

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Yamane (2015) quotes that foreign-born Vietnamese men face wage discrimination on the order of 7-9% and are significantly less likely to hold managerial or supervisory positions than comparable East European men. Furthermore, foreign-born Vietnamese women face even higher levels of wage discrimination and are similarly underrepresented in management roles. In this context, Liebkind (2004) Immigrants often face numerous challenges in this context, including cultural adaptation, discrimination, and finding a new identity in a different society. The experiences of immigrants from countries with a history of conflict, such as Vietnam, are becoming increasingly relevant. Vietnam's long history of war and political instability has driven large-scale migration to various countries, particularly to the West, resulting in significant Vietnamese diaspora communities globally.

The migration process is ideally expected to culminate in harmonious social integration between immigrants and the host community. This process involves cultural acceptance, equal economic opportunities, and the recognition of immigrants' rights (Mai & Diem, 2015). However, in reality, many structural and cultural challenges often hinder this process. The adaptation process for immigrants is often hindered by stereotypes, marginalization, and even discrimination. Additionally, the dynamics of their lives in the new country are complicated by cultural differences, language, past trauma, and trauma from their home countries (Lily Thuy Pham, 2019). In the context of the Vietnamese diaspora, these experiences are further complicated by the legacy of conflict, often echoing the harrowing experiences of the "boat people" who fled after the Vietnam War.

Nam Le's short story collection, *The Boat* (2008), is a seminal contemporary literary work that profoundly explores the experiences of Vietnamese immigrants. Through a personal and emotional narrative approach, Le (2008) reflects the visceral realities faced by immigrants. Despite the physical and mental suffering

depicted, the collection addresses universal issues such as the search for identity, longing for the homeland, and the quest for a better future. Consequently, this work is relevant not only to readers of Vietnamese background but also to those interested in humanitarian issues, diaspora, and migration.

"...these new experiences lead to altered or evolving representations of experience and of self-identity. Such representations are then manifest in cultural artefacts of many kinds [...] new forms of literary production. [...] At one level we can consider individual works, but at another we can consider a full body of literature that arguably hangs together through a relationship with a migratory record or history...". (Russell King, n.d.)

By amplifying voices that have been historically marginalized, literature allows for a deeper understanding of the emotional and mental aspects of the immigrant experience (Tran, 2012). Examining works like *The Boat* broadens discourse on identity, diaspora, and cultural integration (Pham, 2015).

It is very important to conduct research on the experiences of Vietnamese immigrants in contemporary literature, particularly *The Boat*, because there are only a few studies that specifically address the representation of the struggles of Vietnamese immigrants in contemporary literary works. Previous research has focused more on the historical or sociological elements of Vietnamese migration (Nguyen, 2010), but literary studies may still not have received sufficient attention. Nevertheless, literary methods allow for a deeper understanding of the emotional and mental aspects experienced by immigrants (Tran, 2012). Additionally, studying works like *The Boat* can help broaden discussions about identity, diaspora, and cultural integration in the era of globalization (Pham, 2015).

The researcher selected three specific short stories from this collection: "*Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice*," "*Hiroshima*," and "*The Boat*". These stories are chosen because they collectively explore the multifaceted nature of historical trauma and displacement. While the first and third stories directly portray the struggles, intergenerational conflicts, and harrowing journeys of the Vietnamese diaspora, "*Hiroshima*" serves as a crucial thematic anchor. By presenting the tragic memory of a young Japanese girl during World

War II, Nam Le demonstrates that the scars of war, memory, and sudden uprooting transcend national boundaries, creating a shared global landscape of trauma that deeply correlates with the Vietnamese refugee experience.

Therefore, the background of this research is based on the importance of understanding and reflecting on the struggles of Vietnamese immigrants through literary works, particularly Nam Le's *The Boat*. This research has broad implications for the social, cultural, and humanitarian fields, and is expected to contribute to a better understanding and reflection on the struggles of Vietnamese immigrants through literary works.

