual throughout their whole life.

The particular traumas on which I choose to focus this article are absence and loss, two immense consequences produced by wars. For this purpose, it is important first to distinguish the differences between the two aforementioned types of trauma, in order to be able to produce a more nuanced analysis of their literary depictions. In his theory on trauma, Dominick LaCapra identifies and calls for the importance of differentiating the experiences of absence and loss from one another. He highlights that "losses are specific and involve particular events, such as the death of loved ones on a personal level, or, on a broader scale, the losses brought about by apartheid or by the Holocaust in its effects on Jews and other victims of the Nazi genocide, including both the lives and the cultures of affected groups" (LaCapra, 2014: 49). This definition comes in direct opposition with what the experience of absence entails, seeing as "in terms of absence, one may recognize that one cannot lose what one never had" (LaCapra, 2014: 50). Following this line of thinking, it becomes easier to distinguish between June, who suffered various losses as a direct result of war, and Little Dog, whose trauma revolves around absences: the absence of the homeland, the absence of a father he never got to know, and so on. Influenced by the overarching Lacanian approach, LaCapra then goes on to propose that a fixation on absence "downgrades the significance of particular historical losses" (2014: 51), citing as examples a range of rather abstract types of absences which he categorizes as "metaphysical," and which are inherently impossible to equate or to compare to loss as defined by him previously, through tangible and non-metaphysical examples. However, I argue that there are certain examples of absence which are less vague and abstract in notion, such as those I have listed concerning Vuong's novel, and which can therefore represent a trauma in their own right. These types of absences do not negate, nor invalidate the trauma caused by a loss, but rather they derive from it in the future generations. Namely, as I present further on based on Vuong's novel, a person who experiences loss as a result of war may then emigrate to safety, but their descendants will unquestionably experience a trauma of absence, as a result of the loss suffered by their ancestor.

This proves that while absence and loss are distinct experiences, as highlighted by LaCapra, they interact with each other in complex ways, becoming a basis for what is known in psycho-traumatology as intergenerational trauma. Therefore, to assume that the effects produced by wars end when the battle itself ends, and therefore when the losses are not produced anymore, would mean to fall short in assessing the amplitude of the catastrophes caused by wars, by only focusing on one aspect of them. I propose that, rather, the trauma of absence and that of loss are interconnected, an idea which is most easily identifiable when the two forms of trauma appear within the borders of a family, or a community. There, the trauma caused by absence can appear, and frequently does so, in second or third generations, as an effect of the losses suffered by the generation before. Consequently, at least in the case of wars, to bring into focus the traumas derived from absence does not mean to downgrade the

historical significance, but rather to amplify this significance, by showing how trauma evolves and continues to live on much past the endpoint of the historical event.

In *The Surrendered*, June's life is governed by the trauma of loss from the beginning of the novel and to the end. As a child during the Korean War, she loses the members of her family one by one, and each loss forces her to find another motivation for carrying on. First, she is pushed by the looming responsibility of being the only remaining mother figure: "but now that her mother and older sister were gone it was she who had to keep the little ones safe, keep them as sound as she could" (Lee, 2010: 9). Undertaking the role of the mother at such a small age is a difficult position for a child to have to be in, yet the war leaves June and her siblings no other choice. Even after the fresh loss of her mother and sister, she carries on by the power of their memory: "she did so anyway because it was what her mother would do if she were still alive. It was how June formulated every decision. Whether to go on and whether to rest. Where to sleep at night. Whom to approach and whom to flee" (Lee, 2010: 15). June's inner monologue as she becomes the head of the family shows how the guidance that she is able to derive and channel from the memory of her mother makes her able to move all of them along, thus making it seem as if assuming this role somehow brings her mother closer to her. This solidifies the idea that memory is crucial in all discussions about trauma. Multiple types of memory have been identified throughout specialized literature, each serving different functions in the storytelling. For instance, Troy highlights that "literary orphans (...) have different degrees of access to one form of collective memory: familial memory" (Troy *et al.*, 2016: 13), which is the type of memory we see become the key for June in order to be able to continue moving throughout the start of her journey, when the war is in full force.

