
RECLAIMING VOICES: COPING WITH TRAUMA THROUGH STORYTELLING IN 'BLACK-EYED WOMEN.'

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the exploration of trauma and its intricate manifestations in Viet Thanh Nguyen's short story, "Black-Eyed Women," featured in the collection *The Refugees* (2017). The analysis begins by contextualizing the Vietnam War's profound impact on refugees, establishing a foundation for understanding the protagonist's psychological scars. The examination extends to the challenges of cultural displacement, unraveling the intricacies of identity formation in the face of adversity. Central to the investigation is the symbolism encapsulated by the black-eyed woman, a spectral figure representing suppressed memories and unspoken anguish. Exploring coping mechanisms, the paper investigates how storytelling becomes a therapeutic outlet for the protagonist. It probes the protagonist's dual role as both survivor and storyteller, highlighting the agency inherent in reclaiming narrative control. Through a close reading of key scenes, the paper dissects the ways in which trauma is expressed and navigated in the protagonist's quest for self-discovery. This analysis contributes to the broader understanding of trauma in literature, emphasizing the nuanced portrayal in "Black-Eyed Women". The paper contends that the story serves as a poignant exploration of the lasting effects of war, displacement, and the intricate interplay between personal and collective memory. Ultimately, it underscores the power of storytelling as a means of confronting and transcending the haunting legacy of trauma.

KEYWORDS: Refugee, Trauma, Memories, Coping, Displacement, Testimony.

INTRODUCTION

Research on trauma studies has a rich history, particularly from a medical perspective. The exploration of trauma within the realm of modern psychiatry traces its origins to the mid-19th

century. The formal investigation into the traumatic experiences of refugees gained momentum after World War II, when the community began documenting reports on the acute and long-term psychosocial adjustments of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. This marked the beginning of extensive research on refugees and their traumas. The profound impact of the extermination camps and the displacement of millions during the world wars played a significant role in shaping in-depth studies on refugees. Following detailed examinations of concentration camps, a theory emerged known as "concentration camp syndrome," encompassing symptoms such as sleeplessness, weariness, irritability, restlessness, anxiety, and sadness (Boehnlein & Kinzie 224-28).

The Vietnam War marked another significant event leading to a massive influx of Southeast Asian people into the Global North, following the earlier Jewish displacement that prompted a renewed wave of research. Studies conducted during this period revealed a higher prevalence of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among populations exposed to war and violence, explicitly linking the condition to these traumatic experiences (Boehnlein & Kinzie 223-252). Allan Young contends that posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), now a well-established concept in social awareness and institutional application, found its roots during the Vietnam War. Young asserts that PTSD is, to a significant extent, a social construct shaped by the specific historical circumstances that followed the war. He further notes that this syndrome is primarily linked to the experiences of American veterans of the Vietnam Conflict, attributing postwar posttraumatic symptoms to the intense and violent encounters these veterans faced in a foreign war (113).

The arrival of Southeast Asian refugees introduced unique cultural perspectives, highlighting the importance of examining each refugee experience within its specific context. Scholars argue that "refugee mental health over time in a specific social or cultural setting cannot be entirely generalized" due to the diversity of cultural backgrounds (Ramsey, Gorst-Unsworth & Turner 55-59). In recent decades, the plight of refugees has intensified, driven by internal conflicts and warfare, often rooted in challenges faced by nations emerging from colonial rule.

Trauma has been the theme of a massive collection of literary works. According to Claire Stocks, "it is [only] since the fall of Saigon which ended the Vietnam War in 1975 that trauma has become the subject of a fairly substantial body of theoretical and literary works" (71). The aftermath of the Vietnam War has left an indelible mark not only in literature but also in scientific research. *The Refugees* (2017) by Viet Thanh Nguyen is a collection of short

stories about Vietnamese refugees displaced by the Vietnam War, exploring themes of family, love, immigration, and identity. It highlights the struggles of living between two worlds, with memory and displacement as central motifs. Characters question their identities, grappling with feelings of homelessness. Nguyen portrays the diversity of Vietnamese-American experiences, challenging stereotypes and emphasizing that they are not a monolithic group. His stories highlight refugees at different stages of adaptation and offer perspectives that reshape dominant narratives of the Vietnam War, focusing on the refugee experience.

“The black-eye woman” is the opening story of Nguyen’s short story collection *The Refugees*. The story is about a woman who has migrated to USA during conflict. She witnessed the death of her brother and other refugees during her escape from her home. The memories of her dead brother continue to haunt her despite her desire to forget her past. She is muzzled by her trauma leaving her silent and alienated from the outside world and is left both physically and emotionally sick. The description of her feelings after the atrocious event that happened on the boat describe the mental turbulence: “The world was muzzled, the way it would be ever afterward with my mother and father and myself, none of us uttering another sound on this matter. Their silence and my own would cut me again and again.” (*The Refugees* 16). She is visited by her brother’s ghost who swam across the pacific to see her again. Later in life she plans to write about the traumatic experiences of the people who like herself were survivors of such tragedies and were unable to verbalize their grief. She chooses to be a ghostwriter making the actual author silent. She says she ‘preferred the silence of writing’ while her mother liked to talk – the things beyond which they have quite nothing to do with themselves (*The Refugees* 3).

