

TRAUMA, MEMORY, AND RESILIENCE: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF LOSS AND ATTACHMENT IN OCEAN VUONG'S THE EMPEROR OF GLADNESS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of trauma, memory, and resilience in Ocean Vuong's The Emperor of Gladness (2025) from a psychological perspective, with particular attention to loss and attachment. The novel portrays the emotional struggles of individuals who experience loneliness, grief, abandonment, social marginalization, and psychological suffering, and this study traces how these struggles shape identity and emotional development across its central relationships. Drawing on Trauma Theory, Postmemory Theory, and Attachment Theory, the analysis examines the effects of loss, the significance of emotional bonds, the role of memory in preserving painful experience, and the capacity of individuals to endure hardship and adapt to difficult circumstances. Using qualitative textual analysis of selected passages, the study shows that Vuong presents trauma as an ongoing psychological condition that shapes identity, relationships, and personal growth, while resilience emerges not as the elimination of pain but through human connection, caregiving, and the ability to find meaning despite adversity. By tracing the interplay of trauma, memory, loss, and attachment, this paper argues that Vuong's novel offers a nuanced literary model of psychological survival grounded in ordinary acts of care.

Keywords: Trauma, Memory, Resilience, Loss, Attachment, Psychological Perspective, Emotional Healing

1. Introduction

Psychological dimensions of fiction have attracted sustained literary scholarship in recent decades, as literature has become a central medium for understanding the lingering effects of trauma, violence, and loss. Trauma studies has developed into an interdisciplinary field connecting psychology and literary criticism, enabling scholars to examine narrative strategies and the indirect, fragmentary forms through which the

psyche registers suffering (Caruth, 1996; Herman, 1992; Whitehead, 2004), and researchers increasingly recognize that trauma reverberates beyond the individuals who experience it directly, reaching future generations through memory and cultural inheritance (Hirsch, 2008, 2012; Assmann, 2011). Memory, in turn, has come to be understood not simply as the recollection of a past event but as a means of constructing the self and making sense of

emotional experience, and because literary narratives typically present history as selective and fragmented, they are well suited to showing how traumatic past events continue to shape present circumstances (Erll, 2011; Whitehead, 2004). This growing body of psycho-literary scholarship has also expanded to consider identity and belonging in the context of migration and displacement (Whitehead, 2004; Luckhurst, 2008), while resisting the assumption that psychological pain is a permanent state—contemporary fiction is increasingly read for the ways its characters move through emotional disruption and reconstruct meaningful relationships within difficult circumstances. It is this capacity of modern fiction to hold together individual psychological experience and social, historical, and relational reality that motivates the selection of Ocean Vuong's *The Emperor of Gladness* (2025) as the focus of the present research.

1.1 Statement of the Research Problem

Within current literary studies, research on trauma narratives has advanced scholarly understanding of memory, displacement, identity, and pain, yet this research has often developed along separate tracks, with individual studies typically privileging a single dimension of an otherwise broad and multifaceted psychological phenomenon. As a result, some of the most pertinent elements of emotional attachment, traumatic experience, and inherited memory remain insufficiently integrated within literary scholarship, and this fragmented state of research points to the need for a single, connected psycho-literary framework capable of holding these domains together (Balaev, 2014).

This problem is especially visible in scholarship on Ocean Vuong. Existing criticism of Vuong's work has been considerable, focusing in particular on intergenerational trauma, post-war memory, queerness, and the psychological effects of displacement in his poetry and in his first novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), but it has concentrated overwhelmingly on his earlier work, leaving his most recent novel largely unaddressed. Early responses to *The Emperor of*

Gladness (2025) have examined individual elements of the text—social marginality, temporality, and bodily precarity—but have not yet explored the psychological experience of its characters through the interaction of trauma, transgenerational memory, and attachment. This gap calls for an integrated approach capable of capturing the emotional and psychological depth of the novel, and it is this demand that the present study responds to, using a combined trauma, postmemory, and attachment framework to examine how emotional trauma, inherited memory, and attachment shape the identity and worldview of the novel's characters.

1.2 Introduction to the Novel

Ocean Vuong, one of the most gifted contemporary American writers, is known for capturing the emotional textures of migration and the fragile threads of relationship that bind families and individuals across generations and cultures. Having migrated from Vietnam to the United States, Vuong draws on his own history, memory, and imagination, alongside his background as a poet, to render the lives of people who have been socially and politically marginalized and displaced. His debut poetry collection, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016), brought him international recognition; this was followed by his first novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), and his second poetry collection, *Time Is a Mother* (2022), works in which critics note an intersection of psychological and lyrical dimensions that allows Vuong to articulate powerful ideas about memory and the struggle of existence and belonging.

