

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The concept of masculinity has historically been anchored in ideals of strength, control, and resilience, frequently associated with conventional notions of authority and independence (Connell, 2005). Despite this, the rigid definitions have changed such as those observed in years past with studies surrounding masculinity focused on vulnerability, gentleness and even an embracing of another's frailty. Masculinity is not a limited collection of traits and experiences; it is a moving target that tends to contrast the bipolar framework through which masculinity is defined (Kimmel, 2000). Ocean Vuong writes beautifully about masculinity in his collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, particularly the external pressures that shape men's perceptions of their gender roles and expectations. Rather, it frames masculinity as a consequence of emotional pressure coming from a rich cocktail of social and archetypal taboos throughout history. Vuong's work marries contemporary poetry with the themes of absence, memory, and trauma to reimagine masculinity. It allows readers to come to masculinity both as a sociological phenomenon but also as an intimate, and often fraught, state of being that is far more than a social role—one defined by some rich human emotions (Hansén, 2024).

One of the prevailing themes in Vuong's poetry is masculinity formed from absence. The lack of traditional father figures and male role models Vuong makes clear weighs heavily on his understanding of masculinity. There is no father-figure being void of guidance, and masculinity in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* thus becomes vaguely defined; a piece-meal series of tropes then constructed and reconstructed at each crossroad designated by familial absence or patriarchal pressure. Vuong attributes the absence of traditional masculine influence to his upbringing, and his identity as a result, has been expressed throughout his poetry. This absence creates a void that his poetry seeks to fill, illustrating how the lack of a father figure can evoke heightened sensitivity to

gendered expectations. The lack of a paternal figure or a socially recognized masculine role model drives Vuong to pursue an alternative conception of masculinity, influenced by his relationship with his mother, encounters with violence, and cultural dislocation. (Lamb, 2017). The poems of Vuong frequently focus on this process of self-construction, wherein the absence does not diminish masculinity but rather opens it to reinterpretation. His poetry examines the manner in which he constructs masculinity from fragments, memories, and symbols, thereby embodying resilience that emerges from embracing absence rather than avoiding it.

Memory serves as a pivotal instrument in Vuong's investigation of masculinity, wherein he reconstructs the male identity through the recollection of familial, cultural, and inherited traumatic experiences. Memories, particularly those associated with his Vietnamese heritage and immigrant background, provide Vuong with a foundation for developing a masculinity that challenges dominant cultural paradigms. In poems such as "Aubade with Burning City" and "My Father Writes from Prison," Vuong reflects on painful memories, utilizing them to construct a narrative of masculinity shaped by the experiences of loss and survival. The memories that Vuong recounts are imbued with the burden of generational trauma and displacement, thereby illustrating masculinity as a quality that is both inherited and transformed in the act of remembering. As posited by critic Mark Doty, "memory enables the poet to revisit and reframe past experiences, thereby giving voice to emotions that might have previously been suppressed" (Doty, 2011). In Vuong's case, memory functions as a means of reclaiming masculine identity, enabling him to confront painful histories while redefining his place within them. This perspective is instrumental in demonstrating how masculinity can emerge from resilience and acceptance of vulnerability, thereby illustrating the strength inherent in self-awareness and historical consciousness.

Vuong's identity as a Vietnamese American introduces an additional layer of complexity to his examination of masculinity, imbued with cultural and generational nuances that reflect the nuances of diasporic existence. The immigrant experience frequently intensifies questions of belonging and identity,

and Vuong's poems demonstrate how this experience influences his understanding of masculinity. His portrayal of masculinity is not isolated from his cultural heritage; rather, it is deeply embedded in the collective memory of his family's journey. In "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong," he articulates the sense of estrangement and self-acceptance that underlies his diasporic identity, a sentiment that informs his construction of masculinity as a quality that is both fragile and resilient. In her 2003 article, literary critic Y  n L   Espiritu posits that "diasporic identities are not fixed, but constantly negotiated through interactions with cultural memories and historical events" (Espiritu, 2003). Thus, Vuong's masculinity is contained by a battle-spanning culture almost literally between the past glories of father-son bonding and current pangs of identity. His poems articulate a masculinity that is not in tension with his ancestry, but rather a kind of masculinity made deeper and more vulnerable by such history: one which invites the reader to see what legacies of belonging and resistance contribute to men being men.