The researcher selected these three short stories because they share several significant similarities; for instance, each story portrays the struggles and experiences of Vietnamese immigrants in different social and cultural contexts. Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice

This story is about a child born in Australia whose family was affected by the Vietnam War. This child harbours trauma toward his father, causing him to become very distant from him. The child faces difficulties when writing articles his pieces often lack appeal and are essentially unmarketable. However, when he writes an article detailing his family's hardships and sorrows, he discovers to his surprise that it becomes compelling and widely sought after. Hiroshima tells the story of a 9-year-old girl named Mayako, who was evacuated to a shrine located in the hills to escape the air raids of World War II, while Mayako's deeply nationalistic family chose to stay in downtown Hiroshima. Mayako recounts the dedication of her father, a Shinto priest; her older brother, who served in the air defences forces; and her older sister, who volunteered for the Volunteer Corps. The story reaches its climax when Mayako's cherished memory of having her photo taken with her family in which her father instructed her not to blink when the camera's magnesium flash went off tragically overlaps with the instant white flash of the atomic bomb explosion that devastated Hiroshima on the morning of August 6, 1945. The short story "*The Boat*" tells the story of the struggles of a 16-year-old girl named Mai, a "boat person" from Vietnam, as she flees her homeland and fights to survive. Mai was sent alone by her mother to escape the communist regime following the

Vietnam War. On a wooden boat that was overcrowded, stuffy, and unfit for human habitation, Mai had to survive a violent storm that damaged the boat's engine, depleted their food and clean water supplies, and forced them to throw the bodies of the deceased passengers into the sea one by one. Amidst the suffering and deep loneliness, Mai forms an emotional bond with a mother named Quyen and her young son Truong, whose condition is deteriorating due to severe dehydration.

I selected three of the seven short stories in the book *The Boat* because all three are united by a shared grim fate: stories of people uprooted from their homeland by war and forced to flee. What makes these three stories particularly compelling is how the author depicts the extraordinary struggles of the characters to survive in the shadow of war's aftermath.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

This study is focused on addressing the following problem formulations.

1. How is trauma portrayed in Nam Le's Le's selected short stories?
2. How does this trauma impact the lives and identities of the Vietnamese main characters?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study has the following objectives:

1. To analyze and describe the representation of struggles and challenges faced by characters experiencing displacement in Nam Le's selected short stories.
2. To examine how trauma and memory influence and shape the identity formation of the main characters in the selected texts.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Its urgency is even more apparent given the limited number of literary studies that specifically highlight the emotional and psychological dimensions of the struggles of Vietnamese immigrants after the war, even though a more holistic understanding through a literary approach is urgently needed in an era of globalization that is fraught with cross-cultural migration. By using *The Boat* as the

object of study, this research fills the gap in literature related to the representation of immigrant struggles in the realm of contemporary literary criticism while expanding the discourse on diaspora identity, which is relevant not only to multicultural societies in the West but also to global readers who care about humanitarian issues. Thus, the results of this study are expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of Vietnamese immigrants while encouraging broader empathy and social awareness of the importance of building integration and respect for cultural diversity in modern society.

1.5 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative literary method, utilizing qualitative content analysis through a close reading technique. The primary data consists of textual evidence, including narratives, dialogues, character behaviors, and setting descriptions, drawn directly from three selected short stories in Nam Le's anthology *The Boat* (2008): "Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice," "The Boat," and "Hiroshima".

The analysis starts by contextualising the texts in their specific histories of war, to answer Research Question 1 about the textual representations of trauma: the geopolitical catastrophe of the Vietnam War (including the subsequent Boat People crisis) and the localised devastation of the World War II in Hiroshima. The tremendous psychological wounds sustained by the characters are baseline validated by this socio-historical context. After this historical framing, the paper next turns to Cathy Caruth's psychoanalytic model of trauma to explore the structural mechanics of such psychic wounds. Specifically, the analysis employs Caruth's idea of psychological latency to examine how unprocessed wartime traumas enter a delayed stage and appear as unpredictable intergenerational ghosts and somatic terrors in the domestic domain. In addition, Caruth's idea of the crisis of language is deployed to examine how overwhelming historical atrocities undermine typical representational structures, compressing the characters'

experiences into a forced “learned silence,” and converting pauses or ellipses into active psychological symptoms in the text.

To answer Research Question 2, which is concerned with the long-term consequences of trauma for the characters’ lives, relationships and identities, the study explores both internal psychological fractures and external socio-economic pressures. Internally, the research draws on Caruth’s notions of the crisis of truth and relational fragmentation to explain how survivors are caught in a parallel, circular space-time of past atrocities. This epistemic gap creates extreme emotional solitude, survivor’s guilt and total breakdown of shared human connection, leading to deep interpersonal alienation and generational rifts between parents and children. Externally, the study draws on the notion of the Postcolonial Exotic developed by Graham Huggan to analyse the connection of these internal historical wounds to global capitalist networks. Huggan’s critique is leveraged to deconstruct the “commodification of marginality” and to evaluate the sharp ethical tensions experienced by diaspora subjects whose private suffering is weaponised as spectacular currency to meet the curatorial demands of authenticity and exoticism imposed by the Western publishing industry and academic institutions.