Published in 2025, *The Emperor of Gladness* extends this vision into a broader account of contemporary American society and the people who dwell at its margins. Rather than the intimate, closely autobiographical scope of his earlier work, the novel widens its focus to a community shaped by social isolation and economic decline, set in the fictional town of East Gladness, Connecticut, and constructed through quiet, perceptive moments that gradually reveal the emotional reality of its characters. Its central figure is Hai, a nineteen-year-old

Vietnamese American in the midst of a personal crisis, who meets Grazina, an elderly Lithuanian widow living with dementia, and who becomes the first of several companions who shape his emotional journey. Through Hai and the wider cast of characters who surround him—people marked by poverty, age, addiction, loneliness, and social exclusion—Vuong portrays these conditions not as individual pathologies but as sites of communal care and shared humanity, situating personal suffering as a collective rather than solitary experience. The novel's poetic, slow-paced style and its critically praised depiction of poverty, caregiving, and working-class community make it a particularly productive subject for a study of trauma, memory, loss, resilience, and attachment.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to literary scholarship by examining a novel that, despite its critical acclaim, has not yet received sustained psycho-literary attention. While scholarship on Vuong's earlier work is substantial, his most recent novel remains largely unexamined through a psychological lens, and this study addresses that gap by extending existing scholarship on both Vuong's fiction and the psychological representation of trauma in literature more broadly (Caruth, 1996; Whitehead, 2004). The study is also significant for its methodological approach: rather than examining emotional suffering through a single theoretical lens, it integrates Trauma Theory, Postmemory Theory, and Attachment Theory to show how psychological trauma and inherited emotional experience intersect with the relationships depicted in the novel, modeling how psycho-literary criticism can bridge literary studies and psychology (Bowlby, 1988; Hirsch, 2008; Herman, 1992; Nussbaum, 2001; Masten, 2001). Finally, the study is intended to open avenues for future research, offering an analytical model that may be of use to students and researchers working on contemporary American fiction, trauma studies, memory studies, and psycho-literary criticism, and that may be extended to other works by Vuong or by authors engaging

with similarly interwoven psychological, social, and emotional concerns.

1.4 Research Objectives

- To examine the representation of trauma and psychological suffering in *The Emperor of Gladness* (2025).
- To explore the role of memory and inherited emotional experience in shaping identity and emotional consciousness in the novel.
- To analyze how loss, attachment, and resilience influence interpersonal relationships, belonging, and psychological survival in the novel.

1.5 Research Questions

- How are trauma and suffering represented in *The Emperor of Gladness* (2025)?
- How are memory and emotional experience transmitted across generations, and how is this transmission related to identity and emotional consciousness in the novel?
- How do loss, attachment, and resilience shape relationships, belonging, and psychological survival in the novel?

1.6 Delimitations of the Study

This study is delimited to a psycho-literary analysis of *The Emperor of Gladness* (2025), focusing on the representation of trauma, memory, resilience, loss, and attachment. Although the text can also be read through sociocultural or political lenses, this research is confined to psychological and literary perspectives drawing on Trauma Theory, Postmemory Theory, and Attachment Theory, and does not incorporate feminist, postcolonial, Marxist, or linguistic approaches, though these are acknowledged as valuable directions for future scholarship (Caruth, 1996; Whitehead, 2004). The study is further delimited to a single primary text and does not offer a comparative study of Vuong's poetry, his earlier novel, or other contemporary authors; available secondary literature is consulted to build an interpretive

framework, but the findings are understood to apply specifically to The Emperor of Gladness (2025) rather than to Vuong's body of work as a whole (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

2. Literature Review

Literature reviews are an essential part of academic research: rather than merely describing existing scholarship, they critique it, identify scholarly gaps, and locate the theoretical weaknesses that justify further research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hart, 2018; Ridley, 2012). This chapter reviews the scholarship that forms the conceptual basis of the present study, beginning with trauma studies, before turning to memory and postmemory, attachment, and resilience, and finally to existing scholarship on Ocean Vuong's fiction, synthesizing these areas to justify the integrated psycho-literary framework used in the analysis that follows.

2.1 Trauma Theory in Psychology and Literary Criticism

The long-term effects of emotional pain, disruption, and displacement have made the study of psychological trauma central to both psychology and literary studies, offering insight into the effects of violence on individuals and communities alike. Trauma was initially understood in psychology as an overwhelming, extreme event that exceeds an individual's capacity to cope and elicits an abnormal response; later research reframed trauma as an emotional condition that affects memory, the sense of self, interpersonal relationships, and the ways individuals make sense of and engage with the world. As trauma studies became interdisciplinary, psychological theories were increasingly used in literary studies to explain how literature articulates experiences that resist direct communication, and trauma came to be understood as a clinical, narrative, and cultural phenomenon that shifts across time and space. Even so, there remains little agreement on how trauma should be defined. In Freud's (1920/1955) account, trauma is an overwhelming experience that returns through repetitive

thought and unconscious process because the individual could not fully process it at the time it occurred. Caruth (1996) builds on this to argue that trauma is fundamentally an event of belated comprehension: survivors typically understand a traumatic event only through the intrusive memories, flashbacks, and scattered recollections that follow it, rather than through the direct reliving of the experience. This has shaped how scholars read literature, since trauma, on this account, is often best expressed through silence, recurrence, and disrupted chronology rather than straightforward narration. Caruth's formulation has, however, been criticized for grounding trauma in the absence of experience rather than in the historical, political, or cultural contexts that give traumatic events their shape. In response, Balaev (2014) adopts a more pluralistic stance, arguing that trauma should be understood within its many social and cultural contexts rather than as a single, universal psychological state.

