

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>

**FAMILIAL BONDAGES AND SUBJECTIVITY IN OCEAN
VUONG'S THE EMPEROR OF GLADNESS**

Sana Shafiq^{*1}, Saneen Iraj², Amir Iqbal Abbasi³

^{*1}M. Phil Scholar, Department of English, The University of Lahore, Sargodha Campus

²Visiting Lecturer, Department of English, The University of Lahore, Sargodha Campus

³Assistant Professor, Department of English, NUML

^{*1}shaanzy770@gmail.com, ²saneeniraj94@gmail.com,

³amirabbasi@numl.edu.pk



Abstract

The Emperor of Gladness (2025) is the second novel by Ocean Vuong, published by Penguin Books, which involves a thorough investigation of the two-sidedness of familial bondages ties that both restrict and at the same time nurture, and also attempts to explore the subjectivity of identity, in the form of memory, trauma, and relationships between people. The story unfolds in the crumbling fictional East Gladness, Connecticut, where a 19-year-old Vietnamese-American with a depression problem, an addiction problem, and a family secret, Hai, develops a deep connection with an 82-year-old Lithuanian widow, Grazina, with dementia. Vuong opposes the biological family requirements with the so-called found or chosen ones, through the experience of Hai as her caretaker and his work in the HomeMarket fast-food restaurant, the problems of subjective perceptions, that are shaped by the cultural displacement, loss and mental health and redefine belonging. This paper discusses these themes by using close readings of major passages based on the poetic prose of Vuong to assert that subjectivity is a transformational one, that the characters can move in and sometimes even surpass the repressive frameworks of the traditional family relations in a socioeconomically disadvantaged American setting. Giving literary analysis intertwined with arguments of reviews and interviews, it points to the fact that Vuong rejects the idea of linear progress, believing that development arises due to the subjective, empathetic reinterpretations of relationships.

Introduction

Ocean Vuong, a Vietnamese-American poet and novelist regarded as one of the most insightful explorers of the topic of immigrant trauma, queer identity, intergenerational legacy, and how personal and collective history intersect with each other in her works, including *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016), *Time is a Mother* (2022), and her debut novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), continues these studies in her second novel, *The Emperor of Gladness*. Over a nine-month period in the fictional post-industrial community of East Gladness, Connecticut, a locale that resembles the disintegrating working-class environment of the upbringing of both Vuong and Hai in Hartford, HTC, the story traces Hai, a 19-year-old Vietnamese-American college dropout with an opioid-addiction issue, depression, and family frauds. Hai later tries to kill himself on a bridge when he is intervened by Grazina (or Grazina), an 82-year-old Lithuanian widow, with dementia, who thinks he is someone in her past and takes him in. This experience turns into a caring relationship and Hai is at work at fast-casual fast-food restaurant HomeMarket that introduces him to a multi-ethnic crew of colleagues who become his circumstantial or chosen family.

The most important themes in the novel are the interlaced themes of family bondages and subjectivity. Familial bondages are the complicated, sometimes restrictive but supportive relationships that connect members of the family to their own kin the biological and the chosen. These bondages are not loving relationships but snarls spider-webbed with do, generational trauma, secrets, and economic burdens. The family relationships of the biological family can often be stained with expectations and unspoken pain as in the case of Hai and his mother, a war-traumatized immigrant, who transfers her loss and aspirations onto the young man and makes Hai live in the world in a way that he has created a medical school experience, though he is actually not even a student. This is a remainder of the repeated motif of generational sacrifice explored by

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

Vuong wherein love appears as a restrictive form of "bondage" which constrains transparency and sincerity.

Conversely, the novel exalts chosen families as liberating options, which are constructed by empathy, common vulnerability and mutual support as opposed to blood. This is demonstrated through Hai and Grazina: although the two have no biological connection, their relationship, which is founded on Hai taking care of Grazina and the fantasy they create together during her dementia, is healing in both ways and offers a sense of belonging that Hai does not feel in her blood family. Likewise, the HomeMarket crew (which features the cousin of Hai, Sony, and eclectic colleagues struggling with addiction, war trauma, and precarity) is a found family, relying on toil and brotherhood, in which intimacy is an underminer of ideology and alone crosses boundaries. Vuong explicitly questions this in his authorial cogitations (replicated in interviews), whether family ties were as solid as those which we establish with other people and who open themselves to us in a way that may not always be true of kin.

