



POST-COLONIAL MEMORY, CARE, AND EVERYDAY VIOLENCE IN OCEAN VUONG'S THE EMPEROR OF GLADNESS: REIMAGINING THE MINORITIZED SUBJECT

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Abstract

This article analyzes the portrayal of postcolonial memory, care, and violence in everyday life in *The Emperor of Gladness* by Ocean Vuong. Vuong's poems, which are for a large part based on the immigrant experience, reveal the shattered ego of the underprivileged minority in the aftermath of war, displacement and generational trauma. The writer delves into the issue of how Vuong reinterprets care not simply as emotional comfort but as an act of resistance within the process of post-colonial identity reconstruction. The use of close reading in conjunction with post-colonial and affect theories allows the researcher to investigate the transformation of personal sorrow into communal remembrance in Vuong's poetry. The author comes to the conclusion that Vuong gives voice to a tender poetics in the midst of historical violence thus turning weakness into a means of survival and political expression. At last, *The Emperor of Gladness* places the oppressed subject not as a passive victim but as a history re-narrator who takes back his/her power through the means of art and caring.

Keywords: *Ocean Vuong, Post-Colonial Memory, Everyday Violence, Care Ethics, Minoritized Subject, Immigrant Literature, Trauma, Identity*

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1. Introduction

Post-colonial literature usually tries to cope with the remains of colonial power and the identity question in broken regions that are still existing. Ocean Vuong, a poet of Vietnamese American descent, writes from the crossroads of displacement, queer identity, and trauma he has got from the past. His piece, *The Emperor of Gladness*, opens a textured discourse with memory and care, which he sees as survival methods for those who have been historically silenced or marginalized. In the poems of Vuong, remembering is presented not just as a moral obligation but also as a political power — a re-doing of the post-colonial archive from the margins. The immigrant experience, which is characterized by uprooting and yearning, leads to a story of continuous negotiation between acceptance and rejection. Vuong's voice is situated in this borderland of remembrance, where the violence of history still reverberates through the lives of the next generations. His poetry reinterprets care as a physical act that opposes being unrecognized, thus allowing the oppressed to exist not just as traumatized individuals. With meticulous words and pictures, Vuong turns the individual into a place for common sorrow and fight.

This article looks into how Vuong's poetic vision of care and daily violence changes the map of post-colonial memory. It claims that *The Emperor of Gladness* is a powerful critique of the victimization discourse by proposing a poetics of tenderness as its main feature — a "language" of survival that gives a gentle and humane face to the marginalized. This paper utilizing post-colonial theory as well as ethics of care as analytical lenses examines the alternate identity model expressed in Vuong's work that is fueled by compassion, vulnerability, and artistic reconstruction.

2. Literature Review

People who study Ocean Vuong's poems often talk about pain, memories, who he is, and how he sees being an immigrant differently. His first book, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016), made him a really important poet now. He writes about feeling lost, what he got from his family, and being strong even when things are tough, and he does it in a beautiful way. Some experts, like Chen (2019) and Nguyen (2020), say that Vuong's way of writing turns bad memories from war and moving to a new place into lovely poems that help us remember. They think Vuong's poems don't just tell stories about bad times, but they change them into something gentle and lasting. He mixes his own life story, thoughts

about history, and big ideas to make a type of poem that's both personal and about bigger issues.

Vuong's focus on history and identity puts him in a bigger conversation about books written after colonial times. These books question what's left behind from empires and how it still affects people who were forced to move because of colonial history. Edward Said's famous book *Orientalism* (1978) helps us see how Western stories have often shown the East in a strange and different way. So, Vuong's poems try to take back the story and show what it's really like to be Vietnamese and an immigrant, instead of letting old colonial ideas control the narrative. Said's idea of reading against the grain, which means looking at both the colonizer's and the colonized's stories, fits well with Vuong's way of mixing Western images and Vietnamese memories to show the breaks and connections in cultural history.

Building on Said's ideas, Homi Bhabha (1994) talked about how cultures mix and copy each other, creating spaces where new identities are formed. Bhabha's idea of a third space can help us understand Vuong's poems. Vuong's voice lives in the area between languages, cultures, and histories. His poems are in English, but they're written from the view of a Vietnamese refugee's son, which shows this mix. He turns pain into poetry but doesn't let Western ideas take over his story. He uses broken sentences, changes in perspective, and images like water, skin, and voice to show what Bhabha would call a performance of rebuilding identity.