The representation of the refugee figure thematically occurs in the act of storytelling. Storytelling in “Black-Eyed Women” acts as an important act of performing a pieced-together or more cohesive narrative, as an act of generational connection, and as an act of giving reality to the otherwise untold or silenced. The narrator choses to write down his own memories to speak out his trauma to let people know what cannot be otherwise known. Smith and Watson initially delve into the impact on the individual, highlighting that life writing serves as a therapeutic instrument. They observe that writers can attain catharsis either by expressing the trauma through writing or by transforming the traumatic experiences into a narrative of resilient survival (28). Narrating trauma serves as a bridge for victims to connect their private memories to the public sphere. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue that the

"necessity of testimony" arises from the "impossibility of testimony". Drawing from oral testimonies of Holocaust survivors, they assert that the difficulty in narrating trauma makes it imperative to do so. Narrative becomes a tool to organize traumatic events into a coherent system, allowing the victim to make sense of the experiences (224). The nature of storytelling for refugee families, according to Espiritu's anthropological study, is in a distillation of memory or carrying out of collective memory. This is to say that storytelling, as an act, is a motion of cross-generational connection and respect and a motion of silence. Nguyen asserts, "Common in the world of refugees are memories and stories of the dead, the missing, and the ones left behind, those relatives, friends, and countrymen facing the consequences escaped by the refugee. In some cases, the refugee may even benefit from telling about those consequences and the ghosts of their past" (*Speak of the Dead* 9). Yen Le Espiritu declares that "we must —become tellers of ghost stories" when we speak of the war in Vietnam and its aftermath (xix). In "Black-Eyed Women," the narrator reflects that "in a country where possessions counted for everything, we had no belongings except our stories" (7). Stories preserve familial bonds and affirm the family's existence, as seen in the nightly ritual of mother and daughter sharing tales. Even after the father and son's deaths, they endure through the protagonist's planned memoir and the story itself. When her mother asks, "Why write down what I'm telling you?" the narrator replies, "Someone has to" (20), emphasizing storytelling as essential to maintaining family presence and connections, lest stories vanish like bubbles.

The first epigraph of Thanh Nguyen's *The Refugees*, from Roberto Bolaño's *Antwerp*, states, "ghosts, who, because they're outside of time, are the only ones with time." This suggests that ghosts transcend linear time, existing in both the present and the past. In the story, the ghost of the protagonist's brother enables Nguyen to weave a narrative that straddles both timelines, representing the return of repressed memories. As Cathy Caruth argues: "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it is precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). The narrator recalls a harrowing moment when her brother defended her from a pirate, stabbing him with a pocketknife, only to be struck fatally by another pirate wielding a machine gun. This violent event, vividly described as her brother's lifeless body hitting the deck, marks the epicenter of her trauma, silencing her and defining her existence. She continues to be haunted by the memory of the brutal boat journey, including her brother's murder and her own assault, which left her

physically and emotionally scarred. These experiences perpetually revisit her, shaping her identity and becoming an indelible part of her psyche. The ghost of her brother, with a fresh bruise on his head, symbolizes the unhealed wounds of her trauma, mirroring her own bruised sense of self. Even the image of the boat, with its ominous red eyes painted on the prow, serves as a haunting reminder of her suffering and the enduring presence of her trauma:

What pained me the most was not any of these things, nor the weight of the men on me. It was the light shining into my dark eyes as I looked to the sky and saw the smoldering tip of God's cigarette, poised in the heavens the moment it was pressed against my skin. (*The Refugees* 16)

Towards the conclusion of the story, during one of the visits from the ghost of her brother, the ghostwriter experiences a moment of profound emotion, shedding tears and finally grieving for the loss of her brother and the potential moments they could have shared if he were still alive. In this poignant moment, she decides to move forward and leave the past behind. Determined to write her own book, a compilation of "ghost stories" that recounts the displaced lives of refugees, she resolves to confront her trauma. As she grapples with her pain, the ghost of her brother disappears. The ghostwriter concludes:

As they [ghosts] haunt our country, so do we haunt theirs. They are pallid creatures, more frightened of us than we are of them... That is why we see these shades so rarely, and why we must seek them out. Stories are just things we fabricate, nothing more. We search for them in a world besides our own, then leave them here to be found, garments shed by ghosts. (*The Refugees* 21).

The act of writing becomes the narrator's pathway to attempting a form of reconciliation with the traumatic memories of her rape and her brother's murder. Nguyen himself highlighted the significance of writing in the recovery from trauma during an interview with Alexander Bisley:

Traumatic pasts need to be dealt with in complex ways. We need to be able to tell stories about this past We also need to be able to confront these pasts collectively as societies, to try to figure out the proper measure of apologies and reconciliations and reparations that need to take place. And I think in both the cases of slavery and the Vietnam War, we haven't had that just confrontation with our pasts.

This narrative is a continuation of Nguyen's persistent endeavor to articulate the traumatic history of Vietnamese Americans, mirroring the journey of the narrator within his story. As the narrator sought personal solace, Nguyen assumes the role of a spokesperson for the larger

collective, representing Vietnamese Americans who bear the enduring weight of war-related trauma and haunting memories.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, "Black-Eyed Women" by Viet Thanh Nguyen stands as a poignant exploration of trauma and enduring impact of war. Through the lens of the protagonist's experiences as a Vietnamese refugee, the narrative delves into the intricate layers of psychological scars, displacement, and the quest for self-discovery. The examination of the Vietnam War's profound effects on refugees sets the stage for understanding the protagonist's trauma. The symbolic presence of the black-eyed woman emerges as a powerful metaphor, encapsulating the haunting memories and unspoken burdens carried by the protagonist. Central to the paper is an exploration of coping mechanisms, with a focus on storytelling as a therapeutic tool. The protagonist's role as a ghostwriter becomes a means of reclaiming agency, allowing her to navigate and articulate the complexities of her traumatic past. The story unveils the protagonist's dual identity as both a survivor and a storyteller, displaying the transformative power of narrative in the face of adversity. "Black-Eyed Women" contributes to the broader discourse on trauma in literature by offering a nuanced portrayal of the refugee experience. It emphasizes the lasting effects of war, displacement, and the intricate interplay between personal and collective memory.

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