The subjectivity used in the context of the novel refers to the subjective, fragmented, unreliable vision of the reality the characters have due to the distortion of memory, mental health challenges, cultural displacement, and trauma. In contrast to the highly autobiographical, single-subjectivity, treatment of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, one need not look far to see that *The Emperor of Gladness* relies on a more ensemble-oriented narration, which shifts the point of view to highlight collective and individualized inner worlds. Grazina is struck by her subjectivity because it is heavily tinged by the horrors of WWII, as well as WWII losses, which she imposes on the present, forcing others (such as Hai) into her delusions to associate with her. Hai is also deeply depressed and addicted to alcohol, which makes the perception of the self much less stable, making his identity unstable and owed, and his queer awakening is executed through shaky and self-examining prisms. The subjectivity of the town as a whole turns decay into beauty--"It's beautiful here even the ghosts say so"--the individual definition of decay fighting against the rejection of the society.

These themes are interacting dynamically: subjectivity reforms bondage of the family, biological limitations are turned into the possibilities of a selected empathy. The subjective introduction of Hai into the world of Grazina makes it a mother-son relationship, which compensates his maternal tensions, whereas workplace relationships are based on a subjective vulnerability due to marginalization. Vuong writes lyrical prose, a mixture of sensory grit and delicate elegance, with inner monologues and fragmented realities, which implicates strict family standards and establishes the growth by the relational reimaginings of a fractured America. This paper believes that Vuong employs these elements to paint a picture of human compassion as a temporary grace to present a resilience lacking the traditional solution to the lives filled with stasis and deterioration.

The Emperor of Gladness is a lyrical and heart-wrenching look into the found family, work, memory, and strength in America today, written by Ocean Vuong, the highly anticipated follow-up to *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). The narrative, an opioid-based story about social mobility in a fictional post-industrial town of East Gladness, Connecticut (a crumbling, working-class outpost just outside Hartford) with its poisonous environmental history, opioid epidemics, and socioeconomic vulnerability, spans the vicinity of four hundred-one pages, within seasonal cycles across a calendar year (starting in late summer 2009). The description of the town in the first chapters the junkyards of rusting school buses, half painted houses, chain link fences, graffiti covered bridges is a microcosm of ugly America, where there is beauty even in the face of defeat: It is beautiful here even the ghosts agree.

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The story revolves around the 19-year-old Vietnamese-American college dropout Hai who is battling depression, opioid addiction and family deception. The novel begins in dramatic fashion, with Hai about to commit suicide, standing on the bridge of King Philip, in pouring rain, and looking at the possibility of leaping into the river raging below. His life is interrupted by a voice calling at the other side of the water Grazina (sometimes spelled Grazina), an 82-year-old Lithuanian widow and WWII refugee with dementia and inviting him into her dilapidated house on Hubbard Street (also known as the Devil's Armpit by local residents because of a chemical spill). Hai cannot go back to his mother (whom he deceives by telling her that he is studying medicine in Boston as to avoid disappointing his mother) and goes to live in his apartment where he serves as the unofficial live-in helper of Grazina. This improbable friendship is the emotional backbone of the novel: on empathy, role-playing based on Grazina's hallucinations, and mutual healing, it changes both lives, Hai having a new purpose in taking care of Grazina and Grazina having her dignity restored to her with each fragment of memory slowly disappearing.

In keeping with this, Hai accepts a painful position in HomeMarket, a fast-casual diner chain on Route 4, where pre-cooked, lab-grown food represents illusion and commodification in American life. In this, he becomes a part of a heterogeneous motley group of co-workers who make up a "circumstantial" or a "found family" with tiredness and friendship:

The neurodivergent Civil War fanatic who lost his father during the war, Hai is the eccentric cousin of Sony, with a doe-like appearance who was named after the television brand.

BJ is a budding wrestling promoter; Maureen is a conspiracy theorist who is grieving the death of her son and Russia, a stone-eater struggling with addiction whereas Wayne is a haunted veteran who employed in the butcher area.