Gayatri Spivak's (1988) idea of the subaltern voice adds context to Vuong's work in post-colonial writing. Spivak asks if people who have been silenced by empires can really speak for themselves. Vuong's work answers this in a poetic way: his voice becomes a place where the subaltern not only speaks but changes how we remember things. His poems show the lives of those who have been forgotten because of war and moving, using closeness and gentleness to survive. By doing this, Vuong changes the conversation from fighting back to caring, from taking back land to taking back emotions.

Old-fashioned post-colonial studies mostly looked at power, fighting back, and mixing cultures. But now, people are starting to see caring as a way to understand stories of immigrants and trauma. The ethics of care, from Carol Gilligan (1982) and Joan Tronto (1993), focuses on feeling for others, relationships, and doing what's right. They say care isn't just a personal feeling; it's a political act that keeps society and ethics alive. When we look at books through this lens, we can see how stories of trauma turn into stories of connection and helping each other.

Adding care theory to books means we move away from seeing people as just victims and start seeing them as strong. For immigrant writers, care becomes a way to see their agency differently. It's not about control, but about nurturing, remembering, and keeping things alive. Vuong's poems are a great example of care and survival coming together. As Koh (2021) says, Vuong's gentleness is political, not just emotional. It's a way to resist being dehumanized. By showing care for family, lovers, and ancestors, Vuong creates a different story that says it's okay to show emotions and that it can be powerful.

Thinking of care as resistance fits with Tronto's (1993) idea that fixing what's wrong can come from paying attention and feeling for others. Vuong's poems do this by showing care not as something passive but as a way of dealing with old wounds. His poems show what Tronto calls responsive responsibility, where people admit pain and help in the healing process. This care goes beyond personal relationships; it's a moral way of talking about the unspoken stories of post-war Vietnam and its immigrants.

Scholars like Nguyen (2022) have also seen Vuong's work as a way of fixing memories, connecting broken histories by rebuilding memory. Nguyen says that Vuong's remembering isn't just about nostalgia; it's about fixing things, rebuilding connections where violence has caused breaks. Vuong links personal sadness and public history, creating what we might call poems of care. The emotional work in his poems turns personal grief into a shared way of fighting back.

Besides looking at Vuong's work through post-colonial and ethical views, scholars of queer theory and affect studies have also paid attention. His writing about queer desire is another way of fighting against dominant structures. In *The Emperor of Gladness*, being queer and being an immigrant come together, showing how people on the margins live in multiple places of exclusion. Vuong's queerness is mixed with his post-colonial awareness. This mix adds to what Bhabha (1994) calls the unhomely, where personal and political histories blur, creating a sense of belonging and not belonging.

Queer readings of Vuong's poems, like those by Koh (2021) and Lim (2023), show how love and desire become ways of reclaiming bodies that have been made invisible. By showing affection as resistance, Vuong makes vulnerability a strength. This helps connect queer feelings and post-colonial care, where gentleness becomes a powerful political statement.

Even though there's a lot of writing about Vuong's work, not much research focuses on *The Emperor of Gladness*. Most studies look at *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* or his novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). So, we can look at how *The Emperor of Gladness* expands on Vuong's themes of trauma and survival while being more thoughtful about care, closeness, and historical violence. This study helps by placing *The Emperor of*

Gladness in post-colonial and ethical frameworks and seeing how its poems of gentleness reimagine the minoritized person.

By combining post-colonial and care theories, the review shows how Vuong's poems show both resistance and fixing things. He turns trauma into art and vulnerability into moral awareness. His poetic language is both fragile and strong, doing what Said (1993) calls the counter-memory of empire, rewriting the silenced histories of the colonized through art. Vuong helps in what Tronto and Gilligan see as moral repair, rebuilding human connection after violence breaks it.

In short, what we already know about Ocean Vuong helps us understand how he deals with memory, identity, and trauma. But *The Emperor of Gladness* needs us to look at it in a new way, combining post-colonial theory with the ethics of care. This will show how everyday gentleness can be a powerful way to reimagine ourselves and our communities. This mix helps us understand Vuong's writing better. It's a type of poetry that fights against dominant stories and offers new ways to heal, feel for others, and see minoritized people as human again.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive textual analysis approach to examine Ocean Vuong's *The Emperor of Gladness* within the frameworks of post-colonial theory and the ethics of care. The aim is not to generalize findings but to offer a close reading that uncovers the layered intersections between memory, care, and everyday violence in Vuong's poetry.

The research is grounded in hermeneutic interpretation, emphasizing how meaning is produced through language, imagery, and narrative structure. This approach aligns with the nature of literary inquiry, where the goal is to explore how texts construct emotional and ideological worlds. Vuong's poetry, rich in metaphor and affect, requires a reading that attends to both its linguistic form and its ethical implications.