June's orphanhood places her in a special position, becoming the core of her identity in the novel. Nelson observes that "the function of the orphan – typically a girl – is to perform emotional work, and above all to make adults happy" (Nelson *qtd. in* Troy *et al.*, 2016: 115), yet in June it appears to do the opposite. She muffles and subsides her own emotions in order to maintain an appearance of security for her younger siblings in their continued attempts at survival, only allowing herself to grieve her losses in solitude: "Sometimes the pangs overwhelmed her at night, after her siblings were asleep, and only then did she allow herself to softly whimper and cry. By morning her spirit had hardened again, her mind already scrambling, angling furiously as to how they would eat for the day" (Lee, 2010: 22). This type of repression happens because the context of war permits no grievance and no emotional work, but rather it forces the individual into a survival state, where the only pain that matters is the physical one, and the ongoing danger that lurks at every corner and in every stranger.

Although necessary in the moment for the purpose of survival, this hardening of the self has effects on June's life even after she is pulled from the war and arrives into safety. She never quite lets go of the emotional closedness she acquired in the days where she was fighting for her and her siblings' survival, and as a consequence of this, she is a perpetual outsider in every community she finds herself in. This is first seen at the orphanage: "the only child who never played or cheered was June. Hector sometimes saw her slip into the high brush of the valley, or into the dormitory, making a point of disappearing for the entire time" (Lee, 2010: 159), but also later in life in her own family, as she is too emotionally closed off to have a proper relationship with anyone, including her son: "she sometimes found herself furious with him, for nothing other than his being a child" (Lee, 2010: 259). Repressing all emotions tricks June into thinking that she is in fact better: "her night panics had, strangely, subsided after David died, as if being alone again had firmed the resolve of her psyche" (Lee, 2010: 57). Her inner

monologue clearly shows that a lifetime of living in survival mode has severed all emotional ties, showing that even familial memory becomes useless to June, as opposed to it being a motivator in her childhood. As an adult, she only becomes comfortable in loneliness, the only constant under which she had learned to live since she was a child.

Loss is also present in Vuong's novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, most notably seen in the characters of the mother, Rose, and the grandmother, Lan. However, the protagonist's life, Little Dog (whose name the reader never learns), is marked by the absence of the things his family has lost, absences he has to grow around, but which are never filled. LaCapra highlights that "absence, along with the anxiety it brings, could be worked through only in the sense that one may learn better to live with it and not convert it into a loss or lack that one believes could be made good" (1999: 712). In this sense, both loss and absence presuppose the need for a grieving process, as what is lost can never be returned, and what is absent can never be known. Both of the experiences include something which lacks, but the lack presupposed by loss happens as a result of something being taken away, while the lack which derives from absence happens as a result of something which is not happening, never did, and therefore never can happen. In Little Dog's case, this refers to his childhood as a Vietnamese boy in his homeland which cannot happen as a result of the war, as well as his absent father, who leaves a hole impossible to be filled in his life.

As stated previously, at least in part, Little Dog's trauma (that which is caused by the absences) is derived from his family's trauma. This poses the important question of whether or not "the suffering of others [is] also our own?" (Alexander, 2004: 1). Studies on the transmission on trauma between families and communities have proven the validity of the claim (Lê, 2023: 13), suggesting therefore that, in familial cases, the answer to Alexander's question is affirmative. This idea is pondered upon by Little Dog in various points throughout the narrative, as he continues to realize more and more that he cannot escape the ties of trauma that are closely interwoven in his family. Later on, in his adult years, while writing letters to his mother, Little Dog creates an analogy with monarch butterflies in order to show how beauty and pain are intertwined in traumatic family ties. He ponders the way in which the future generations are perpetually forced to revisit the past, and likens the immigration trauma to the lives of butterflies: "Monarchs 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. When does a war end? When can I say your name and have it mean only your name and not what you left behind?" (Vuong, 2019: 22). In Vietnamese culture, the butterfly is a symbol of revival (Dung, 2018: 28). Therefore Little Dog's likening of the immigration from war to the butterfly colonies' cycle of life is telling of his desire to transform the pain of his family's trauma into hopeful imagery. However, in the end the question prevails: when *does* the war end, since being physically removed from the atrocity still does not signify an end for neither his mother and grandmother, nor for himself.

