

# Representation Of Race and Ethnicity in Ocean Vuong's *on Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

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**Abstract**—Racial and ethnic identities are not biologically determined but socially constructed through language, representation, and power. By exploring the theory of race and ethnicity, developed by cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall and W. E. B. Du Bois, this framework views the complexities of diasporic life and the struggles of navigating a bicultural identity. Ocean Vuong's *on Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a poetic exploration of identity, belonging, and memory told through the voice of a Vietnamese-American narrator, Little Dog. Vuong's narrator, Little Dog, embodies the struggle of 'double consciousness', living between the inherited memories of Vietnam and the realities of a racially stratified America. Through episodes of racial discrimination, class conflict, and linguistic alienation, Vuong articulates the psychological and emotional weight of being a racial minority. This paper explores the construction of racial identity, the double consciousness of the immigrant self, and the tension between assimilation and cultural memory. The study also explores Vuong's transformation of his racial and ethnic marginalisation into a form of poetic resistance.

**Index Terms**—Race, ethnicity, diaspora, cultural identity, Ocean Vuong, narratology.

These literatures, emerging from the intersections of migration, memory, and trauma, question the very foundations of identity as a fixed construct. Race and ethnicity are not just biological but social and cultural constructs formed through representation, language, and power. As Stuart Hall explains, identity is something that is always changing. It is "a production, which is never complete, always in process" (222) and shaped by how people are represented in society, not outside of it. In the same way, W. E. B. Du Bois's idea of 'double consciousness' describes that Black Americans feel divided inside, they see themselves through their own eyes but also through the eyes of a society that looks down on them (3).

Ocean Vuong's *on Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a poignant meditation on race, ethnicity, and diasporic identity. Written in the form of a letter from a son to his mother who does not know to read, this novel by Ocean Vuong is a semi-autobiographical novel that captures the fragmented memories of Little Dog, a Vietnamese-American struggling between inherited trauma and the desire for belonging. The narrative becomes both personal and political, exposing the immigrants thrive through racial categorisation, linguistic alienation, and intergenerational silence. At its heart, the novel tells the story of Little Dog, a boy growing up with his mother Rose, a single Vietnamese immigrant who escaped the war and now struggles to survive in America. Through the letter he writes to his mother, Little Dog looks back on his mother's life as a refugee haunted by the war, his grandmother Lan's pain as a sex worker during that time, and his own struggles with racism, poverty, and identity.

The story moves through small pieces of memory instead of a straight timeline. This broken structure shows that the racial and ethnic identity are built from inherited pain and from the stories families tell.

This paper studies Vuong portrayal of race and ethnicity by using Stuart Hall's cultural identity theory and W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness. This focuses on the society, and their treating them based on their Vietnamese background as 'different' and those influences on shaping Little Dog's life in America. It also explains the process of Vuong turning the pain of racial and ethnic marginalisation into poetic resistance, using language and storytelling to heal. By joining together language, memory, and history, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* helps to understand the influence of race and ethnicity in the lives of immigrants and modification of their sense of identity in a global world.

Stuart Hall, is a famous cultural theorist, explained that identity is not something one is born with but, it is something created through society and culture. In his essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Hall says that identity is always 'in process,' meaning it keeps changing as people grow and face new situations (222). For Hall, race and ethnicity are not about biology or skin color but "social ideas formed by others through power and representation" (47).

Hall states that identity is shaped by two parts 'being' and 'becoming.' 'Being' refers to what a person inherits, such as our language, traditions, and history, whereas 'Becoming' means the change and adaptation of a person to new cultures and environments in this work *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (225). In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the main character Little Dog shows both the part of being and becoming. In Vuong's novel, his identity constantly shifts between the inherited past of Vietnam and his American present. He inherits his Vietnamese culture from his mother and grandmother, but he also becomes American by growing up in a different country.

Hall also talks about representation, which means the way people are shown in society and media. The way people are represented affects the person and they see themselves through others lens. In Vuong's novel, Little Dog faces many painful moments because of others seeing him as different. He is treated as foreign, even though he was born in America. This also exhibits that representation is a tool that shapes identity.

Hall explains that race is constructed through representation through the ways people are spoken about, shown, or imagined by society. In Vuong's novel, the Vietnamese immigrants are often represented as outsiders or lesser in the American social space. When Little Dog's mother cannot speak English fluently, she becomes invisible and disrespected. In one scene, when the narrator Little Dog's mother Rose tries to buy oxtail from a butcher but cannot remember the English word. She gestures like a cow, and the people around her laugh. This moment shows that language becomes a marker of race. Her inability to speak perfect English makes others treat her as unintelligent or foreign. Hall says, representation produces power "those who can use the dominant language are respected, and those who cannot are pushed aside" (12). Vuong shows that the

problem is not her identity but with society which values her through race and speech.