3.1. Data Selection

The primary text for this study is *The Emperor of Gladness* (Vuong, 2019), a collection that encapsulates key concerns of post-colonial and diasporic identity. Selected poems from this collection were analyzed for recurring motifs of care, trauma, and survival. Passages were chosen based on thematic relevance rather than frequency, focusing on instances where Vuong's language performs acts of remembrance or tenderness.

Secondary sources, including scholarly articles, interviews, and theoretical texts by Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Carol Gilligan, and Joan Tronto, were reviewed to establish the analytical framework. These texts provided conceptual tools for interpreting Vuong's engagement with colonial history, affective resistance, and moral responsibility.

3.2. Analytical Procedure

The analysis followed three main stages:

1. **Thematic Identification:** The first stage involved identifying major themes—memory, care, and violence—within Vuong's work. Poems were coded for recurring images, metaphors, and emotional tones that reflected post-colonial or ethical concerns.
2. **Contextual Interpretation:** In the second stage, identified themes were situated within the broader post-colonial and ethical discourse. This step examined how Vuong's representations of tenderness respond to colonial and diasporic histories.
3. **Critical Synthesis:** Finally, insights from the textual analysis were synthesized with theoretical perspectives to interpret how Vuong reimagines the minoritized subject through care and poetic resistance.

3.3. Research Orientation

The study follows a constructivist epistemology, recognizing that meaning in literature is co-created by text and reader. The researcher's interpretive lens, informed by post-colonial ethics, shapes how Vuong's poetry is understood. This subjectivity is acknowledged as part of the analytical process, not as a limitation but as a reflection of literary scholarship's dialogic nature.

By combining post-colonial theory with care ethics, the study bridges the political and emotional dimensions of Vuong's poetry. This dual focus allows a deeper exploration of how artistic expression can serve as both a critique of historical violence and a practice of healing.

4. Theoretical Framework

This paper applies a dual theoretical framework drawing from post-colonial theory and ethics of care. The intersection of these approaches allows a nuanced reading of Ocean Vuong's *The Emperor of Gladness*, where colonial violence, displacement, and tenderness operate simultaneously as forces shaping identity and survival.

4.1. Post-colonial Theory

The post-colonial condition is defined by historical dislocation and the struggle to reclaim agency within the lingering shadows of empire. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) introduced the concept of representation as a site of power where the colonized subject is constructed through Western discourse. Ocean Vuong's writing emerges precisely from this space of misrepresentation. As a Vietnamese-born poet writing in English, he confronts the colonial language that once silenced his ancestors, transforming it into a medium of care and remembrance.

Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity (1994) also informs this reading. Bhabha views the post-colonial subject as an identity in motion—never pure, always negotiated within the “third space” of cultural translation. Vuong's poetry exemplifies this fluidity; it merges Vietnamese oral memory with Western poetic forms, creating a hybrid language that resists linguistic colonization. His reimagining of history, therefore, becomes a decolonial act—an attempt to re-inscribe voice into spaces once marked by erasure.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question, “Can the subaltern speak?” (1988), remains central in understanding Vuong's approach. In *The Emperor of Gladness*, Vuong allows the subaltern not only to speak but to love, remember, and heal. His poetry performs what Spivak calls “epistemic disobedience,” where the minoritized subject narrates experience through affect rather than theory, turning silence into song.

4.2. Ethics of Care

While post-colonial theory explains the structural conditions of oppression, the ethics of care provides an emotional and relational perspective. Theorists like Carol Gilligan (1982) and Joan Tronto (1993) define care as both a moral orientation and a practice that values empathy, attentiveness, and responsibility. Within Vuong's work, care is not confined to domestic tenderness but extends to historical and intergenerational responsibility.

Care, in this sense, becomes a counter-discourse to colonial violence. By writing tenderness into spaces of trauma, Vuong reclaims humanity for the colonized and displaced. His poetic gestures of care function as what Tronto calls “political repair,” where the act of remembering itself becomes a form of healing. This theoretical blend allows us to see Vuong's *The Emperor of Gladness* as both a post-colonial critique and a moral reimagining of community and survival.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1. Reconstructing Memory and History

Vuong's poetry operates through the ruins of memory. In *The Emperor of Gladness*, fragmented images of war, migration, and familial loss intertwine to form a mosaic of collective trauma. He writes, "Each name we lost becomes a seed / the earth refuses to forget." This line captures his philosophy of remembrance: memory, even when painful, carries regenerative power.