This professional family gives Hai companionship and comfort that he lacks in his biological family- bad relationships with his war-traumatized mother, grandmother, and his aunt, Kim, an immigrant woman spared by war both physically and mentally. Food (as nourishment, as deception and as bond), dementia (as perverted subjectivity and as door to the past), war trauma, queer awakening (implicit suggestions in the identity and relationships of Hai), and precarious work pervade it, challenging America in its proclamation of progress and enlivening human relatedness with brief moments of joy.

The story is written in Vuong's typical poetic prose full of sensual details, metaphors and fragmented introspection, but with alternating viewpoints to create a sense of ensemble and refusal of the linear solution in favor of stasis and gradual grace. Minor plot twists are family discoveries (e.g., the fact that Sony has a father), crew escapades (e.g. assisting BJ in his wrestling match or a journey), and confrontations with institutionalization, addiction, and deceit. The novel ends with silent revelations of perseverance and empathy, with its focus on second chances with less dramatic redemption. It is based upon the personal experiences of Vuong (who works in fast-food, loses his mother, has immigrant parents, is a veteran, etc.) and is unsparingly and tenderly depicted, questioning whether one can find happiness and flourish in the world where nothing matters anymore.

Literature review

The Emperor of Gladness (2025) is the second novel by Ocean Vuong after the successful *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), which received a lot of critical acclaim upon release. The book tells the story of an unlucky 19-year-old Vietnamese-American Hai with depression and addiction, who develops a strange friendship with Grazina, a hapless elderly Lithuanian widow with dementia,

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

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upon discovering him attempting suicide. Set in the fictional post-industrial town of East Gladness, Connecticut, the book interlocks with Hai's story, a young man and outsider in the community. This bond, in combination with the experiences of Hai in a found family at his place of employment, HomeMarket diner, investigates the themes of familial restriction, selected kinship, memory misrepresentation, and immigrant identity. Although scholarly writings on the novel are scarce since the book was published only recently (as of January 2026, no peer-reviewed academic articles about the novel can be found in major databases), preliminary reviews happen to be mostly in the form of book reviews and cultural commentaries. The literature review is a synthesis of major critical reactions to this, which revolve around the perception of readers about familial bondages (biological restraints versus chosen relationships) and subjectivity (disjointed perceptions due to trauma, dementia, and marginalization).

Familial Bondages: biological Constraints and Chosen kinship

One of the most repeated themes of the criticism is the representation of family as both oppressive and redeeming with family ties usually shrouded in secrecy and anticipation by Vuong against the liberating found families. In the review, the focus on chosen kinship in the novel is brought out by numerous reviewers as a way of addressing the isolation of the immigrant and the working classes.

The Guardian (2025) has a review which praises the novel as a tour around the edgeland between aspirational fantasy and self-deception because of his strained relationship with his war-traumatized mother based on the lies about his life, and his looking after Grazina and his friendship at HomeMarket creates a true yet short-lived glow of joy on his face by supporting each other. This diner found family, consisting of various marginalized employees, is formed because of mutual work, which provides openness, which blood family cannot give.

Equally the book is written off as a novel of found family by the review by NPR (2025) which highlights the wonderfully unsentimental nature of the relationship between Hai and Grazina which owes some of its origin to the real life experiences of Vuong. The critic claims that these circumstantial unions create an element of resilience in the face of hopelessness, against the ineffectiveness of traditional nuclear families in a post-industrial America marred with opioid crises and elders abandonment.

The Los Angeles Times (2025) shares this, considering the novel to be an ode and a criticism to kindness in desperation, in which immigrant outcasts such as Hai can have substitute bonds that replace alienated blood ties. The mutual assistance of the workplace crew, which helps each other in the fulfillment of their dreams, regardless of precarity, conceptualizes the family on a basis of mutual survival instead of heredity.

The Adroit Journal (2025) carries this discussion forward, observing that Vuong no longer focuses on single subjectivity like his debut: ensemble is the theme of resilience in select bonds: the support network of Hai is needed to overcome loss, and community is the aspect of resistance against erasure.

Such interpretations are consistent with the intentional interpretation of Vuong, as he himself states in interviews (e.g., PBS NewsHour, 2025), that he was interested in the outsider status and in sharing the common survival of immigrants and the working population.