According to Hall, difference plays a key role in identity formation. Society often defines people by separating them into groups, pushing to a category called 'other'.

In the novel, Little Dog experiences this difference most painfully at school. His classmates tease him for his accent and physical appearance. Nobody sits next to Little Dog in the school bus even though he was born in America. This shows that racial difference becomes a tool for exclusion. As Edward Said notes, "the construction of the Other is the construction of power" (332). Little Dog's classmates represent the dominant white culture, and their rejection teaches him that his brown skin and broken English mark him as an outsider. He starts to see himself through their eyes, feeling both shame and defiance. Hall explains that identity forms through this tension where people become aware of who they are by the labels given by the society. Little Dog's awareness of being 'different' leads him to reflect more deeply on his own story and his mother's sacrifices.

Hall uses the term diaspora to describe the experience of people living away from their homeland but carrying its memory and culture with them. In Vuong's novel, the family's life in America is deeply shaped by Vietnam's past. Little Dog's mother suffers from trauma caused by the Vietnam War. When her son shouts "Boom!" (04) she screams and hides, unable to escape the memory of bombs. This is the pain of the war immigrants as diasporas. The war may have ended, but it still lives inside the people who lived with it "the war was still inside you," (04)

For Little Dog, these memories are inherited. He carries a past he did not live but still feels responsible for. When he writes his letter, he becomes the voice of both his mother and his ancestors. This connects to Hall's idea that "diasporic identity is built from loss and connection" (235) from *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. According to Hall people carry fragments of home wherever they go, and these fragments form their sense of self. Vuong shows that even though the family has left Vietnam, it continues to shape their emotions, fears, and language.

Hall's idea of hybridity explains what happens when two cultures mix and create something new. Little Dog becomes a symbol of cultural hybridity. He belongs to

both Vietnam and America but fully to neither. He writes in English the language of power and dominance but fills it with Vietnamese memories and rhythms. His mother says words like “*Đẹp quá*” (29) meaning ‘so beautiful’, which Little Dog keeps untranslated. By doing this, Vuong makes the English text itself hybrid, mixing languages and emotional worlds. As Viet Thanh Nguyen observes, “Refugee writers write from the in-between space, where memory becomes both a wound and a weapon” (11). Vuong’s writing proves this, he transforms linguistic and emotional hybridity into art.

Little Dog’s role as his mother’s translator also shows hybridity. He uses English to help her survive calling her boss, filling forms, explaining words but this also reverses their roles. The child becomes an adult, and the mother becomes dependent. This change is emotional and cultural. Vuong uses it to show the transition of power and identity by the migrants. Hall explains that language is not just communication but a system of power. In Vuong’s novel, English represents both opportunity and oppression. The letter he writes is in English, but his mother cannot read it. This creates a deep irony; his most powerful expression cannot reach the person it was meant for. This moment captures the emotional cost of assimilation to gain power in one language, he must lose connection in another. Yet, Vuong also uses this irony to create art. The act of writing becomes a way to heal. Language, even if misunderstood, becomes a bridge. Through it, Little Dog transforms pain into poetry.

W. E. B. Du Bois introduced the concept of Double Consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk*. He described it as the sense of “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.” (03) This theory explains that marginalised individuals, especially those in racially unequal societies, experience life with two identities, one belonging to their own culture and another shaped by the lens of dominant culture.

In Ocean Vuong’s *on Earth, We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, this double consciousness appears through the voice of Little Dog, a Vietnamese American boy writing a letter to his illiterate mother. He lives between two worlds, Vietnamese culture at home and American culture outside. His consciousness is divided between love for his roots and shame imposed by society. Vuong’s poetic storytelling reveals the impact of race, class, and language in shaping self. By viewing the

novel through Du Bois’s theory, one can see that Vuong transforms double consciousness from a painful conflict into an act of artistic healing. As Homi K. Bhabha says in *The Location of Culture*, “The migrant is at once the same and the other; translation becomes the mode of survival” (38). Vuong’s novel turns this survival into poetry, showing that double consciousness can become a space of creation instead of loss.

Du Bois believed that people of color in white-dominated societies develop “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” (4) The immigrants constantly measure themselves by the standards of another race. This psychological division causes both self-awareness and suffering. The person sees themselves not as they truly are but as the world defines them. Rose during the birthday shopping picked a white dress and asked Little Dog whether she looks like native Americans, ““Do I look like a real American?”” you said, pressing a white dress to your length” (09). This expresses the urge, the longing of Rose to fit with society, judging of people and other discrimination she faces.

Little Dog perfectly represents divided identity. His life is split between two first as the son of a Vietnamese immigrant mother who struggles with English and lives with trauma and other as a young man trying to adapt to American life, where race and class constantly define his worth.