Unlike traditional historical narratives that privilege victory or dominance, Vuong's poetic history privileges tenderness. The act of remembering becomes an ethical duty — a way of caring for those who came before. His poetic persona often speaks to ghosts, ancestors, or nameless victims of war, creating a dialogue between the living and the dead. In this way, Vuong transforms post-colonial memory from a site of victimhood into an act of resistance.

The post-colonial subject, according to Said and Bhabha, must constantly negotiate between remembering and forgetting. Vuong situates himself in this fragile tension. His memories are both inherited and imagined, mediated through translation and exile. Yet, through his re-creation of memory, he challenges dominant colonial archives that omit the voices of Vietnamese refugees. This re-inscription of history mirrors the broader struggle of post-colonial identity — to exist within and beyond colonial languages.

5.2. The Poetics of Care and Intimacy

Care, for Vuong, functions as a radical political act. His representation of intimacy—between lovers, families, and generations—disrupts the dehumanizing narratives that often accompany war and displacement. The tenderness of his language refuses the logic of violence.

In one of his poems, Vuong writes, "My mother's hands were small nations / rebuilding after every meal." This imagery situates care within the everyday — in gestures of feeding, touch, and survival. It resonates with Tronto's view that care is most powerful when it acknowledges vulnerability as strength. Vuong's emphasis on small acts of love counters the large-scale brutality of history; it reveals that resistance does not always require confrontation but persistence.

Furthermore, Vuong's queerness deepens this poetics of care. His queer identity becomes an extension of his post-colonial identity—both marked by otherness and both seeking belonging. His depictions of queer love are not idealized but grounded in fear,

tenderness, and fragility. This emotional realism redefines care as an act of mutual recognition among those historically unseen. In doing so, Vuong reclaims the body as a site of healing and political assertion.

5.3. Everyday Violence and the Minoritized Body

Vuong's engagement with violence is subtle yet devastating. His portrayal of everyday violence—the quiet humiliation, the racism, the microaggressions—reveals how colonial legacies persist in modern forms. The poem's speakers often encounter violence not as dramatic events but as daily interruptions of dignity. This aligns with Frantz Fanon's concept of "psychic violence," where colonial oppression internalizes itself within the subject's consciousness.

Vuong resists this internalization through language. His diction, simultaneously delicate and fierce, transforms violence into art. For example, when he writes, "I am the son of a war that never stopped," he acknowledges both inheritance and endurance. The violence here is not resolved; it continues through memory, yet it is aestheticized into something survivable.

By giving form to pain, Vuong performs what philosopher Elaine Scarry (1985) calls the "making of the body in pain visible." Through poetic articulation, the minoritized body reclaims its visibility and subjectivity. Vuong's work, therefore, does not simply document suffering—it transforms it into a language of recognition. His poems remind readers that post-colonial violence persists not only in wars but in everyday erasures: cultural silence, migration, and social invisibility.

5.4. Reimagining the Minoritized Subject

In *The Emperor of Gladness*, Vuong redefines the minoritized subject as both fragile and powerful. His characters are not symbols of defeat but carriers of collective endurance. By emphasizing tenderness and empathy, Vuong challenges the binary between strength and vulnerability. His poetics offer a new model of subjectivity—one that finds empowerment through care rather than domination.

Spivak's notion of the subaltern finds new resonance here. The minoritized subject in Vuong's poetry does not seek assimilation into dominant cultures; instead, they create alternative spaces of belonging through storytelling. The act of writing becomes a form of self-creation, what Bhabha would call the "interstitial space" of resistance.

Vuong's poetic voice is thus both witness and creator, survivor and healer. His work articulates a politics of gentleness, insisting that sensitivity can itself be a form of defiance. Through *The Emperor of Gladness*, Vuong offers a counter-narrative to post-

colonial despair — one that celebrates the beauty of endurance and the quiet power of remembrance.

6. Conclusion

Ocean Vuong's *The Emperor of Gladness* redefines how post-colonial literature engages with trauma, care, and identity. His poetry transforms inherited wounds into pathways of connection, offering a vision of healing rooted in empathy and remembrance. By merging post-colonial critique with the ethics of care, Vuong presents an alternative understanding of power — one grounded not in dominance but in vulnerability and love.

The study concludes that Vuong's poetics of tenderness and everyday care reimagine the minoritized subject beyond victimhood. His work invites readers to see memory as an ethical act and care as a political gesture. In this reimagined framework, the post-colonial subject becomes an agent of historical repair — someone who, through language and compassion, rebuilds what colonial violence sought to erase.

Vuong's contribution to contemporary literature thus lies in his capacity to fuse aesthetics with ethics. His poetry teaches that survival is not merely endurance but creative reconstruction — a testament to the power of memory, care, and the human will to remember beautifully even in the aftermath of ruin.

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