Vuong, through this lens of vulnerability and intimacy, has subverted manhood stereotypes: masculinity is typically attached to emotional distance and physical strength. In his poetry, he demonstrates a tenderness and vulnerability associated with masculinity that challenges the conventional definitions and expectations typically associated with this concept. In poems like "Deto(nation)," the phrase talks about masculinity tied to sorrow, compassion. Wanting closeness. Vuong's willingness to embrace vulnerability in his poetry provides an alternative model of manhood, one that sees emotional complexity as a strength rather than a weakness. This can also be linked to the work of R.W. Connell, who describes "hegemonic masculinity" on one hand as a broader set of ideas that repress and stigmatize vulnerability, and marginalizes others not in line with its tenets (for instance women or gay men [Connell, 1995]). Rather than affirming what previous mentions might suggest, Vuong is turning the understanding of masculinity upside down, revealing it as a realm where strength is indicative of one's ability to be vulnerable. His poems create a frame of context where love, at the least tenderness and loss can be adjusted into male identity an idea of masculinity that resolves in understanding through concern.

While absence and memory in Vuong's poetry are subjects of meditation, yet simultaneously serve to reinforce the notion of masculinity. The concept of absence is employed by Vuong as a means of exploring the lacunae in our understanding of identity. Similarly, memory enables him to reconstruct and reshape the narrative of his life and heritage. These devices function in conjunction to create an intricate portrayal of masculinity that resonates with both personal and universal experiences. For example, the theme of lacking a father figure repeatedly returns as representative of the spaces Vuong attempts to fill with words and ongoing discovery. Vuong rethinks the mythological son in "Telemachus" (feet of clay/sin-just-born), and finds a kind of murky parallel to his journey at sea. Scholar Patricia Hill Collins posits that "the absence of certain figures in one's life can prompt a more profound introspection and redefinition of the self" (Collins, 2000). Vuong's poetry embodies this notion as his absence drives the forward motion of the work and he struggles to contend with or reinvent masculine archetypes.

The exploration of masculinity via absence and memory in Vuong is a highly relevant object of examination, as such focus contributes to ongoing discussions within (contemporary) literary studies on identity, gender, culture and the interplay between them. In contrast to traditional notions of masculinity, Vuong envisions a manhood that expresses emotional weight and cultural richness. His researches illuminated the diverse mechanisms through which masculinity is constructed and performed, especially among marginalized and diasporic populations. This examination of masculinity as a factor of lack, fragility and historical awareness which draws attention to more inclusive stories that extend to the complexities of human experience be it gendered or otherwise. Vuong's poetry challenges the traditional stereotypes of masculinity, providing insights that allow for a softer view of masculinities and push readers to consider how these societal norms change across cultures and generations. In *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, Vuong illustrates that masculinity can be defined as surviving against the odds, being aware of one's origins, and persevering despite adversity. However, it can also be defined as transforming one's pain into a testament to

one's existence and resilience, proving that one has not only endured but also matured.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

1. How does the absence of a father, shape idea of masculinity in Vuong's selected poems?
2. How role memory influence Vuong's understanding and expression of masculinity?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

1. To Investigate how familial absence shapes Vuong's concept of masculinity.
2. To Analyze the role of memory, especially traumatic and inherited memories, in reshaping and reconstructing masculinity.

1.4 Significance of the Study

1. To contributes to contemporary discussions on masculinity, especially within marginalized and diasporic contexts.
2. To give a contribution of a reference for other researchers in further study. From this research, the reader is able to know how masculinity can be an adaptive and inclusive aspect of identity that allows for cultural and emotional complexity.