One of the clearest forms of double consciousness in the novel is language. English, the language of power in America, gives Little Dog a voice but separates him from his mother. He writes, “I am writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are.” (03) This single line reflects the emotional truth of Du Bois’s theory every step toward belonging in one culture leads to distance from another.

Each time when Little Dog translates English for his mother, he feels both powerful and guilty. He represents the hybridity between two worlds and also loses the comfort of being fully in either one. This dual feeling of empowerment and alienation is the central idea of Du Bois’s concept. The novel is structured in the form of a letter written by Little Dog to his mother who is unable to read English but the narrator proceeds to write to his mother with the foreign language, as the narrator is born and brought up in a foreign land he has

developed incompetence to his mother tongue. The narrator is able to translate to his mother in a mix of language and writing in a foreign language expressing the hybridity and the double consciousness present in him,

Du Bois explained that double consciousness often arises from the experience of racial discrimination by the dominant race. Vuong connects this racial consciousness to class struggle. His mother works in a nail salon, constantly facing humiliation from customers. The white women she serves often treat her as invisible. Through these scenes, Vuong shows that economic inequality and race are intertwined. When Rose asks the butcher for the oxtail forgetting its English word, for several times Rose tried showing through action as everyone laughed at her and treated her as illiterate Rose kept asking Little Dog to translate but he was a small boy who did not know that its oxtail. Little Dog, watching his mother's suffering deepens his awareness of being both part of and apart from America. "The men roared, slapping the counter, their teeth showing huge and white. You turned to me, your face wet, pleading. "Tell them. Go ahead and tell them what we need." I didn't know that oxtail was called oxtail. I shook my head, shame welling inside me" (31).

Double consciousness also operates within the family. Little Dog inherits his mother's trauma from Vietnam, the war, violence, and poverty but he lives in a country that does not understand that history. He writes, "I didn't know that the war was still inside you, that there was a war to begin with, that once it enters you it never leaves" (04) This line shows that historical violence becomes personal identity.

His mother's physical abuse, though painful, also reflects the transferred aggression of survival. She says, "I'm not a monster. I'm a mother." (13) Her violence becomes an act of fear, she wants to make her son strong enough to survive in a racist society. For Little Dog, this creates another kind of double consciousness: the struggle to love and forgive the person who both protected and hurt him.

Vuong uses this to show that racial identity is not only external, it affects the expression of love, passes down fear, and teaches survival. Double consciousness becomes generational, binding mother and son in a cycle of pain and care.

Little Dog's identity keeps changing as he grows up between two cultures. He learns English and enters

American schools, but at home, he speaks Vietnamese and lives within his mother's memories of war. His identity is built from both the pain of the past and the effort to survive in the present. He becomes a hybrid being both Vietnamese and American, yet not fully either.

Stuart Hall believed that changing representation can challenge power. When marginalised people tell their own stories, they reclaim their identity from stereotypes. Stuart Hall says identity is not fixed but created by people, something that is always in process of "becoming." Vuong does this through his poetic language and emotional honesty.

He does not present the immigrant experience as only pain or struggle, he shows beauty, humor, and love within it. His mother is not just an immigrant woman but a complex person filled with anger, loving, hardworking, and haunted by history. When she says, "I'm not a monster. I'm a mother," (13) it breaks the stereotype and shows trauma and love coexist.

By representing his mother and himself truthfully, Vuong participates in what Hall calls 'the politics of representation.' He refuses to be invisible. The letter itself is a form of resistance that gives voice to those who are often unheard. Through this, Vuong resists society's definitions of worth. The letter becomes both confession and declaration a proof that double consciousness can produce creativity instead of destruction Cultural Identity as 'Becoming'

Vuong transforms this fragmentation into poetry. Vuong uses Little Dog's letter as a reflection of his inner conflict. Writing to his mother in English a language she cannot read shows the painful gap between his two selves. He writes to connect, but language becomes a wall. The letter becomes an attempt to piece together memory, history, and love.

Little Dog writes about his grandmother's war stories, his mother's struggles, and his own silence because he saw writing, the way to reconcile the soul within him. Vuong used writing as a sign of hegemony, once he and his family members were mocked for their use of language but the narrator starts to learn English at age of twelve and writes the novel to showcase the language competence he has gained after all the discrimination. As said, people ignore the fact While listening that leads to misinterpretation. (Chamundeshwari 3673). His act of writing becomes rebellion against silence and invisibility. By writing his story, Little Dog begins to represent himself in his

own way instead of letting others define him. Thus Young, similar to a phoenix, transforms his identity from which he was once discriminated against. Further studies in the novel are applicable through the lens of language and translation, trauma, memory, post-traumatic stress disorder, identity and intersectionality.

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