Clinical psychology adds a further dimension by examining how individuals process and recover from trauma. Herman (1992) describes trauma as an experience that fractures an individual's sense of safety, trust, and identity, with recovery achieved through the slow rebuilding of psychological stability and human connection, while Van der Kolk (2014) argues that trauma affects the whole person and often remains outside verbal memory, surfacing instead through sensory impressions and physical responses that emerge long after the precipitating event. Together, these frameworks show that trauma is not a short-lived emotional or cognitive response but a psychological phenomenon that manifests across multiple domains of experience, shaping memory, identity, and relational life.

Psychological research also complicates the assumption that trauma affects everyone identically. McNally (2003) and Bonanno (2004) show that traumatic response varies considerably along a continuum shaped by personality, culture, and social context: some individuals develop long-term difficulty, while others adapt and continue functioning without significant impairment—a model important for literary

criticism, which must represent the full range of human responses to loss rather than a single trajectory. A related strand of scholarship concerns memory: autobiographical memory typically follows a logical, structured pattern, while traumatic memory tends to be disjointed and intrusive, recurring as sensory fragments (Caruth, 1996; Ehlers & Clark, 2000). Conway (2005) and Brewin, Gregory, Lipton, and Burgess (2010) argue that traumatic memories are poorly integrated with autobiographical narrative because they are encoded with unusually intense sensory detail, suggesting that fragmented narration and recurring imagery in literature may reflect the structure of traumatic memory rather than functioning merely as stylistic devices.

2.2 Memory, Postmemory, and Cultural Transmission

Where psychological research has focused on the encoding and retrieval of traumatic memory, literary and cultural scholarship has extended this inquiry to the relationship between individual memory and collective history. Following Halbwachs (1992), memory is understood not as a purely individual phenomenon but as a social one, shaped by groups, cultures, and shared history; Assmann (2011) develops this distinction further, differentiating personal memory, produced through daily interaction, from communicative or cultural memory, preserved through texts and historical narrative. Erll (2011) reinforces this by arguing that memory should be viewed as a changing cultural phenomenon rather than a static account, continuously interacting with literature, media, and public discourse—meaning that the memory conveyed through fiction functions as a medium through which experiences of violence, migration, and suffering are conveyed, reiterated, and preserved across time.

The most significant contribution to this strand of scholarship for the present study is Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, which explains how the impact of trauma extends to generations that did not directly experience it. Hirsch (2008, 2012) argues that descendants can develop powerful emotional connections to traumatic

events through family storytelling, photographs, and everyday cultural practice, even though they did not witness the events themselves. Postmemory is therefore a mediated process rather than a form of direct remembrance: trauma is transmitted across generations through family narrative, visual images, everyday behavior, and—crucially—silence around painful experience, and because descendants cannot remember the original events, postmemory depends on imaginative and emotional reconstruction that allows individuals to form an emotional connection to legacies of suffering without substituting for historical truth (Hirsch, 2008; Erll, 2011). Although postmemory originated in studies of Holocaust memory, it has since been extended to literature and art concerned with war, migration, exile, and displacement more broadly, and it does not suggest that descendants experience trauma identically to those who lived through it; rather, inherited memory is reshaped by imagination and family narrative, producing a distinct but psychologically significant form of understanding (Hirsch, 2008, 2012; Erll, 2011).

2.3 Attachment, Relationships, and Psychological Development

As trauma scholarship progressed, researchers increasingly recognized that psychological pain is closely tied to the quality of interpersonal relationships, with supportive or disrupted relationships shaping both an individual's susceptibility to trauma and their capacity to heal from it, helping to explain why people exposed to similar adversities can respond in markedly different ways (Herman, 1992; Bowlby, 1988; Van der Kolk, 2014). Bowlby (1988), who established Attachment Theory, argued that emotional regulation and lifelong stress responses are shaped by internalized models formed through early caregiver interactions: consistent, responsive care tends to produce secure attachment, while inconsistent or absent care is associated with insecure attachment, emotional instability, and difficulty trusting others—a finding Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) supported empirically, showing that childhood attachment styles have a lasting

influence on emotional behavior across the lifespan. Central to this framework is the internal working model, the mental representation of self and others built from early caregiving experience that shapes expectations for security and trust throughout adulthood (Bowlby, 1988; Holmes, 2001).

Contemporary scholarship has moved decisively away from treating trauma and attachment as separate domains: Fonagy, Campbell, and Luyten (2022) argue that secure relationships are essential for psychological recovery, and that ongoing neglect or emotional disturbance can compromise an individual's capacity to trust others, while Zagaria and colleagues (2024) extend this with the concept of attachment trauma, describing how disruptions in caregiving affect emotional, relational, and identity development. This holistic view is especially valuable for literary criticism, since fictional characters frequently display co-occurring traumatic and relational experiences shaped by the quality of relationships available to them.