Subjectivity: Fragmentation, Memory, and Warped Realities

The subjectivity is often criticized concerning dementia of Grazina and mental illness of Hai considering their distorted view of reality as a way of interpreting traumas and identity.

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According to the New York Times (2025), the novel is ripe with bruising in places, metaphors of hazy inner worlds of its characters, Hai with his depression, and Grazina with her hallucinations floating past and present, and establishing a co-created reality through empathy.

More critically, World Literature Today (2025) criticizes hypertrophic metaphors and exorbitantly delusional elements of a fantasy war game that Hai and Grazina play in their prose, proposing that Vuong exaggerates subjectivity, blending traumatic incidents of the past (WWII, Vietnam War) into the present grounded in the ordinary.

Chicago Review of Books (2025) admires the way in which subjectivity distorts general experience: the dementia portals refer to immigrant experiences, and communal town sensibilities transform the vision of decay into the beauty and it resembles the poetic style of Vuong.

According to Kirkus Reviews (2025), non-realism explorations touch on war and morality, dementia and addiction disrupting subjectivity to emphasize the vulnerability of humans.

In general, reviewers observe that Vuong is shifting toward a multi-perspective narration beyond autobiographical singularity to ensemble subjectivities which proclaim compassion amid fragmentation.

Familial Bondages Constraints and Connections in *The Emperor of Gladness*

In *The Emperor of Gladness*, Ocean Vuong imagines family bondages as complex interrelationships that include the tyrannical burden of biological lineage as well as the liberating possibility of relationships by the choice. These constraints are not fixed, they change as the characters interact, making them a continuation of the greater philosophical question of the relationship between human beings in their stasis and decline as developed by Vuong. The comparative strength of these ties is explicitly in doubt in the prefatory letter of the novel to his editors: Vuong asks: Are the family bonds as strong as the ones that we have with others, who show themselves to us with an openness not always available with our kin? (Page 1). Such rhetoric provocation establishes the thematic background and provokes the readers to think of the way blood relations can enslave and non-blood the ones can free. The framing of Vuong is based on his immigrant experience where the family is a godsend, and a silent curse, repeating the patterns in his previous texts such as *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, where parental relationships are punctuated by trauma and silence.

The biological familial bondages described by the novel are frequently represented by family inheritances of a traumatic history, a cultural displacement, and unfulfilled expectations, forming an emotional and psychological bondage. The dynamic between Hai and his mother is a good example of this constraining relationship. Being a Vietnamese immigrant who experiences the war as a scar she is an epitome of sacrifice and strength who is willing to work continuously in a nail salon to earn money to support her son and transfers her unrealized dreams onto him. Hai, in her turn, is perpetuating a chain of lies to protect herself against disappointment: he tells her he is going to medical school in Boston, promising her, I'm gonna go be a doctor (P. 78), despite the fact that he struggles with the dropout status, addiction and despair. This is because of the fact that it is a fear that is deep based on the fact that in her mind she is afraid of losing her dreams which lie in her own story of survival where she ran away to America in pursuit of opportunity. This is reinforced in text, as an indication of a form of bondage: Hai looks back on her sacrifices, how she has been "trapped on level thirteen of Tetris more than a year" which symbolizes her life of stagnation, and how her projections of war cause him emotional imprisonment (P. 91). This is reflective of the repeated theme of Vuong addressing the concept of immigrant filial duty where love takes the form

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of compulsion, and it tends to kill the individuality. These limitations are also depicted by Hai in his extended family, such as his grandmothers and his Aunt Kim who was said to be "women who had been spared by the war in body but not in mind" (P. 45) and their unspoken sufferings and cultural demands that prevented them to communicate openly and kept them in isolation. This has been understood by critics as a commentary on the American Dream to immigrant families, in which biological ties become networks of debt in socioeconomic precarity, in which trauma is passed down across generations with no resolution.