1.5 Methodology of the Study

This research will employ a qualitative methodology, combining close textual analysis with a review of secondary literature on masculinity, memory studies, and Asian-American literary theory. The analysis will concentrate on a number of selected poems from *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, with particular attention paid to "Aubade with Burning City," "Telemachus," "My Father Writes from Prison," and "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong." By analysing Vuong's use of language, metaphor, and symbolism, this study will interpret how masculinity

is constructed in Vuong's work and investigate the impact of cultural memory and familial absence on this construction. Furthermore, the research will cite the scholarly interpretations of masculinity put forth by theorists such as Stefan Horlacher, who posits *Configuring Masculinity*, Paul Ricoeur theories on memory, history, forgetting, and a new theory of absence experience by Laura Gow. The poetry of Vuong will be examined in conjunction with these frameworks in order to illustrate how masculinity in his work reflects an alternative to the hegemonic masculinity model, with a particular focus on the themes of resilience, empathy and vulnerability.

1.6 Scope of Limitation

This paper is a synoptic study of Vuong's collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* and focuses on the elements of masculinity, absence and memory. Although ideas regarding masculinity also appear in Vuong's other work, this study will elucidate the poems from *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* alone due to their concentrated attention on masculinity and therefore more thorough analyses are possible. This paper will specifically focus on how Vuong's Vietnamese heritage and immigrant story influences his representation of masculinity. He will also explore his use of cultural memory in creating an alternative model for masculinity that subverts the dominant Western paradigm.

1.7 Status of the Study

In *Ocean Vuong Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, masculinity is depicted to stand in for its construction: absence, memory." The piece explores a number of difficult topics from both personal and more historical trauma, as well as questions around cultural identity, milking legacy. The intersection of Vuong's Vietnamese background and his queer Asian American experience is where his work lies. This gives him space to explore masculinity through means that challenge normative patriarchal values. This lack of a paternal presence in Vuong's poetry is both an account of a literal absence in the family dynamic and the invocation of a figurative void that can be filled by alternative masculinities, soft-bodied validation, quiet healing touch; lyrical abundance. *Night Sky with*

Exit Wounds treats these themes uniquely, with the absence of a father delivering two punches one to the poet's identity and the other to his understanding of masculinity.

There are some prominent works that have approached the subjects of masculinity, father absence, and memory in literature from a diverse array of perspectives and cultural contexts. This review situates Vuong's themes within a broader discourse on masculinity studies and father absence, while also elucidating how Vuong's work uniquely engages with memory and cultural identity in the construction of alternative masculinities.

In the studies "Father Absence and Female Masculinity in Little Women" (2019) and "Yuni" (2021), Rizqiyah and Hidayatullah (2024) examine the phenomenon of female masculinity in the context of an absence of a paternal figure. The studies employ the narratives of "Little Women" and "Yuni" as case studies. The study investigates how female characters adopt masculine roles to fill the void left by absent fathers, suggesting that father absence may prompt the development of non-traditional gender traits within daughters. While this research parallels Vuong's themes in examining father absence as a transformative force, it diverges from her work by focusing on the manifestation of masculinity within female characters, emphasizing agency and independence, rather than exploring masculinity as part of male identity within marginalized communities. This comparative study offers insight into the ways in which disparate narratives reinterpret the phenomenon of father absence through a multiplicity of gendered experiences. It also provides a unique contribution to the field in the form of Vuong's work, which is centered around queer and Asian American masculinity in poetic form.

Florian Andrei VLAD's 2023 Cultural Contexts and Masculinity Transitions continues to deepen these discussions in the multivocality literature by exploring how shifts in masculinity are negotiated with specific cultural contexts. The study of VLAD argued that masculinity is not a universal thing, but rather something that is constructed by the social, cultural and historical environment. Vuong's poetry similarly embodies a unique masculinity that is culturally

situated, which can be seen most clearly in how the Vietnamese and immigrant experience effects his own memory and trauma. However, while VLAD provides a sociological perspective on the evolution of masculinity within specific cultural frameworks, Vuong's work internalizes these shifts within the intimate sphere of family memory and loss. By placing the poet's voice in narrative space as one in which personal and cultural masculinities are perpetually re-decided nous gain a much more nuanced sense of the tension between individual and collective experience.