2.4 Resilience as a Relational and Ongoing Process

Scholarship on trauma has broadened to consider how individuals develop coping mechanisms and rebuild their lives after adversity, moving away from an exclusive focus on suffering toward a fuller account of positive adaptation; long-term impairment is no longer treated as an inevitable outcome of trauma, and resilience has come to be understood as the capacity to remain engaged and active in life despite hardship (Masten, 2001; Bonanno, 2004). Masten (2001) famously describes resilience as "ordinary magic," achieved through simple relationships and a supportive social environment rather than exceptional personal achievement, while Bonanno (2004) similarly finds that many people maintain a stable, socially engaged baseline following trauma without developing chronic distress. Ungar (2011) extends this further, arguing that resilience is a socially and culturally constructed response shaped by the relational environment available to an individual, rather than a fixed personal trait.

This shift has meaningfully influenced literary criticism, which increasingly treats resilience as an emotional process that evolves over time rather than a final resolution to suffering. Rather than depicting comprehensive recovery, contemporary scholarship recognizes characters who reconstruct their sense of purpose and relationships while continuing to live with trauma's emotional aftereffects—a fuller picture of resilience that is particularly useful for psycho-literary analysis, allowing scholars to examine emotional perseverance and the coexistence of vulnerability and hope (Masten, 2001; Bonanno, 2004; Ungar, 2011).

2.5 Ocean Vuong Scholarship and the Research Gap

The growing body of scholarship on Ocean Vuong's writing, much of it produced following *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), has largely approached his work through migration, refugee studies, and studies of race and sexuality, agreeing that Vuong depicts the evolution of identity through a relational and historical lens on intimate violence, situating trauma within social and political context rather than as an isolated psychological event. A related strand focuses on his distinctive narrative technique—poetic language, fragmented narrative, symbolism, and non-linear progression—read as formal expressions of the psychological effects of trauma and displacement, conveying memory and emotional fragmentation through sensory impression, silence, and repetition (Whitehead, 2004; Luckhurst, 2008). While valuable, this scholarship leaves a significant gap concerning the interconnected frameworks of trauma, memory, attachment, and resilience—frameworks that, this study argues, operate together rather than in isolation across Vuong's fiction.

The Emperor of Gladness (2025) presents particularly fertile ground for this kind of integrated study, extending previously explored themes into a new, working-class, multigenerational setting. Existing scholarship on the novel remains limited and offers little insight into how trauma, memory, attachment, and resilience function together within it. This study

addresses that gap directly, developing an integrated psycho-literary framework—combining Trauma Theory, Postmemory Theory, and Attachment Theory, with resilience as a complementary analytical concept—to investigate how emotional suffering, inherited memory, and social relationships intersect within the narrative, extending scholarship on Vuong and contributing to broader debates on trauma, memory, and identity in contemporary literature.

3. Theoretical Framework and Method

3.1 Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in psycho-literary textual analysis of *The Emperor of Gladness* (2025). The primary data source is the novel's prose; secondary sources consist of Trauma, Postmemory, and Attachment Theory, together with relevant literary criticism. The qualitative design is appropriate because it centers emotional and psychological experiences that exceed quantitative measurement, and because trauma is represented in literature through events, language, symbolism, silence, imagery, and narrative structure that require close, interpretive reading. The study examines fragmented narrative, intergenerational trauma, emotional inheritance, silence, identity crisis, and relationships as they appear across the novel, aiming to produce a comprehensive, textually grounded interpretation rather than statistically generalizable findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.2 Trauma Theory

Trauma Theory remains among the foremost frameworks for understanding the psychology of suffering and its literary representation. While early accounts of trauma centered on a single stress-inducing event, contemporary trauma theory holds that traumatic experience can destabilize memory, identity, and emotion more broadly, impeding an individual's capacity to make coherent sense of existence (Caruth, 1996; Whitehead, 2004; Luckhurst, 2008). Cathy Caruth describes trauma as an experience of deferred time: individuals cannot fully process traumatic events as they occur, and disruptions

such as intrusive memories and flashbacks instead testify to the event's incomplete integration into conscious mental life, an understanding that has informed literary analysis of fragmented memory and silence as authentic representations of trauma rather than mere stylistic technique (Caruth, 1996). Anne Whitehead extends this by examining how trauma shapes literary form as well as content, since traumatic memory's resistance to sequential recall is often reflected in repetition and non-linear structure (Whitehead, 2004), while Roger Luckhurst treats trauma as a cultural and historical phenomenon as well as a psychological one, encouraging researchers to examine trauma within its cultural setting rather than as a purely personal event (Luckhurst, 2008).

Later scholars, including Herman (1992) and Balaev (2014), argue that trauma cannot be understood solely from the standpoint of individual psychology, and must instead be read alongside historical, cultural, and social context. This study draws on the combined insights of Caruth, Whitehead, and Luckhurst because the novel situates trauma within poverty, migration, and the loss of caregivers, requiring a holistic understanding that accounts for both psychological interiority and social reality; Trauma Theory therefore serves as the primary framework for analyzing the psychological trauma and emotional fragmentation of the novel's characters.