As an alternative, however, selected families are seen as places of mutual mercy and freedom, which overcome biological constraints with empathy, vulnerability, and common humanity. This transformative relationship can be seen with regards to Hai and the old Lithuanian widow, Grazina, who is suffering with dementia. They meet by chance when Grazina stumbles over an attempt at suicide on King Philip Bridge, believing that Hai was one of the people in her WWII history and forcing him inside her rotting house: "Come back. Come back" (P. 10). Hai in turn is her caregiver and tries to negotiate her hallucinations by assuming the role of such personas as Sgt. Pepper to co-create comforting realities. As an example, when she mixes him up with a soldier during her delusional invasion by Stalin, Hai says, "My name is Hai Sergeant Pepper... and I am carrying us to America" (P. 263) and their immigrant backgrounds are merged in the pretended escapes. This roleplaying creates a healing effect on both sides—Hai gets a sense of purpose, compassion in attending to his own feelings of worthlessness as Grazina gets to experience temporary dignity and companionship as her memories fade (Pp. 106-109). This is emphasized by reviews as a life-changing relationship based on compassion, where Hai fills in his absentee father and lack of good relationships with his mother by becoming the surrogate son of Grazina, with the openness that his blood relatives lack. The creation of this intergenerational alliance that was made under non-kinship standards emphasizes the Vuong theme of second chance or fleeting mercies, in which accepted relationships overcome the fragmentations of biological ones without requiring any alteration.

The Home Market workplace goes further to demonstrate how labor creates circumstantial families, a mixture of blood and choice in a small universe of cultural diversity and strength. The boundary between these two worlds is crossed by a neurodivergent teenager, Hai, who is obsessed with the Civil War, when his cousin Sony gets him a job and introduces him to the eclectic crew: "We are cousins. Just tell me next time" (P. 140). The team, which includes BJ (a potential wrestling promoter), Maureen (a bereaved conspiracy theorist), Russia (an addiction-remorseful stoner), and Wayne (a wartime butcher with PTSD) is the group itself, and it is defined by precarity. In a world of exhausting shifts and serving commodified food as a symbol of illusion (e.g. laboratory-produced cakes called corncakes), they find solidarity in shared traumas and bizarre dreams, a phenomenon that plays out during a frantic slaughterhouse field trip when they all have to face the reality of death: "We all sound the same" (P.189), an experience of shared vulnerability which breaks the ideological wall. This heterogeneity, immigrant, veteran, addict, is reflective of wider societal criticisms, with common living being more important than birthplace and leading to intimacy. Vuong deconstructs the weakness of a nuclear family, in that Grazina is deserted by her adult children: "Her two adult children... have abandoned her" (P. 52), in favor of the supportiveness of the crew, which includes attending to BJ to wrestle and taking on the far-fetched crusades. These circumstantial connections are resistant to isolation and the family is redefined as an active reciprocity in the post industrial America where old traditional forms are not working.

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Finally, the family bondages Vuong interprets are the realities of immigrants and the working classes, in which blood ties tend to reproduce the cycles of silence and burden, but the relationships by choice provide a way to rebel against this process, with compassion and directness. Through the opposition of the deceiving maternal relationship by Hai with the sympathetic relationships he forms with Grazina and the HomeMarket crew, Vuong can assume that true kinship is based on shared weaknesses, which are not blood. This also agrees with his denial of linear progress, that growth, both emotional and relational, takes place in stasis, in the form of brief mercies such as the second chances. Following these entanglements, the novel confirms the idea that bondages when restructured might cast light on gladness through the decline, and forces the readers to rethink the notion of family as a carving, a despondent gesture rather than as a given destiny.

Subjectivity of *The Emperor of Gladness*

In *The Emperor of Gladness*, subjectivity is expressed through both the untrustworthy partial views of the reality and the focus on the distortion of individual and group experiences by memory, trauma, mental health experiences, as well as cultural displacement. The story of Vuong gives the inner world more privileges than the world of objectivity, subjectivity is fluid, relational, and vital in being empathetic in a marginalized American environment. It is a step further than the hyper-autobiographical, one-polar subjectivity of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* to a more collectivist style, where the multiple distorted perspectives collide to create a common humanity in the face of stasis.

The first pages of the novel are written as a collective voice, which creates a subjective collective vision, making it difficult to distinguish between the lives of individuals and town in the state of East Gladness, where people live, although they die: We live on the edge, die in the heart of the state (the first pages, reflecting the communal voice used in the given draft of the novel, which is we in the given draft). This we includes ghosts, humans and lost histories, redefining industrial ruination as melancholic loveliness: It is beautiful here, even the ghosts say so, in which ghosts represent the dates that have to be forgotten and cannot be forgotten, the subjective memories that refuse to be erased. Critics point to this as the poetic method of Vuong, where the rejection of working towns in society is turned into a rebellious and collective re-designing of value.