One of the important acknowledgements necessary in discussing war is that trauma caused by them is a form of cultural trauma, and therefore its effects are also closely interconnected with how afflicted cultures and the members of these cultural collectives carry on their lives after the fact. Jeffrey Alexander explains that "cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (2004: 1). As I have explained before, this is applicable for both small-scale and large-scale communities (both on families and diasporas, for

instance). For this reason, it is clear that “the study on intergenerational trauma is situated in historical and political contexts” (Lê, 2023: 13). In the case of those who flee their homelands and become war immigrants, the irrevocable change in identity is easily seen, as they are forced to continue their lives in a foreign space. For Asian immigrants into the United States, as is the case of the two novels at hand, the foreignness remains perpetual, as assimilation in the new collective seems impossible. For *Little Dog*, the moment he understands that he has no tie whatsoever to the place he is in, and therefore can never truly be part of the American culture, is heartbreaking: “Up to that point I had, if nothing else, a tether to this country, a grandfather, one with a face, an identity, a man who could read and write, one who called me on my birthdays, whom I was a part of, whose American name ran inside my blood. Now that cord was cut” (Vuong, 2019: 60). Thus, the absence of the homeland becomes even more striking. Not only is his family’s homeland inaccessible to him because of the physical movement and distance, but the presupposed homeland he has been given only sees him as an outsider. The immigrant, therefore, is forced to live in a state of liminality, with terrible consequences on the natural development of the psyche, because of rejection and unbelonging.

Little Dog is also the only member of his family who can speak proper English, and even as a child, this burden is placed heavy on his shoulders in more instances than one. He is bullied at school by the American children telling him to speak English, and his mother either does not offer him solace either: “‘You have to find a way, *Little Dog*,’ you said into my hair. ‘You have to because I don’t have the English to help you. I can’t say nothing to stop them. You find a way. You find a way or you don’t tell me about this ever again, you hear?’ You pulled back. ‘You have to be a real boy and be strong (...) You have a bellyful of English.’” (Vuong, 2019: 33-34). The assertion of being a “real” boy, as it relates to the language he expresses himself in, reigns strong in *Little Dog*’s psyche. He ponders his connection to his Vietnamese, his mother tongue, which he ties closely to his actual mother, both of whom he has great difficulty in reconciling with: “But what if the mother tongue is stunted? What if that tongue is not only the symbol of a void, but is itself a void, what if the tongue is cut out? Can one take pleasure in loss without losing oneself entirely? The Vietnamese I own is the one you gave me, the one whose diction and syntax reach only the second-grade level” (Vuong, 2019: 38). The impending loss of his mother tongue terrifies him, as he is afraid of losing the last (albeit indirect) connection he has to his homeland, the only connection which he used as a way to grow around his homeland’s absence. While he realizes that his knowledge of Vietnamese is limited because of the war context in his mother’s own childhood, he is still afraid that “giving up” and speaking the foreign language will remove a part of himself. Finally, he decides to let go of the Vietnamese and undertakes the task of being his family’s voice and interpreter: “I took off our language and wore my English, like a mask, so that others would see my face, and therefore yours.” (Vuong, 2019: 38). It is a clear attempt at protecting his family, with the only thing he, from the position of a child, has to offer. The traumatic stress that this causes on his mental wellbeing is seen all throughout the process of adopting the second language, and this resignation of his mother tongue is similar to June’s repression of her feelings in order to protect her siblings, having similar effects on their psyches.

Healing from the absences and losses produced by wars can be achieved by building communities. Jeffrey Alexander emphasizes the importance of solidarity in living with and healing from cultural trauma, assessing that by accepting the fact that the suffering of others can also be transmitted further on, communities can therefore expand their circles and recognize the others’ trauma (2004: 1). Thus, by assuming moral responsibility “members of