3.3 Postmemory Theory

Marianne Hirsch's Postmemory Theory explains how the impact of trauma extends into the generations that follow those who directly experienced it. Unlike personal memory, postmemory describes how descendants encounter trauma indirectly, through family narrative, photographs, silence, and cultural practice; these inherited recollections shape their emotional landscape and can function as "lived" memories in shaping identity (Hirsch, 2008, 2012). Because descendants cannot themselves remember traumatic events, postmemory depends on imaginative reconstruction from family fragments and incomplete narrative,

without substituting for historical truth (Hirsch, 2008; Erll, 2011). Although the theory originated in studies of Holocaust memory, it has since expanded to literature concerned with war, migration, exile, and displacement, and it does not suggest that descendants experience trauma identically to those who lived it—rather, inherited memory is reshaped by imagination into a distinct but psychologically significant form of understanding. Within this study, Postmemory Theory illuminates how emotional silence and inherited family history shape the psychological experience and identity of characters across generations in the novel.

3.4 Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory, developed by John Bowlby, describes how childhood emotional connections to caregivers shape psychological, emotional, and social development throughout life; Bowlby posits that all humans possess an inherent need to form close emotional connections that provide safety and support, shaping self-perception and relational capacity across the lifespan (Bowlby, 1988). Children who receive stable, consistent care are more likely to develop secure attachment and healthier adult relationships, while inconsistent caregiving tends to produce insecure attachment characterized by anxiety and difficulty trusting others, creating barriers that extend well beyond childhood (Bowlby, 1988; Ainsworth et al., 1978). Central to this framework is the internal working model—a mental representation of self and others, formed through early caregiving, that shapes expectations for security and trust into adulthood (Bowlby, 1988; Holmes, 2001).

Attachment Theory has become increasingly influential in literary criticism because fictional characters routinely display trust, abandonment, caregiving, and emotional distance—behaviors productively analyzed through major attachment constructs. Current research has also applied the theory directly to trauma and healing, recognizing that protective, consistent relationships can support psychological recovery and function as protective factors during and after trauma (Fonagy et al., 2022; Zagaria et al., 2024). In the

present study, Attachment Theory is used together with Trauma Theory and Postmemory Theory to examine how family relationships and attachment patterns in the novel shape characters' emotional responses to trauma and the emotional legacies passed on to them.

3.5 Integrating Trauma, Postmemory, and Attachment Theory

This study integrates Trauma Theory, Postmemory Theory, and Attachment Theory into a single psycho-literary framework in order to analyze the psychological complexity of *The Emperor of Gladness* (2025). Each theory addresses a different facet of experience: Trauma Theory explains the disruption of cognitive and emotional functioning that trauma produces; Postmemory Theory describes how the emotional legacy of trauma is transmitted to subsequent generations, beyond what Trauma Theory alone can explain; and Attachment Theory examines how caregiving and interpersonal relationships shape the ways individuals manage and respond to psychological pain. Together, these theories describe emotional pain as shaped by more than the traumatic event itself, including family relationships, attachment style, and inherited emotional legacy (Caruth, 1996; Hirsch, 2012; Bowlby, 1988; Ainsworth et al., 1978).

This integrated approach reflects a broader tendency within contemporary literary studies to combine theoretical frameworks in pursuit of a fuller understanding of human experience (Whitehead, 2004; Luckhurst, 2008; Herman, 1992). The three theories are not merged into a single coherent model; each retains its own conceptual boundaries, and it is precisely their combination that allows this study to move beyond the limits of any single theoretical perspective—an approach especially well suited to a novel that interweaves trauma, inherited memory, and interpersonal relationship throughout its narrative.

3.6 Key Analytical Concepts

3.6.1 Silence and Narrative Representation

Silence functions as a key analytical concept in trauma and literary studies alike, often signaling

something of considerable importance. Because trauma frequently exceeds an individual's capacity to verbalize experience through ordinary discourse, extreme events often elude straightforward narration, emerging instead through fragments, repetition, and gaps that register psychological disruption rather than functioning merely as literary technique (Caruth, 1996; Whitehead, 2004). Within Postmemory Theory, silence is especially significant, since traumatic experience is frequently passed from one generation to the next without words, conveyed instead through emotional distance and incomplete family narrative (Hirsch, 2008, 2012). As a literary device, silence requires the reader's active participation, using omission and gaps to convey emotional truths that direct description cannot capture; it does not indicate an absence of meaning but the limits of language in the face of overwhelming experience, and it can also function as psychological protection rather than weakness. Silence also bears on attachment: combined with emotionally unavailable caregivers, it can make it difficult for individuals to feel secure or to trust others (Bowlby, 1988; Holmes, 2001). In this study, silence is treated as a significant analytical element for tracing disrupted relational patterns across the text.

3.6.2 Identity Formation

Identity formation is treated in this study as an ongoing psychological process through which individuals understand themselves in relation to their experiences, relationships, and environments, rather than as a fixed condition. In psycho-literary studies, identity is a fluid construct that can be reinforced or disrupted through trauma, memory, and relationship, and literary narrative is well suited to capturing this process, showing how characters reconcile divergent emotional and social experiences over time (Erikson, 1968; Caruth, 1996). Trauma can destabilize long-held ideas about self, producing uncertainty and inner disconnection, but identity does not form from trauma alone: positive social interaction also contributes to the transformation of self (Herman, 1992; Caruth, 1996). Caruth (1996) argues that the inability to integrate a

traumatic event into one's life story produces fragmented memory and emotional disruption, often represented in literature through disconnected narration; Postmemory Theory adds that descendants construct identity from inherited stories rather than lived experience (Hirsch, 2008, 2012), while Attachment Theory contributes the insight that early relationships shape identity directly, with secure attachment supporting a stable sense of self and insecure attachment introducing instability (Bowlby, 1988; Holmes, 2001).

