

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

The Vietnam War, spanning from 1945 to 1975, was a protracted and divisive conflict that pitted the communist forces of North Vietnam and the Viet Cong against the anti-communist regime of South Vietnam, supported by the United States and its allies. The war was the biggest loss of United States as described in Maclear's *The Ten Thousand Day War (1985)* as a war that occurred longer and bloodier compared to previous major wars in the historical record of America (1985: xiv). As conflict raged between North and South Vietnam, with U.S. involvement, the nation faced immense upheaval and devastation. Amidst the chaos of war, a significant outcome emerged—the mass migration of Vietnamese refugees to the United States. Fleeing political persecution and economic instability, many Vietnamese sought refuge in America, particularly after the fall of Saigon, Vietnam's capital, in 1975.

The transition to life in America presented significant challenges for Vietnamese immigrants, particularly within the framework of capitalism. America's capitalist society, which is characterized by its emphasis on the ownership of means of production, posed substantial obstacles for the survival and integration of Vietnamese immigrants. Immigrants faced barriers to accessing economic opportunities and social resources. Discrimination and prejudice further

compounded these challenges, as Vietnamese immigrants encountered systemic racism. White people, which are the dominant race in America, are historically recorded in contributing to build racial-based capitals ownerships (Nancy Leong, 2013, 2158). It highlights the enduring barriers faced by Vietnamese immigrants as they tried to adapt to life in the United States.

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous (2019) is an epistolary autobiographical novel written by Ocean Vuong, a Vietnamese immigrant living in America. The novel depicts how war forces a huge change to the Vietnamese and how America as a new home offers many difficulties to the immigrants. The novel is narrated by Little Dog. He writes letters to his illiterate mother in order to express his longing and his fragility upon the hardships of life he had been facing. The novel vividly illustrates the life of three different generations of a Vietnamese immigrant family. Lan, Little Dog's grandmother, gets away from her unfortunate marriage and continues living as a sex worker for American soldiers during the Vietnam War. Rose, Little Dog's mother, was born biracial. Lan was pregnant with her after serving an unknown American soldier. Rose depends on the money she makes in the intoxicating salon as a nail engineer. Little Dog himself works as a manual labour at a very young age in a tobacco farm to support the family's financial needs. Characters in the novel are faced with both dominating White American and a work system which places them in the lower class of society. Poverty, as a continuous effect of immigration, cannot be avoided.

The three characters share a similar fate as Vietnamese immigrants grappling with poverty and identity in American society. This forms the primary foundation for this research, aiming to understand the dynamics of these Vietnamese immigrants' lives through a Marxist lens. Marxism is suitable for this study because it focuses on conflicts between social classes and power structures within society. In the context of this novel, Marxist analysis can uncover how capitalism impacts the lives of immigrant characters and how American hegemony influences their position as vulnerable members of the working class.

1.2. Research Problems

There are several questions concerning this research which will be explored in the forthcoming discussion, those are:

1. How do Lan, Rose, and Little Dog represent the lives of Vietnamese immigrants in the United States of America?
2. How the dominant group maintain their power in the novel?
3. How do the Vietnamese immigrants represent Marxist concept of commodification, class consciousness, and exploitation?

1.3. Objectives of the Study

To address the subsequent questions, objectives are established to refine and accomplish the intended outcomes:

1. To analyze how Lan, Rose, and Little Dog represent the lives of Vietnamese immigrants in the United States.
2. To reveal how the dominant group maintain their power in the novel.

3. To analyze how the Vietnamese immigrants family represent Marxist concept of commodification, class consciousness, and exploitation.

1.4. Previous Study

Prior research conducted by the writer revealed that there are some previous studies related to Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). The following studies serve relevant issues to the discourse of immigrants in America. However, the studies obtained do not specifically address the issue of immigrants using Marxism theory.

The first study is "Subjecting Sentences: Syntax and Power In Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*" written by Sophia D'urso (2022) which is published in *Meliora* Vol. 1, Issue 2. This study offers close reading to the sentence structure used by Little Dog as a Vietnam immigrant who attempt to reconstruct the hierarchy of sentence structure in English. This study reveals linguistic phenomenon experienced by Vietnamese immigrants.

The second study is "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*" written by Birgit Newmann (2020). The study elaborates the issue of mother language among Vietnamese immigrants and how Little Dog as the narrator uses his linguistic ability to negotiate subjectivity and Vietnam community in diasporic context.

The third previous study is "The Beauty of Men: Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*" which was written by Min Hyoung Song and published on LARB (Los Angeles Review of Books). The article observes the issue of masculinity, gayness, and analyzes the philosophy of beauty.

The fourth study is a journal “Children of Immigrant Families: Analysis and Recommendations” written by Margie K. Shields and Richard E. Behrman (2004). This research explores challenges faced by immigrant children in America.