collectivities define their solidary relationships in ways that, in principle, allow them to share the sufferings of others” (2004: 1). This shows the importance of solidarity and the sense of community in healing both cultural trauma, as well as individual trauma. The first and foremost method of building this solidarity is by communicating the trauma and one’s own suffering and experiences. However, it has been identified that even though familial relationships and bonds are the main such mechanism, “families affected by historical trauma often find themselves in a ‘conspiracy of silence’” (Cai & Lee, 2022: 237). This silence is expressed through the parents, or those who were directly exposed to the historical or cultural trauma, who avoid bringing up the topic, which in turn creates such an atmosphere in which the children and descendants also feel the need to avoid discussions or questions about it. This complicit silence is evident in both of the novels. In *Little Dog*’s family the only mentions of the war happen in contexts in which either the mother or the grandmother have been triggered, and it is rarely a conversation, but rather a burst of emotions, after which the silence returns: “My family, I thought, was this silent arctic landscape, placid at last after a night of artillery fire.” (Vuong, 2019: 28). June practices the same silence, if not worse, seeing as compared to her, at least *Little Dog*’s mother and grandmother sometimes do address the war and their previous lives in Vietnam, albeit in flashes and triggers and never for too long. June, on the other hand, completely isolates her past from her son, Nicholas. The only connection she lets him make between her and her past is through a book about war which she received from one of the women at the orphanage, and which she considers to be her most treasured possession, having read from it as a child and having found deep meaningful connection between her past and the battle sequences present in the book. When Nicholas first discovers the book, tucked away safely in a jewelry box, and expresses curiosity towards it, June tries to dissuade him from pursuing more information, but, further on she comes to consider it an unspoken connection between them: “Sometimes she could tell that he had come in and inspected the book, tiny bits of charred paper left on the bureau top, and though she would have preferred his not handling it, and then taking such an interest in its harrowing, difficult content, she grew to see the activity as a strange kind of intimacy between them, a way to let him peek into her life and past without having to tell him a thing.” (Lee, 2010: 268). The only information she ever shares about it is that it belonged to “a friend” who helped her during the war, however, as seen in the excerpt above, she considers this enough. The walls that June puts between her past (and therefore herself) and Nicholas finally draw an unbridgeable rift between them, which is dramatically expressed when he finally leaves from home and never comes back. Even then, the book is the only thing he takes with him, stealing it from his mother, an action which is deeply symbolic of the broken family ties between the two of them, showing his desire to maintain the only thing that has ever connected him to their family history.

Although this silence is at the core of intergenerational trauma, sometimes communication can also have the same effect. Cai and Lee highlight that “Though silence about historical trauma within families can be detrimental, the mere presence of communication about historical trauma is not necessarily positive. Both silence and communication from parents can negatively impact the parent-child relationship.” (2022: 237). The novels each portray both of these instances. June’s silence drives Nicholas away and dramatically destroys their relationship, and while *Little Dog* knows more about his family’s trauma and their experiences, their relationship is not necessarily better, as it is marked by physical and emotional abuse.

Healthy identity formation is dependent on a safe family environment. Cai and Lee emphasize that, particularly in the case of immigrants, the family history is important for how

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the ethnic and racial identity is formed (2022: 239). As seen in both of the novels presented, each character's identity is an internal battle for both Little Dog, and Nicholas, who are each kept apart from their families, first emotionally, and then also physically. Lin et. al. warn that with silence the older generations "risk alienating their children not only from themselves, but from significant dimensions of family and community history that have shaped the present-day context" (2008: 200). This type of alienation is seen in Little Dog's childhood particularly, when he speaks about renouncing his mother tongue in favor of becoming the family's interpreter, but also in all the other attempts he makes in order to fit in better in the American society: "'Drink,' you said, your lips pouted with pride. 'This is American milk, so you're gonna grow a lot. No doubt about it.' I drank so much of that cold milk it grew tasteless on my numbed tongue. (...) 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" (Vuong, 2019: 34). As the passage shows, the alienation is even encouraged by his mother, who tries her best to replace every trace of heritage with the characteristics of the new land they are in, while the child can only hope that it works and that it keeps both him and his family safer. This creates remarkably sad associations in his mind, as seen in the excerpt above, through the light versus dark dichotomy, wherein his heritage is something dark which needs to be replaced by the lightness of the American culture – an association which is both racially and ethnically charged, and which affects his identity.

The process of healing the cultural and collective trauma, happens, as Alexander highlights, "through public acts of commemoration, cultural representation, and public political struggle" (2004: 7). These have the role of "undoing repression and allowing the pent-up emotions of loss and mourning to be expressed" (Alexander 2004: 7). In Little Dog's case, this public commemoration happens in his adulthood, through the letters he starts writing, addressed to his mother, where he reconciles with all aspects of his past as well as hers. In June's case, it is evident in her special relationship with the book she holds dear and in which she sees herself and her trauma, which Nicholas ultimately takes with him when he leaves, as a token of remembrance.

In both cases presented, literary acts serve as a way of commemorating the trauma and the family histories of the characters, in the same way that, in a meta-referential way, so do the novels themselves. Thus, literature, and particularly the trauma novel, is an important outlet in discussing experiences of war, as well as post-war life, and it aids in telling a fuller story of the catastrophes which wars involve. As seen in the two novels proposed for analysis, the tragedy does not end at the end of the war, but continues for generations, as trauma mutates and therefore persists in causing suffering, and the only solution is to find ways in which to mourn the losses, grow around the absences, and reconcile with the past in such a way as not to forget it, but to be able to live alongside it.

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