3.6.3 Emotional Inheritance

Emotional inheritance describes the ways individuals pass on emotional experience and psychological patterns to subsequent generations, rooted in daily interaction and shared family narrative rather than formal caregiving; trauma can disrupt the emotional lives of later generations even when those generations never encountered the originating event directly (Hirsch, 2012; Bowlby, 1988). Hirsch's work suggests that later generations can develop attachments to historically significant events that occurred before their own existence through sustained family tradition, imbuing inherited memory with real emotional significance. From a literary-critical perspective, emotional inheritance helps explain why characters carry emotional burdens not fully accounted for by their own lived experience, expressed through repetitive behavior, family dynamics, and unspoken anxiety rather than formal exposition. Attachment Theory clarifies how this transmission operates through relationship: emotionally supportive caregiving fosters secure attachment, while unresolved parental trauma can produce attachment inconsistency across generations (Bowlby, 1988; Ainsworth et al., 1978). Emotional inheritance thus links Trauma, Postmemory, and Attachment Theory together, providing a further analytical tool for tracing the painful legacies presented through family relationship and memory in *The Emperor of Gladness* (2025).

4. Textual Analysis

The Emperor of Gladness (2025) resists the model of trauma as a discrete crisis to be overcome. Instead, Vuong presents trauma as an ongoing, shaping presence within memory, relationships, and the ordinary textures of daily life—a psychological, continuous condition rather than a radical, isolated occurrence. The analysis applies Trauma Theory, particularly the work of Caruth (1996) and Herman (1992), to understand the effects of traumatic experience on memory, identity, and the present; draws on Hirsch's (2012) postmemory framework to trace the emotional legacies transmitted across Hai's family; and applies Bowlby's (1988) model of attachment to examine how emotional relationships provide comfort, security, and belonging during crisis. Read together, these theories show that psychological healing in the novel is not a solitary achievement but a relational process shaped by memory, attachment, and caring relationships.

The chapter centers on two figures, Hai and Grazina, who embody different forms of psychological pain: Grazina suffers from displacement, aging, dementia, and the gradual loss of independence, while Hai suffers from inherited emotional burdens, migration, fractured family ties, and unprocessed grief—differing vulnerabilities that point toward a universal need for care and recognition across generation and life stage. The following analysis traces this need across six interrelated movements: the psychological landscape of loss that opens the text; the crisis on King Phillip's Bridge and the formation of attachment outside the family; the relationship between naming, identity, and emotional inheritance; the role of community and ordinary care in healing; the treatment of inherited sadness in the following generation; and the reframing of resilience through separation, loss, and the novel's closing return to its opening image.

4.1 Trauma and the Psychological Landscape of Loss

From its opening pages, the novel situates psychological suffering within both individual

consciousness and social environment. East Gladness, the fictional Connecticut town at the center of the narrative, is defined by economic decline and social abandonment that mirror the emotional fragmentation of its inhabitants; its decaying spaces externalize internal loss, reflecting the scars of characters such as Hai, whose grief and fractured family remain unspoken. This relationship between external environment and internal condition is established from the novel's opening line, "The hardest thing in the world is to live only once" (Vuong, 2025, p. 8), which frames existence as a burden shaped by irreversible experience. Read through Caruth's (1996) account of trauma as an experience that destabilizes one's relationship to the present, this opening positions Hai's fragmented internal landscape as continuous with the decay around him. This atmosphere intensifies through the recurring image of "forgotten identities... searching for their names, names that no longer live in any living thing's mouth" (Vuong, 2025, p. 8), a metaphor for the slow disappearance of history and the hope of being remembered; read alongside Hirsch's (2012) postmemory framework, it suggests that the absence of recorded memory does not eliminate emotional impact.

The novel's first major crisis occurs when Hai stands on King Phillip's Bridge, prepared to end his life, "like a good son" (Vuong, 2025, p. 13)—a decision Vuong presents not as sudden but as the culmination of unhealed grief and diminished self-worth. Read through Bowlby's (1988) account of attachment and self-esteem, this phrase reveals a warped internal working model in which care, devotion, and sacrifice have become dangerously merged, evidence that Hai's crisis is relational in origin rather than merely situational.

4.2 Attachment as an Alternative Family

Hai's crisis is interrupted not by resolution but by an unexpected relationship. Grazina's simple appeal, "You look young, you can live. Please" (Vuong, 2025, p. 16), does not ask Hai to justify his pain; it treats him as a person whose life holds value, illustrating Vuong's suggestion that healing can begin when an outsider responds with simple

kindness. Read through Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory, this moment demonstrates that a secure attachment can form between strangers, expanding attachment beyond biological or long-established relationship. This is reinforced when Grazina tells Hai, "Poor kid... Whatever happened is over. But don't you cry, boy" (Vuong, 2025, p. 19)-reassurance offered without requiring Hai to relive his trauma. Vuong further complicates the conventional caregiver-dependent structure: Grazina, vulnerable because of her age and advancing dementia, nonetheless becomes the source of emotional safety for Hai, suggesting that caregiving in the relationship is mutual and reciprocal, grounded in shared vulnerability (Holmes, 2001), and positioning Grazina as the starting point of his psychological healing.