Hai is deeply affected by his depression and opioid addiction which makes his vision of the world highly hazy, with subjectivity becoming unreliable and fluid. During the rotations his mind began to sway sooner than the 6-hour marker, and this demonstrates how time and self-image are distorted by addiction, reflecting the slow stagnation of the town. This interior fog propels his early suicide attempt and further self-delusions (e.g. telling his mother that he is going to medical school) because subjective despair establishes a barrier between him and organic relationships and establishes the opportunity of his choice ones.

The dementia shown by Grazina is the embodiment of subjective distortion, with traumas of the past being transferred and projected onto the current, laying hallucinatory layers. She mixes East Gladness of today with the Lithuania of the WWII, saying that she saw him last night in connection to dead people, a mixture of horrors of displacement with the banality of rot. Hai adjusts by immersing into her delusions, which involves gunfight simulating and role-playing as he embodies a character she has imagined to be her savior: scenes that illuminate the relational side of subjectivity reality is co-created through empathy, and they comfort each other. As one of the reviews notes, such fantasy war games incorporate past traumas into the present and show how the twisted perceptions create healing without negating pain.

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

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The prose of Vuong affirms introspective inner monologues which explore the fluid characters. Hai struggles with queer self-exploration against the backdrop of cultural pressures, his ambivalent desires being enacted through the softening of observation, such as his face softening, queering heteronormative standards and inherited social identity. The subjectivity of immigrants introduces cultural overtones: the mother of Hai views America through the prism of war-coded America, she feels that she has done enough, and her suffering creates an impression of indebtedness and alienation in the mind of her son. Similar to *Echoing On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the tacit knowledge and partial memory (e.g., implied letters or contemplations) brings subjective lapses in the intergenerational comprehension.

The collective subjectivity of the town also reinvents decay as strong beauty, where fragmentation is increased by the shifts in a multi-perspective. Roles-plays and confessions in the workplace as caused by dementia demonstrate the capacity to subjectivity to disperse such universal themes as loss, war trauma, and precariousness, and to facilitate communal connections. Vuong does not consider subjectivity as isolation, but as a medium: when characters live in the distorted reality of others, they become empathetic and develop without changing anything. This conforms to the non-progressivism of the novel which is that fragmented visions, cloudy, hallucinatory, haunted are what maintain the dignity and joy in lives that are considered forgotten by society. The subjectivity of creating worlds together is a practice of resistance as Hai and Grazina power-play worlds, and as the HomeMarket crew embrace vulnerability to one another, tender relationships in a world of irreconcilable distortion.

***The Emperor of Gladness* Intersections of Familial Bondages and Subjectivity**

In *The Emperor of Gladness*, families tie each other in a relationship of dynamism where subjectivity, tortured by depression, dementia, addiction, cultural trauma, etc., is transformed into relationship structures that allow empathetic development and silent redemption. Vuong demonstrates how fracturing perceptions can turn the biological burdens into spaces of alienation and allow the establishment of chosen relationship to thrive on shared vulnerabilities and concludes that the real kinship is not based on blood ties but on relationships that are co-constructed with others. This crossroads supports the main idea of Vuong that growth can take place without change or the linear development, but rather through internal, subjective reconsideration of failure, loss, and mercy in life stagnation.

The subjectivity of Hai that is conditioned by the aspect of depression dramatically changes his perception of biological bondages and transforms blood connection into emotional confinement and self-destruction. Hai also thinks about his name as a made-up inheritance at the beginning of the novel: the name... was the only thing his mother gave him and he could preserve it without ruining it, and the fact that his self-concept is indebted and alienated by addiction and hopelessness makes him perceive the motherly love as a heavy burden. It is this subjective fog that motivates his lies (about medical school) as well as his first suicide attempt as depressed state prevents his real openness to his war-traumatized mother and grandmother. This is construed by critics as the criticism of immigrant filial duty that is based on the idea of generational sacrifices and makes one feel guilty instead of connected, and that the Hai is trapped in the patterns of silence and unrealistic expectations.