The fifth study is a review by Heller McAlpin titled “On Earth” is Gorgeous All The Way Through” published on npr.org. The review observes the novel with its correlation to Ocean Vuong as a Vietnamese immigrant.

The sixth previous study is a research titled “Men as The Victim of Patriarchal System in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*”, which is written by Olivia and Delvi Wahyuni. The research is an exploration of how men affected by the patriarchal system as it is reflected in the novel. The research is published by E-Journal of Universitas Negeri Padang.

The seventh previous study is a critical essay by Sarah Appleton Pine titled “Language and Trauma in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*”. As it is said in the title, the essay is a psychoanalysis of the Vietnamese family trauma. This essay is published by Ploughshares at Emerson College, 2024.

The eighth previous study is “Gorgeous Healing: Liminality in Memoir and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*” by James Minh Rick from Washington and Lee University. This thesis explores the intersectional experiences of historical trauma and identity, particularly through the lens of Little Dog, who navigates life as a queer Vietnamese man in Connecticut.

The ninth previous study is “Reconfigured Self: Integral Entanglement Of Intergenerational Trauma, Migration, Sexuality and Masculinity in Vuong`s *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*” by Boy Ertanto (2022). This thesis focuses on how

the traumatic narrative of Little Dog, the narrator, can be associated with intergenerational trauma, migration, sexuality, and masculinity.

The tenth study is “Fireproof” written by Jia Tolentino, published by The New Yorker. This article is a general review of *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*.

Because there is no study of Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) from perspective of Marxism, the writer chose to conduct a research entitled “Marxism Analysis of Vietnamese Immigrants in Ocean Vuong’s Novel *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong”. In this study, the writer analyzes social phenomenon experienced by Vietnamese immigrants using the lens of Marxism.

1.5. Research Method

There are three research methods that is used in this study. It consists of data and data source, method of collecting data and method of analyzing data.

1.5.1. Data and Data Sources

Data are information or facts used in discussing and answering research problem. Data sources is the objects from which the writer collects the data of the study. In this study data is divided into two; primary data, which is Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* novel, and secondary data, which are studies collected from previous thesis, articles, e-books, and online journals.

1.5.2. Method of Collecting Data

The writer uses qualitative method and library research in collecting the data. As stated by D. Boereen, qualitative research is a scientific method which does not involve measurement or statistic in it. Qualitative method is a method of research

involving a straightforward, disciplined, systematic approach to find out the most relevant results.

1.5.3. Method of Analyzing Data

In analyzing the collected data, the writer uses qualitative method and contextual research. Exploring context involves much bigger issues—the ‘circumstances’ that contribute both to its production by the author and to its reception by the reader. Context refers to what goes with a text, rather than what is in it. It can be said that in analyzing a literary work with contextual research, the writer focuses the study on the surrounding conditions and environment in which the text is written.

1.5.4. Method of Literary Criticism

Marxist criticism is used to analyze the novel, with main focuses on capitalism, commodification, class consciousness, and hegemony. Marxist criticism is applied to analyze the novel, emphasizing key themes such as capitalism, which explores the economic system of the novel. Commodification is used to understand how character is affected by becoming commodity within the capitalist framework. Class consciousness is explored to reveal characters' awareness of their social status and the inequalities inherent in society. Additionally, Marxist criticism examines hegemony to analyze power dynamics and the dominant ideologies shaping characters' behaviors and choices throughout the story.

1.6. Scope of Study

This study is focusing on the exploration of Vietnamese immigrants experiences through the narrative and dialogues in the novel using Marxism as the theoretical framework. The analysis will be narrowed into two aspects: intrinsic and extrinsic aspects. As for the intrinsic aspects, the writer will focus on characters and setting analysis. For the extrinsic aspect the analysis will mainly focus on America as the capitalist society and how it affects the life of the Vietnamese immigrants in the novel.

1.7. Organization of the Writing

Taking into account the methodologies and objectives related to the research inquiries, this thesis is structured into chapters and sub-chapters to ensure simplicity. The organization will be structured as follows:

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This chapter contains six sub-chapters. Those sub-chapters are background of the study, research questions, objectives of the study, scope of the study, research methods, and the organization of the writing.

CHAPTER II: LITERARY FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, the writer thoroughly explains the theory which would be applied in discussing the study. The writer describes the Marxism's social class phenomenon, such as capitalism, class consciousness, commodification, and hegemony. In this chapter the writer also will explain the method of the research.

CHAPTER III: RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the novel from the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects. These discussions will explore the trajectory of the Vietnamese immigrants and further analyze them in Marxism concepts.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

This chapter concludes the discussion and all previous chapters in several brief explanation to answer the research questions.