More recently, Ruxton (2020) has framed a memoir on loss with reflections on masculinity mourning love for the loss of his son in World War II in the article "Masculinity, Intimacy, and Mourning." Ruxton's study is based on a father's account of the death of his son. It explores the ways in which grief reshapes the father's understanding of masculinity and intimacy. This theme of intimacy within the context of father-son relationships is reflected in Vuong's engagement with the concepts of masculine tenderness and loss. However, while Ruxton's analysis is centered on the father's perspective in processing his son's death, Vuong's poetry navigates the absence of the father from the viewpoint of the son. This inversion serves to illustrate Vuong's innovative approach to portraying masculinity through the lens of absence. The poignant longing for intimacy with an absent father serves to underscore a vulnerability that has the effect of reshaping traditional male roles, particularly within immigrant communities.

Boothroyd and Cross (2017) conducted an empirical analysis of the influence of father absence on gendered personality traits in children in their study, *Father Absence and Gendered Traits in Sons and Daughters*. The findings of their research indicate that the absence of a father may contribute to the emergence of more gender-specific characteristics among sons and daughters, potentially due to the reinforcement of traditional gender roles in the absence of the mother. While Vuong's poetry also addresses the issue of father absence, his work does not reinforce conventional gender roles. Instead, it subverts them by portraying masculinity as inherently fragile and permeable. Vuong's engagement with masculinity is not based on empirical data or psychological outcomes; rather, it is a subjective exploration of memory and identity. By employing poetic

language, Vuong develops an alternative masculinity that challenges the conventional frameworks analyzed by Boothroyd and Cross. Instead, he focuses on the emotional landscapes shaped by memory and loss.

In the final analysis, as presented in *Black Sons to Mothers: In order to examine the intersection of memory, mothering, and masculinity in African American sons' experiences of maternal influence*, Dancy, Perry, and Dancy (2024) conducted a study entitled "in the Wake". The study examines the ways in which African American men negotiate their understanding of masculinity within the context of intergenerational trauma and racialized memory. While this study shares thematic similarities with Vuong's work in examining masculinity in the context of absent fathers and maternal influence, its focus on African American experiences introduces a racial dimension that is distinct from Vuong's Vietnamese and immigrant background. Similarly, Vuong's work addresses intergenerational trauma within the context of the Vietnamese diaspora, demonstrating how racial and cultural histories influence the formation of masculinity in marginalized communities. This comparative perspective highlights the diversity within experiences of paternal absence and the formation of masculinities that transcend cultural and racial boundaries.

In conclusion, these studies collectively emphasize the intricate and multifaceted nature of masculinity, particularly in the context of paternal absence and cultural memory. Each study addresses the issue of father absence within a variety of contexts, including the influence of female masculinity, the impact of cultural shifts, the effects of grief and intimacy, the psychological implications of father absence, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma. These studies reveal both universal and culturally specific implications of father absence on gender identity and expressions of masculinity. Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* makes a significant contribution to this discourse by creating a poetic space where masculinity is articulated through memory, loss, and cultural heritage. This offers an alternative narrative to traditional male identities shaped by dominance and stoicism. In contrast to the studies previously discussed, Vuong's approach is distinctive in its focus on a queer, Vietnamese American perspective. This perspective reframes masculinity as a site of both

personal vulnerability and cultural resilience.

1.8 Organization of the Study

Organization of The Study This *skripsi* consists of four chapters:

Chapter 1 is introduction. This chapter contains a description of the background of the problem, problem formulation, research objectives, research benefits, research methodology, scope and limitations of the research, research status and writing systematics.

Chapter 2 is review of related literature. This chapter contains the theories or related research studies in the same field. This provides the theories used in analyzing the data, that is theory masculinity and memory.

Chapter 3 is finding and discussion. In this chapter, the answers to the research problems including the research findings, research findings integrated into established knowledge, theories, and explanations of research results will present.

Chapter 4 is conclusion and suggestions. This chapter contains conclusions and suggestions based on the research findings of the previous chapter to answer research questions on the selected scene. This chapter describes the conclusions from what has been discussed previously and some suggestions regarding this research.