4.3 Naming, Identity, and Emotional Inheritance

As Hai gradually feels safety with Grazina, the novel turns to questions of identity and the emotional remnants of family. Hai reflects that his name was "the only thing his mother gave him that he was able to keep without destroying" (Vuong, 2025, p. 20)-a reflection that transforms his name from a simple identifier into a vessel of memory, emotional legacy, and quiet persistence. Read through Hirsch's (2012) postmemory framework, this shows that inherited legacies encompass love as well as trauma, and that recovery is possible through reinterpreting inherited memory rather than rejecting it outright. This relational conception of identity develops further through the domestic ritual of preparing bread with Grazina, when Hai says, "I feel beautiful," before correcting himself: "I feel Grazina" (Vuong, 2025, p. 23). The correction reveals that Hai's positive self-perception originates relationally rather than internally, cultivated through Grazina's unconditional regard-evidence, consistent with Masten's (2001) claim that resilience is built through small, everyday adaptive actions, that psychological change can begin within the mundane rather than the extraordinary.

As Hai becomes further absorbed in caring for Grazina, Vuong shifts attention toward the quieter, psychological dimensions of caregiving. This is evident when a question Hai asks Grazina during her confusion turns out to be "the question he asked his own grandmother, dead years now, whenever she had one of her schizophrenic fits" (Vuong, 2025, p. 31). Read jointly through Hirsch (2012) and Bowlby (1988), this scene shows that what crosses the generational divide is not simply the capacity to grieve but the capacity to care: while Grazina's cognitive memory is eroded by dementia, she continues to respond to gentle, reassuring care, allowing Vuong to distinguish remembering events from remembering feelings, and to suggest that emotional connection is the more enduring determinant of personhood. This recurs when Hai comforts Grazina with the same folk song "his grandmother would sing to him when he would wake from a nightmare" (Vuong, 2025, p. 36), showing memory functioning not as passive recall but as an active emotional practice enacted in the present.

4.4 Community, Ordinary Care, and Healing

As Hai becomes more emotionally stable, Vuong shifts the narrative's focus from bare survival to self-discovery, visible in Hai's quiet admission to Grazina: "I used to want to be a writer. My dream was to write a short novel that held everything I loved, including unlovable things" (Vuong, 2025, p. 38)-marking an evolution in his relationship to trauma, where painful memory becomes something to be considered rather than escaped, echoing Caruth's (1996) account of the drive to bring order to fragmented experience without erasing it. The novel extends this model of relational healing to the wider community at HomeMarket, the restaurant where Hai works, which emerges against a backdrop of decayed, abandoned buildings as an intentional alternative defined by an ordinary philosophy of care. This philosophy is voiced by BJ, who tells Hai, "We give people the feeling of home" (Vuong, 2025, p. 54), and later, "We transform it. We turn food into a feeling" (Vuong, 2025, p. 55), positioning food as a medium of care through which small

gestures restore dignity. Hai extends this symbolism, describing how cornbread inherits "the essence of corn... while, perhaps, preserving, even enhancing, that very cornness" (Vuong, 2025, p. 56)-a metaphor for identity under trauma: individuals are reshaped by suffering without losing the capacity to feel, think, and love.

4.5 Sony and the Transmission of Inherited Sadness

Hai's friendship with Sony, BJ's son, extends the novel's examination of inherited trauma into a new generation. Vuong connects Sony's emotional experience to his father's substance use without reducing it to a narrative of victim and failure, encouraging readers to understand self-destructive behavior through emotional context rather than moral judgment. Sony's inherited sadness surfaces when he asks, "Why do I feel so sad sometimes?" (Vuong, 2025, p. 128)-a question Vuong leaves unanswered, its silence reflecting the difficulty of conveying emotionally inherited pain through language. This deepens when Sony admits, "I wish I didn't feel this way... like a loser" (Vuong, 2025, p. 129), and Hai responds, "I'm a fucking loser too" (Vuong, 2025, p. 129), entering Sony's painful reality rather than offering condescending reassurance. Their exchange about sad music, when Hai explains that it "gives the sadness a place to stand" (Vuong, 2025, p. 129), crystallizes one of the novel's central claims: that pain which is acknowledged, rather than avoided, becomes more bearable, and that healing consists of accumulated ordinary interaction rather than singular transformative events.

4.6 Loss, Separation, and Resilience

As the novel moves toward its conclusion, Vuong turns to the effects of emotional separation on attachment. Grazina's dementia progresses to the point where Hai can no longer care for her, a loss conveyed through quiet communication and restrained emotion. Her admission, "I wish I knew you when I was a girl," affirms that attachment can form and hold meaning entirely outside biological or formally sanctioned family bonds, and though Grazina has lost much

capacity to recall facts, she has not lost the capacity to recognize emotional safety-a distinction between factual and emotional memory that runs throughout the novel. When social services arrive to move Grazina to a care facility, Hai comforts her with an imaginative story rather than a painful truth, an act of emotional maturity that marks a clear departure from his earlier tendency to withdraw. Through their parting, Vuong reframes attachment as an "enduring emotional presence" rather than "permanent physical closeness": separation may change the form love takes, but it does not eliminate its psychological presence.