In contrast, the dementia-inflicted subjectivity of Grazina creates an liberating chosen relationship in which Hai can receive empathy and reconstruct his identity by means of participatory delusions. Since her hallucinations distort the WWII traumas with the current reality,

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

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Hai finds himself in her world by assuming the character of the Sgt. Pepper and answering her requests with such sentences as Sgt. Pepper help me. In a very touching scene, as she gets lost, Hai comforts her: We are in America. No war, Grazina," co-created a fantasy of safety, which cures both: Hai has a reason to behave like mothering, covering the father-daughter gaps and maternal tensions, whereas Grazina enjoys a moment of peace. This subjective relationality turns constraint (the responsibility of looking after Hai) into mercy because when she ventures into her delusions, one can reciprocate and be tender, mirroring the theme of second chances that Vuong envisions but does not actually get.

Circumstantial families in the workplace at Home-Market also serve as an example of subjective resilience, in which collective distortions take over agency to face opioid crises and precarity. The multiethnic crew (immigrants, veterans, addicts) unites around their vulnerabilities, as they travel to fulfill all the crazy dreams or face trauma, which are replaced by the naked confessions, such as All my fucking life, by the moment of healing by the unfiltered truth. Vuong is critical of the formations of the subject in terms of racial, class, and immigrant: characters such as Hai are caught in the crises that are not visible (addiction to drugs or place), their relationships form a resistance to the erasure of society. These partnerships go beyond blood and create intimacy through helping one another in hard work.

Authentic relationships are formed out of uncovered weaknesses, our fractures are repaired, like in kintsugi, in a very gold-empathy style--we emphasize the fractures, instead of concealing them. This is shown by the fact that Hai in his confession to Sony, I am a little bit scared, reconciles blood and choice in the honesty of his confession. Vuong so theorizes subjectivity as changeable: through dwelling in the stylized worlds of other characters, characters experience gradual development, in terms of emotional richness, empathy, respect, in the form of irreversible decay. These intersections in fractured America shine on transient gladness, which rejects isolation with sympathetic, flowing kinship which respects imperfection instead of resolution.

Conclusion

In *The Emperor of Gladness*, Ocean Vuong skillfully infuses the relationships between parents and their children and the subjectivity to show relationships as encountering tertiary cage, redemption and silent endurance. Vuong questions the strict construct of family through the experiences of Hai, who not only teetered on the edge of suicide but also developed deep bonds with fellow outcasts in the disintegration of East Gladness, where blood ties are hardened to a cruelty that thrives on the despair brought by marginalization and powerlessness in a disintegrated post-industrial America.

One of the important discoveries is the idea that biological bondages that are filled with generational trauma and immigrant expectations tend to bind authenticity and create isolation like in the case of the deceptive relationship between Hai and his mother characterized by unspoken sacrifices and dream projections. However, selected families such as the surrogate relationships between Hai and Grazina and the circumstantial staff of HomeMarket provide liberating openness in which empathy overrides blood and work rusts ideological boundaries, enabling the two to heal each other and enjoy a moment of true happiness, albeit temporary.

The transformative lens is subjectivity, torn to pieces under the influence of dementia, depression, addiction, and cultural dislocation: the perversion of the eye allows characters to create realities together, making restrictions their favors. The hallucinations by Grazina and the vague inner world of Hai support growth of relations without changing anything, which supports Vuong in his dismissal of linear-progress narrative.

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

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In the end, these cross-over points shed some light on little life-affirming, life-beautifying moments in shortened, stagnant lives, as the prose poetry of Vuong is lyrical and intertwines grit with grace to emphasize the power of human compassion on the backdrop of diminishing. Reflecting his literary life, both the autobiographical closeness of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and the poetic considerations of the issues of loss, the novel argues that real connections form through personal susceptibilities, redefining the family as a constructive, graceful process. This is deep hope: in the forgotten zones of America, compassion is creating a fortitude that it can be seen that despite the hardship that cannot be resolved, there is still life to be led, despite the pain and roughness of acknowledgement. The future research could discuss these themes as well as Vuong poems or the discourses on the queer immigrant story and the working-class solidarity at large.

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Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

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