1.6 Scope and Limitation of the Study

This study sets strict boundaries to ensure depth and analytical focus in dissecting representations of the diaspora experience. The scope of this study is specifically focused on analysing the physical and psychological struggles, generational challenges, and historical trauma experienced by the characters in three selected short stories from Nam Le’s anthology *The Boat* (2008), namely: "Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice," "Hiroshima," and "*The Boat*". The textual analysis is strictly limited to the narratives, dialogues, character dynamics, and thematic events that reflect forced migration, cultural alienation, and psychological coping mechanisms within these selected texts. Geographically and historically, the study confines its focus to the aftermath of the Vietnam War and World War II as depicted within the boundaries of the fictional world created by the author.

Furthermore, the theoretical framework of this research is strictly limited to the intersection of psychoanalytic trauma studies and postcolonial diaspora theories. Specifically, the study limits its critical analysis to the application of Cathy Caruth's framework on psychological latency and the crisis of language, Marianne Hirsch's concept of familial and affiliative postmemory, Stuart Hall's perspective on fractured hybrid identity, and Graham Huggan's critique of the postcolonial exotic regarding the commodification of cultural suffering. Other literary dimensions, such as linguistic structures, formalist stylistic features, or sociological data outside the text, fall outside the scope of this study.

1.7 Status of The Study

Several scholars have explored the themes of refugee identities, historical memory, and trauma within Vietnamese diaspora literature, yet the convergence of postmemory, structural silencing, and cultural commodification remains under-examined. First, Nguyen and Carter (2021) investigated the corporeal and physical pain of the Vietnamese 'boat people' as a defining symbol of existential uncertainty and geopolitical displacement, focusing primarily on the sociological aspects of the first-generation refugees' physical journey. Second, Tran (2023) focused on the intergenerational transmission of conflict memories within immigrant households, specifically examining the development of a private "culture of silence" between parents and children. Third, Masus (2025) expanded the discourse on contemporary refugee narratives by investigating the acute psychological defense mechanisms such as the fight, flight, and freeze responses exhibited by marginalized characters in Viet Thanh Nguyen's literary works. While these studies provide a solid foundation for understanding the immediate physical and domestic aftermath of forced migration, they fail to connect how this internal, private trauma clashes with the external, public demands of the global literary market, nor do they explore how identity is dynamically negotiated through cultural hybridity across diverse historical circumstances. Therefore, this study fills a distinct gap in contemporary literary criticism by uniquely synthesizing Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, Marianne Hirsch's postmemory, Stuart Hall's cultural hybridity, and Graham Huggan's

postcolonial exotic to investigate how historical trauma and genetic memory construct a fractured diasporic identity that must navigate the commercial pressures of the Western publishing industry.

1.8 Organization of the Study

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

Chapter I This chapter establishes the foundation of the research, encompassing the background of the study, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, the refined methodology focusing on psychoanalytic and postcolonial frameworks, the scope and limitations, the status of the study, and the overall organization of the writing.

Chapter 2 This chapter provides the theoretical and contextual framework necessary for the analysis. It is divided into three primary foundations: first, the history of war, focusing on the historical realities of the Vietnam War, *The Boat People* crisis, and the atomic destruction of Hiroshima; second, Cathy Caruth's psychoanalytic trauma theory, detailing the concepts of psychological latency, the crisis of language (silenced trauma), the crisis of truth, and the resulting relational fracturing; and third, Graham Huggan's postcolonial theory of the *Postcolonial Exotic*, focusing on the systemic commodification of marginality and the weaponization of cultural trauma within the Western literary marketplace.

Chapter 3 This chapter presents the core analysis and findings of the study, divided into two main critical sections. The first section analyzes the textual manifestations of trauma through the lens of Caruth's latency and language crises alongside Huggan's institutional commodification. The second section evaluates the long-term impacts of these forces, unpacking how the collision between historical wartime wounds and market pressures results in emotional isolation, survivor's guilt, severe interpersonal alienation, and a fractured identity crisis for the diaspora characters.

Chapter 4 This final chapter synthesizes the major insights achieved from the analysis to deliver a definitive conclusion regarding how war, psychological trauma, and global commodification shape the liminal existence of Nam Le's

characters. It also offers strategic suggestions for future literary research to expand the critical discourse surrounding diaspora narratives.