The novel's final section, beginning with Grazina's departure, centers on what it means to survive trauma rather than to overcome it. This idea crystallizes in the image of salamanders crossing the HomeMarket parking lot, which Hai calls "so brave" (Vuong, 2025, p. 340)-small, fragile creatures whose continuous movement through danger becomes a model of courage available to ordinary, vulnerable people rather than conventionally heroic figures. This reframed resilience is reinforced when Hai gives away his savings to help secure a more stable future for his aunt Kim and Sony (Vuong, 2025, p. 349), read here not as evidence of complete healing but as renewed capacity for empathy, consistent with Ungar's (2011) account of resilience as socially constructed. The HomeMarket employees illustrate this same principle collectively, enduring hardship through mutual support that functions as an alternative family, suggesting that resilience in the novel is fundamentally relational.

At the novel's close, Vuong replaces the question of whether trauma can be overcome with the question of how people continue living once they accept that certain losses are permanent. This shift is captured when Hai, reflecting from inside a dumpster shortly after Grazina's departure, considers that houses contain rooms, rooms contain people, and people contain relationships-transforming a space associated with waste into a symbol of universal relational connection, and refuting the idea that trauma survivors exist in permanent separation from others. This

transformation is captured in the novel's final line, which echoes and revises its opening: "They are soft, simple people, who only live once," recalling the earlier claim that "the hardest thing in the world is to live only once" (Vuong, 2025, p. 8). Where living only once initially seemed unbearable, by the novel's end the same fragility of human life is what makes attachment, and the small acts of service that sustain it, precious rather than unbearable—a shift reinforced by Hai's mother, who tells him, "Eventually, it'll get smaller" (Vuong, 2025, p. 354), describing healing as a process of gradual accommodation rather than complete closure. Taken as a whole, the ending affirms that hope remains possible even within uncertainty, and that it is possible for individuals to carry their scars while still being whole.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how trauma, memory, loss, and attachment intersect in Ocean Vuong's *The Emperor of Gladness* (2025), and to show that these psychological processes cannot be adequately understood in isolation from one another. Using Trauma, Postmemory, and Attachment Theory together, the analysis demonstrates that psychology, as represented in the novel, is not compartmentalized: trauma shapes memory, memory forms attachment, attachment nurtures resilience, and resilience in turn equips characters to endure loss. Trauma in the novel is not a discrete, resolvable crisis but an ongoing condition that shapes memory, self-perception, and relationships. Memory operates as both burden and resource, transmitted across generations through postmemory as much as through direct experience: Hai's relationship to his mother, grandmother, and eventually Sony shows that inherited memory carries love as well as pain. Attachment—formed as readily between strangers, as in Hai and Grazina's bond, as within biological families—provides the primary mechanism through which characters withstand psychological pain, and Vuong's emphasis on role reversal and mutual vulnerability challenges any simple division between the wounded and the healing. Resilience, finally, is not an exceptional

trait possessed by a few strong individuals, but an ordinary, cumulative, relational process built through shared meals, small kindnesses, and the willingness to remain present for others despite the certainty of future loss.

This study also affirms Vuong's broader contribution to contemporary literature. By foregrounding the emotional lives of socially and economically marginalized communities—the elderly, the working poor, immigrants, and those affected by addiction—Vuong counters dominant narratives that bypass these experiences, suggesting that ordinary caregiving can produce healing even within lives that are otherwise emotionally burdened. The analysis undertaken here has mapped the primary forms of trauma depicted in the novel, assessed the role of memory in preserving and transmitting pain, traced attachment relationships as sources of emotional safety, and examined resilience as a psychological survival mechanism, fulfilling the research objectives with which this study began and directly answering its guiding questions regarding the representation of trauma, the transmission of memory across generations, and the ways loss, attachment, and resilience shape belonging and psychological survival in the text. The novel suggests, ultimately, that healing does not consist in the elimination of pain but in the acceptance of vulnerability and the acknowledgment of shared humanity—offering readers a testament to the possibility of hope and connection even amid trauma, loss, and uncertainty.

This study is limited to a single primary text and to a specific psycho-literary framework, and the novel remains saturated with psychologically relevant material beyond its scope. Future studies might examine the text through Postmemory Theory or Attachment Theory in greater depth, or through the frameworks of Mental Health Studies, Dementia Studies and Gerontology in light of Grazina's characterization, and Care Ethics in light of the novel's caregiving relationships. The novel's treatment of identity, displacement, and belonging also invites further study through Cultural Studies, Diaspora Studies, and Identity Theory, while the economic

struggles of the HomeMarket employees present valuable material for class consciousness and labor studies. Finally, The Emperor of Gladness might be situated within comparative studies of contemporary American, Asian American, and immigrant literature, or read alongside Vuong's other publications to develop a fuller understanding of his treatment of memory, trauma, and resilience across his body of work—directions that would extend the interpretive model offered here and contribute further to the evolving scholarly conversation on trauma, memory, and resilience in contemporary literature.

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